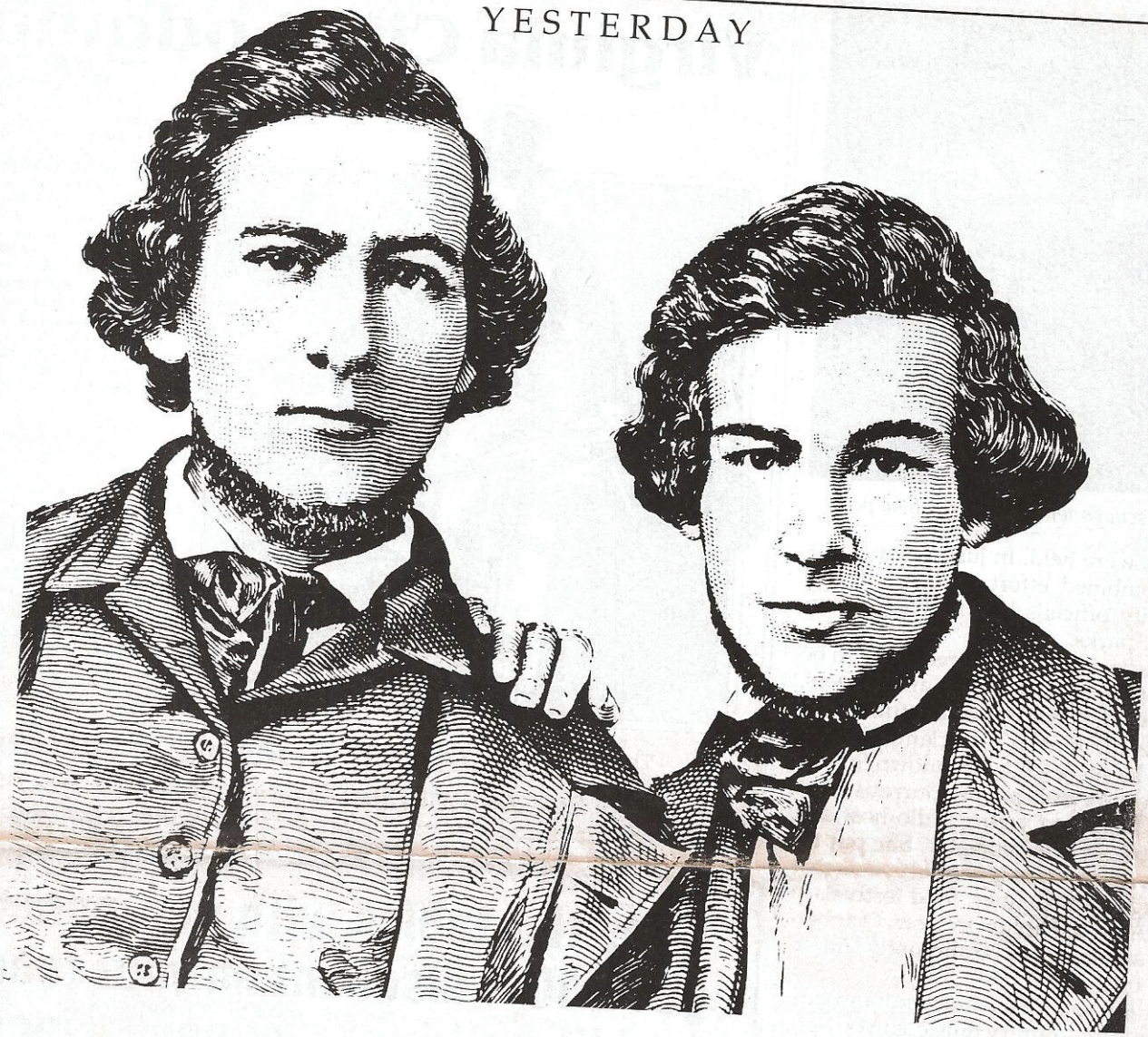


Hosea (left) and Allen Grosh.

THE BROTHERS GROSH

In the 1850s, two brothers found what their fellow Comstock gold seekers had missed—silver.

