



Cities of the Golden Dawn

by *Fred Kille*

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Photos courtesy of Jack Gibson.

We crested the hill, my father at the wheel of the huge 1948 Buick with the chrome portholes. The Dynaflo in low gear groaned the last few miles up the pinion-covered slope, but we knew we were nearly there. He stopped, and we looked down into a green yet arid canyon and saw for the first time the brick buildings with arched and spacious doorways that stared up at us from under an early morning sun. Neither of us had expected this miraculous view. We had forded creeks, climbed steep canyons of shale and fought narrow and nearly impossible wagon roads for some eighteen miles out of Bodie and, finally, arrived at this place that had vanished from road maps and mileage signs.

As we got out of the car a frightened jackrabbit ran into the high sage. From this height, the entire town seemed overgrown in brush as high as a person; a dirt street cut through town and the side streets radiated out of that deserted and ruined center. The air sparkled in a dry, early morning light and shadow--it was 1949 and I was ten years old. My father and I, a fat little urban kid, stood by the green fender and looked on Aurora, the best ghost town I have ever seen. We saw a long main street lined with brick and wood buildings in that incredibly silent place where we were the only people. Even now in my imagination, it still shimmers before us as it did then in my childhood eyes.

I didn't realize it then, but that was my first encounter with an awareness of time and its disappointments. Children are impressed by the immediate emotion and the general scene and fail to see detail; my memory is cast in a series of childhood recollections that illustrate the exciting and eerie, the dangerous and sublime. My father impressed me with the fear of open pits and rattlesnakes: do not walk without looking where you're going, do not lift up boards or put your hands under things. These do-nots of all worried parents, especially fathers, impressed on me the danger of this place. Yet I was entranced from the very first sight of this ruined, silent town.

That day proved an exhilarating series of explorations in the fantasy of a small boy. While my father set up the tripod and carefully took pictures of the place, I wandered through the buildings on the main street. The cool darkness of the dilapidated Esmeralda Hotel with its upper floors caved in and its scattered furniture and debris; the Last Chance Saloon slightly leaning with a rickety stairway to the second story where a wood-burning stove stood in one corner with its rusty pipe slanting through a peaked and rotting ceiling. On the corner street, a brick building with huge arched doors and iron shutters stood roofless—a rectangular white sign SALOON painted on the crumbling exterior wall. I wandered through this street and through these buildings with awe and fear. But the town we saw from the hill was not the town I walked through. Each perspective had its particular excitement, but the panoramic view we saw was that of another, more subtle place. Once surrounded by vacant buildings and dark windows and high sage, one feels differently. The unexpected is immediate and coiled at your feet; impressions become scattered and incoherent. One impression is cancelled by another, which, in turn, is again cancelled with a movement of the head or the looking around a corner.

After my father took his pictures and changed to a smaller camera, we began to explore. It took several hours to see the main street. We started from the hotel and walked to the other end of town where the livery stable with wagons and equipment stood. My imagination flared upon seeing the wagons and the two huge bellows, of wood and leather construction, which were connected to a dark furnace. They were housed in a large barn-like building of weathered wood, slightly leaning. The blacksmith's shop and the livery stable were one. Tools were scattered on long benches attached to the walls. Rotting leather harnesses and straps and wagon wheels seemed left where they were last used. I was fascinated. The wooden roof leaked sunlight and, in a semi-light, I saw the faint dust rising up and floating in bright streaks from where I had just walked on the powdery floor. It was eerie and fascinating, a placement of myself on a genuine Twentieth-Century Fox set somewhere in a desolate land. Fantasy and the actual mingled in ways I find difficult to explain.

That afternoon we set up camp on a flat tailing pile above the town and my father prepared lunch. It was warm, yet we could see snow on the higher peaks of a distant mountain range. My father was in no hurry to return to the town. He lingered over the view and, as I look back to this time, it

was as if he were unable to believe what we saw before us. It was a fantasy, perhaps another set piece for a new western film like *Yellow Sky*. Only the green Buick with molded fenders sparkling among the old buildings gave us a fixed reality—it was the only obtrusive object in the panoramic landscape of town and surrounding hills. I was suddenly aware of the entire place, the hills behind hills that offered untold exploration in the mind. The extensive mining and the scattered cabins, those roads that either switchbacked over a peak or went straight ahead as a thin shining ribbon and vanished into the shadow of a further canyon.

But we never walked into those canyons; instead we explored the cabins on the outer fringe of the town. The scattered furniture, the spidery hanging screen doors, the creaking of tin roofs and floorboards. The thin walls were covered with

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its silence.

