The Richest Place on Earth: The Story of Virginia City and the Heyday of the Comstock Lode.


Reviewed by Oscar Lewis, author of many books and articles on western history.

From the time the extent and richness of Virginia City's silver ore became known to the world, that Nevada town has never lacked historians. Beginning in 1876 with the publication of Dan De Quille's *The History of the Big Bonanza* (still one of the best of the lot), attempts to capture the peculiar interest and excitement of the place have been so numerous that today the literature of the Comstock—histories, biographies, books of reminiscences, even occasional novels and plays—fill several shelves in most libraries of Western Americana.

Why did this remote and relatively small community—during its heyday Virginia City had about the population of today's Modesto or Salinas—happen to gain so much attention and to hold it so long? The answer to that question is suggested by the title of the present book, for there was a time when Virginia City might indeed have been "The Richest Place on Earth." So generous was the yield of its mines that one property, the Consolidated Virginia, was paying its lucky owners dividends of more than $1 million per month, and others were not far behind. Because a few dollars invested in a Comstock stock could, and frequently did, increase in value a hundred-fold overnight, in San Francisco and elsewhere it set off an orgy of speculation in which virtually the entire population took part. Thus, trading in Comstock stocks produced a small group of multi-millionaires while gathering in the savings of many thousands. Yet Comstock silver rebuilt much of downtown San Francisco, helped finance the North during the Civil War, and made Virginia City and its environs the wishing-well for the financially hopeful all over the West.

The volume under review is a brief but reasonably inclusive retelling of the familiar Comstock story. While it breaks no new ground—what new can be said at this late date?—it is well organized, fast paced, and holds the interest throughout. A word should be said about the illustrations, for here we have not the reproductions of pioneer photographs found in most Comstock books, but a series of drawings. The latter are both numerous, occupying at least a third of the book's less than 200 pages, and filled with action. In "Notes on the Drawings" at the end of the volume, the artist explains that the purpose of his dramatic treatment of his subjects was to convey "the experience rather than a picture of the experience." How well he succeeds in each viewer must decide for himself.