By J.B. Roberts II

It was the summer of 1857, and Allen and Hosea Grosh nearly had it made. In their diggings a couple of miles down the mountain from the future site of Virginia City, they found the promise of wealth they had searched for since leaving their family farm in 1848, the first year of the Western gold rush.

Sons of a Pennsylvania preacher, Allen and Hosea were among the thousands who flocked to California following the discovery of gold at Sutter's Creek. Not satisfied with their small successes in that state, they turned to northern Nevada, which was then part of Utah Territory. They began placer mining in Gold Canyon, an area that later would stretch upward from Dayton to Silver City, Gold Hill, and Virginia City—the fabled Comstock Lode. Hard work eventually led them to some of the richest silver veins in North America, but fate took their lives and left their fortune to other men.

The Comstock's early miners found placering hard going. The most efficient way to wash sand and gravel for gold was a sluice box. But heavy blue mud, as opposed to the yellow clay miners hoped for, constantly clogged the sluices and was a source of cursing and consternation to all—except Allen and Hosea.

Unlike their peers, the Grosh brothers showed little interest in placering. Instead, they applied their effort to the canyon's outcroppings. In one letter to their father they announced the discovery of a large quartz vein, a "dark grey mass, tarnished, probably, by the sulfuric acid in the water.

"It resembles thin sheet lead, broken

Illustration: Nevada Historical Society

The *Territorial Enterprise's* Dan De Quille described the two brothers as secretive, almost reclusive. They shunned the 'oh be joyful' life of the caricature prospector.

very fine," they wrote, "and lead the miners suppose it to be." But Allen and Hosea thought differently. They recognized that the blue mud contained silver. Once they found the source veins, they would be rich.

However, bad luck hampered their venture. They tried to form a number of companies—like the Utah Enterprise, Frank, and Pioneer Silver mining companies—to raise the capital needed to exploit their find. A partner named George Brown, who was working a freight station near Elko at Gravelly Ford, had saved $600 to invest in the claim.

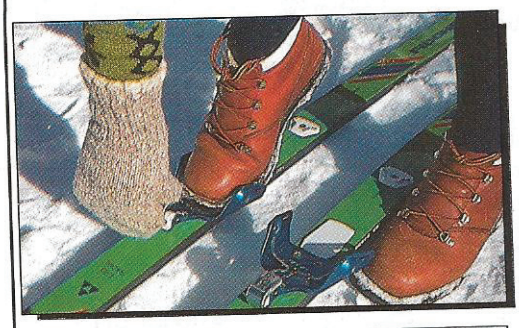
But news of Brown's murder, possibly by bandits, reached Allen and Hosea that summer. Laura Dettenreider, an early settler whose journals contain a wealth of Nevada lore, had heard the news and told the brothers when she visited them at their cabin in the summer of 1857.

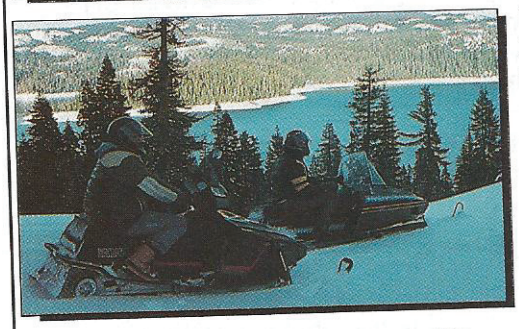
Dettenreider also planned to invest in the company. She stopped to see the brothers in August while on her way to Dayton, telling them of Brown's death in the word-of-mouth manner in which news was passed on the Nevada frontier.

Brown's death was a heavy blow. Allen and Hosea were short of capital because they had shunned placering in order to prospect veins. But it would take money to exploit their find.

To make matters worse, Hosea was hurt. When she visited, Dettenreider found Hosea seated in front of his stone house nursing a tender foot. Only a few days before, he had accidentally driven a pick into it while probing a vein of rock. The injury, and Brown's death, meant further delays as they sought the capital the partnership desperately needed.

