

Henry Tompkins Paige Comstock Biography

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Biography

Henry Tompkins Paige Comstock (1820-1870) was a flamboyant American gold prospector whose name is attached to one of the world's most productive mining districts, the Comstock Lode.

Henry Comstock was born in Trenton, Ontario. From a difficult life on the American frontier he developed a rugged body, an independent spirit, an acquisitive nature, and a shrewd way of dealing. He also became a boaster, braggart, and bully.

Trapping for fur in Canada, Michigan, and Indiana, Comstock was later employed by the American Fur Company. After serving in the Black Hawk and the Mexican wars, he guided overland travelers and also engaged in business in Santa Fe and in Mexico.

Though Comstock was attracted back to the United States by the California gold rush, he returned to Mexico. In 1856 he appeared in Nevada tending a flock of sheep. He claimed 160 acres of unoccupied land for a ranch. Although he maintained good relations with the Paiute Indians, they were starving and decimated his flock.

In the late 1850s California prospectors began investigating the Nevada slopes of the Sierra range, locating numerous small but promising claims. Comstock joined them and helped organize the first mining district in the Washoe Valley. In 1859 two prospectors struck a particularly rich body of ore. Comstock appeared on the scene, blustering that the two had "jumped his claim." Although they knew that Comstock had neglected to perfect his claim, to quiet his rage they accepted him as a partner. None of the partners realized that an extremely valuable discovery had been made, a discovery now recognized as the beginning of the fabulous Comstock Lode. Unfortunately, none of the partners kept his claim long enough to greatly profit from it. Comstock sold his share to a California syndicate for \$11,000--a fraction of its true worth. He remained in the area just long enough to see his name attached to a mining district he had neither discovered nor developed.

Unsuccessful at merchandising in Carson City, Comstock moved to the Pacific Northwest. He constructed a road in Oregon and prospected in Idaho and Montana. In 1870, after an expedition to the Big Horn Mountains, he returned to the Washoe Valley to testify in one of the numerous court suits over his old mine. On Sept. 27, 1870, during a period of mental depression, he took his own life near Bozeman, Mont.