WINTER IN PLUMAS COUNTY





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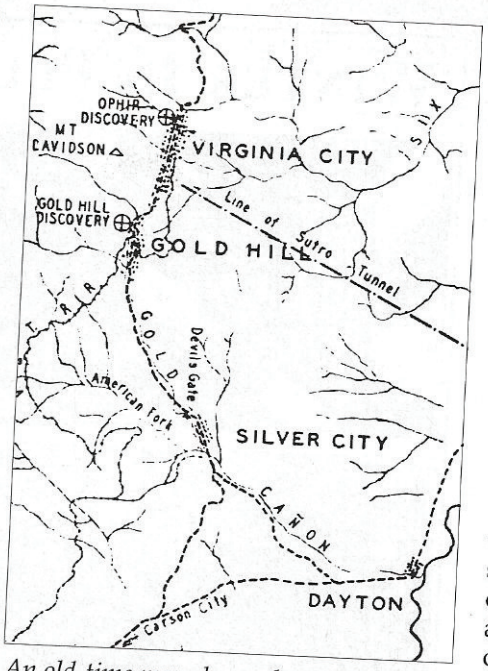
Dettenreider offered to invest $1,500 if the mine the Groshes described was as rich as they claimed. The brothers showed her maps of their claims, and she left intending to sell some California property to raise the funds.

But luck intervened again before she returned. Hosea's wound, which she described as doing well under a water-immersion treatment, worsened rapidly. Tetanus and lockjaw set in, and three days after Dettenreider's visit Hosea was dead at the age of 31.

The death of his younger brother unsettled Allen. In a posthumous account, the *Territorial Enterprise's* Dan De Quille described the two brothers as secretive, almost reclusive. They shunned the "oh be joyful" life of the caricature prospector, whose pouch of gold diggings was so frequently and speedily exchanged for a bottle of whiskey or a hand of cards.

But reclusive is perhaps too strong a word. The Groshes were simply very close, and determined to succeed.

Five days after Hosea's death, Allen wrote his father that he "thought it most hard that he should be called away just as we had fair hopes of realizing what we had labored so hard for so many years."



An old-time map shows the early Comstock. The Grosh Brothers lived and worked in the Silver City area before Virginia City was established.

Allen vowed in a letter only four days later to continue the search for funds to develop the mine.

"By Hosea's death, you fall heir to his share in the enterprise," he wrote. "We have, so far, four veins.

"Three of them promise much," he finished.

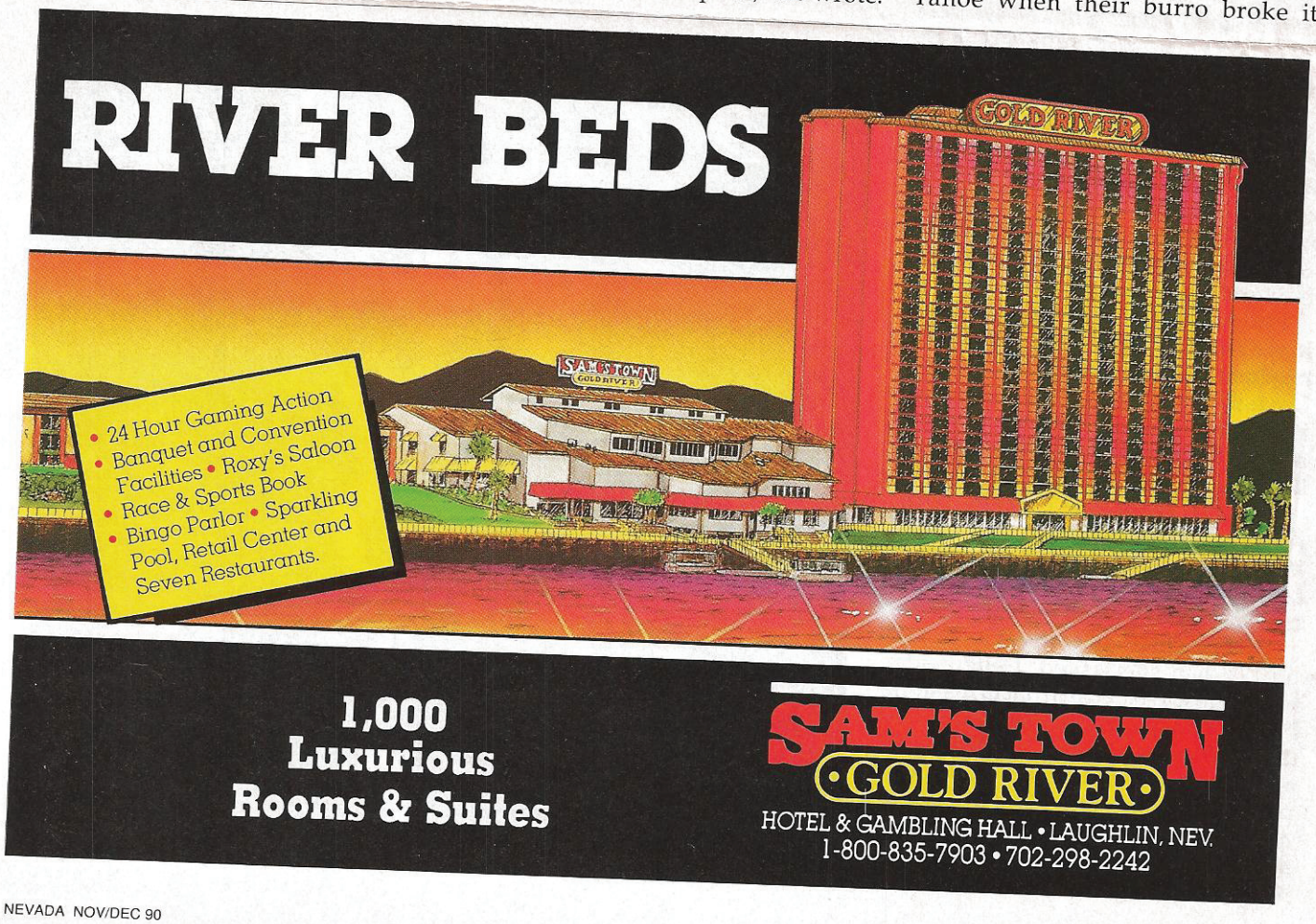
For Allen, the promise was an empty one. He wrote that he missed Hosea desperately. Whether out of that desperation, or the need to find capital, he decided his only hope for raising money after Brown's death was to return to the East.

But his religious propriety delayed his departure. Unable to bear the thought of burying his younger brother in jeans and a red cotton shirt, Allen borrowed $60 from other miners to purchase a burial suit.

It was equally unthinkable to Allen to leave before settling the debt. So he stayed to pan enough ore to pay the debt and purchase supplies for a trek across the Sierra to California and an ocean passage home.

Summer had turned to autumn. After meticulously charting his claims, Allen and another miner, Richard M. Bucke, finally set out for California in November. It is known that Allen and Bucke carried some journals and charts with them at the beginning of their ill-fated trip into the Sierra.

They had gone only as far as Lake Tahoe when their burro broke its



Map: *History of the Comstock Lode, 1850-1920* (Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1943)

hobbles one night and strayed back to Virginia City. The delay cost them a precious four days. By the time they returned to the old Indian trail across the Sierra, an early winter storm struck.

When they reached Squaw Valley, every trace of the trail was obliterated by deep snow. They hunkered down in a tent hoping to outlast the storm, but each snowfall was succeeded by another.

Their burro died at the tent camp. They roasted its flesh for food and set out in waist-high snow, now realizing the desperate trek they faced.

They jettisoned ore specimens and charts, the evidence required to line up financing for the mining venture. Coming down a steep hillside, they abandoned their snowshoes. They walked in the snow for several days, struggling from peak to peak hoping to regain the trail. Finally they discovered they had gone in an aimless circle and had doubled back on their own tracks.

Heavy blizzards limited their vision to less than 100 yards. They threw away sodden blankets and could only light fires with flashes of powder from their guns. All their equipment had soaked through completely.

Finally even their weapons became too heavy to carry. To keep the final maps to his claims from disintegrating in the dampness, Allen wearily hid them in the hollow of a fallen pine tree. He marked the great conifer with a carved cross, rolling a stone in front of the opening.

By the first week of December Allen and Bucke had been reduced to sleeping in snow dugouts while wolves stalked their camp at night. Bucke was tortured by dreams of feasting on roasted quail, but Allen was persistent. Some days they progressed only two miles. Finally they crawled, weakened and half-frozen, traveling only half a mile a day.

In near delirium, they were awakened one morning by the sound of gunshots and a barking dog. A group of miners out hunting found them in a snow cave and pulled the frozen men sled to a camp in California's Placer nty. Ironically, the camp's name the ast Chance.

n and Bucke were taken to a ding that served as a combined general store, assay office, saloon, and doctor's clinic. Now delirious, Allen babbled about the rich ore-bearing blue rock of the Comstock. Unable to eat or drink, Allen refused to have his frost-bitten legs amputated. Bucke submitted to the emergency surgery in the crude frontier outpost.

Bucke survived. Allen did not.

Allen died on December 19, 1857, little more than three months after Hosea. Allen was buried at Last Chance.

By Dan De Quille's account, Allen had cached the brothers' all-important mining records in some rocks before heading east. Laura Dettenreider's journal says otherwise. She believed that another miner, Henry Comstock, was left in possession of the charts and notes regarding the Grosh claims.

By the first week of December Allen and Bucke had been reduced to sleeping in snow dugouts while wolves stalked their camp at night.

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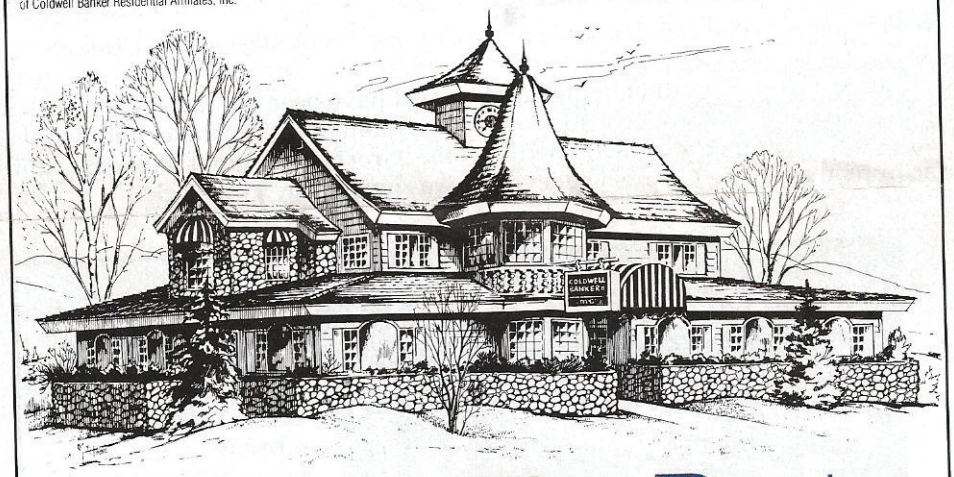

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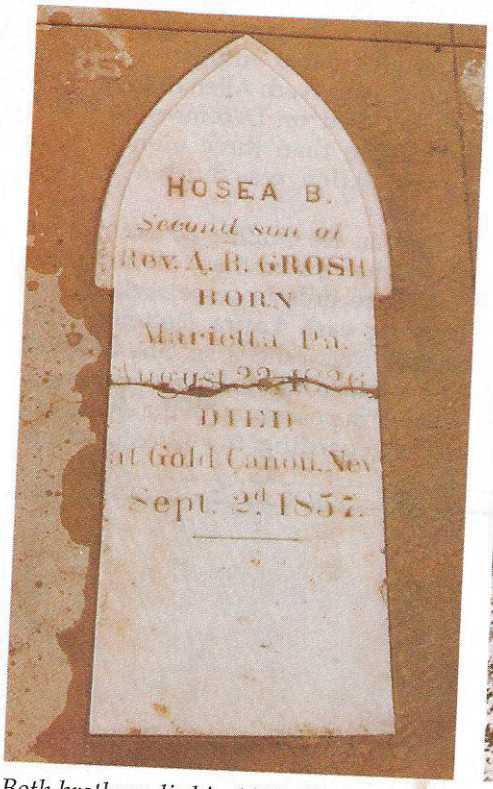

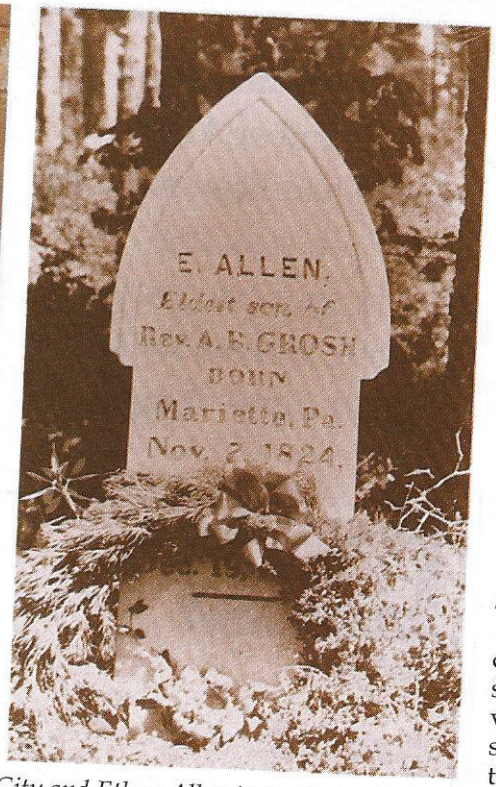

Both brothers died in 1857, Hosea in Silver City and Ethan Allen in Last Chance.

Hosea's and Allen's father denied that they had left any property to Comstock. What property of theirs he did acquire, the Reverend Grosh believed, must have been gained at Comstock's own initiative. Whatever the details, the Groshes' original Pioneer claim was jumped by Comstock.

Some accounts say he rifled the Grosh cabin for clues to the whereabouts of their lode, breaking into locked boxes they left behind. Some say he was simply too ignorant to understand the notes and charts he found.

Comstock found lasting fame in 1859 when he cajoled miners Patrick McLaughlin and Peter O'Riley into sharing their gold discovery on Mount Davidson. Those claims would lead to the boom in Virginia City and the naming of the Comstock Lode.

Eventually everyone learned what the brothers had known, or suspected: The blue mud that was such a nuisance to those looking for gold was, in fact, silver-bearing ore that assayed for $3,000 a ton.

As to the whereabouts of the Grosh cabin and mine, history is silent. The surviving descriptions are vague, so vague that any—or none—of the scores of mines that pitted the area after the gold rush of 1859 could be the brothers'. De Quille wrote that in 1860 the Grosh smelter and furnace were unearthed by mining, setting off a fruitless search for their mine. Other chronicles say their cabin was at the base of Grizzly Peak, at the south end of Silver City.

Bucke survived a long winter convalescence and hobbled to San Francisco, despite the loss of one leg and part of another. He was seen there by one Alpheus Bull, M.D., who treated the lingering ailments of his ordeal. Bucke went on to study medicine in Europe and, perhaps driven by memories of the maddening delirium of a Sierra blizzard, became superintendent of the Dominium Insane Asylum in London, Ontario.

Bucke marked Allen's grave in Last Chance with a memorial tombstone. In Silver City, the Reverend H.D. Lathrop, accompanied by a military troop and a host of newspaper editors, erected a monument to Hosea at his gravesite on June 27, 1865. The troop fired a volley of shots in salute.

For many who came later, luck smiled fondly from Virginia City. Fortunes were made, and the riches of Comstock Lode helped Nevada Territory become a state. But for Allen and Hosea Grosh, risk and toil earned them only a place in the footnotes of history. It is a place that deserves to be remembered even now. ▽

J.B. Roberts II lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Photos: J.B. Roberts II (left), Nevada Historical Society (right)