Burnt Norton

newspapers dating from the 1860s—advertisements with bearded gentlemen giving testimonials and somewhat plump ladies displaying the latest fashions; or reports of the latest mining explorations and profits; or national concerns such as the latest Civil War skirmishes and battles won and lost. My father read these papers as I scrambled around the cabins looking, forever and simply looking: the scattered debris, the hanging and torn lace curtains with layers of dust, the paper-thin walls separating the small rooms. I rambled through bedrooms with iron beds and wooden dressers, was intrigued by the discarded clothing in closets or piled on floors or hanging out of trunks. I have always been a natural snoop. We spent many hours wandering the back streets of Aurora and even then did not see enough. I wanted more, more and more. I wanted to see the houses on the surrounding hills and explore the mines. I wanted to walk the back roads to those other, more obscure places. I intently focused and lost my focus, one object superseding another as if I were watching an unfolding drama in which I was entirely captured and dazed. But finally, in a failing light, my father and I had to return to camp.

That evening a half moon hung over us and shined an intense light over the landscape. Dark outlines lighted the entire

townsite. The walls of the Esmeralda and the many other gaunt buildings shined against an immense range of darkness. Aurora was a genuine ghost and haunted in the proper way. Yes, and still haunts. As an adult looking in retrospect at this translucent night, I am haunted by memory alone, simple and complex and confusing memory. We ate a late dinner by campfire. Exhaustion had taken both of us suddenly and swiftly. My father, then forty-two, told me about his trip to Rhyolite as a young man. It was the same fantasy—the deserted streets, the empty buildings, the excitement of seeing an abandoned town for the first time. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you know that feeling now. Of seeing something for the first time and feeling different in its presence."

He had given me several of the artifacts he had found many years ago at Rhyolite: old checks and papers from the open vaults in the bank, several purplized bottles, an old packsaddle. But I had seen Rhyolite the year before, and it wasn't deserted. People still lived there, and it was too close to the main road. Most of the buildings were gone and those still standing were empty. "Aurora could never be like Rhyolite," I confided to my father.

We shared a large iron cot, and together looked up through the moonlight and tried to trace some of the more obvious constellations. Falling asleep under this bright sky was pleasant. The landscape swirled darkly in my imagination—those distant shining ribbons of road, those distant places that I would never see. I fought to keep awake. I wanted to look out over this place forever. The thought of leaving seemed too disappointing to be real. Something would happen. Maybe we could stay longer. I fell asleep with that reassuring hope. The next morning came early. Breakfast and a few hours prowling around the town. Then the packing. We would return, my father promised. We would return to Aurora next year and stay longer. We left with the excitement of an early return.

But the mind of a small boy easily forgets. We did many things and went many places over the following years: camping in the Redwoods, traveling in Canada, taking in a World's Fair. We went to these places as a family. My father and I, however, continued our special outings. But the child's mind did not ruminate on Aurora; his imagination was stirred by ghost towns and canyons beyond canyons. My father bought a 1939 La Salle that became our official camping car, and we prowled the ghost towns of Death Valley and the Panamints. I learned to drive on those narrow and dusty roads. We explored the

more distant ruins of Hamilton and Treasure Hill, but we never once returned to Aurora.

The years went by and I grew out of my fatness and learned to cope with rattle-snakes and open pits. I worked those inevitable first jobs and graduated from high school. I went to college, got married; the years passed quickly and I forgot about ghost towns and that place called Aurora. Graduate school came after my degree and temporary jobs and the raising of a family--those inescapable years of survival where one keeps a narrow and constant focus. Then a permanent job settled in, and we saved some money. I then suddenly realized that my son, a leaner version of myself at ten, had never seen any environment outside of Los Angeles and the occasional trips to Santa Maria to visit relatives. Where had those years gone and why so quickly? And for reasons too subliminal to know, I thought again of the Goddess of Dawn and that she has haunted me unknowingly for all these years. It was time to return to that place under moonlight and again explore what I had seen and what I had not seen.

That first night my son and I camped at Bodie. Now a state park, Bodie seemed unchanged. The wood buildings leaned a little more perhaps and the rangers had shored up many of the structures that would have fallen under a heavy snow. It was early June and a cold wind blew through the town and through the small campground at the far end of the park. We were the only campers in this isolated area, and it felt good to sleep under a dark cloudy sky. I was excited. Yet the real thrill was ahead, that place of genuine ghostly attributes. Thinking back into my past did not let me sleep well that night. I thought of my father then and now. I thought of a father guiding his son as his father guided him and knew I had been lax. Not that my son and I were not close, but that I was always busy, somewhere out there. And somewhere out there I had lost a certain familial warmth.

There secretly nestles within each of us that illusive area without time or place that remains changeless and immutable, an uncharted region that dark nights and cold winds and intimate memories restores to a painful and forever vivid truth. And these thoughts haunted me during the night, these thoughts and the thought of that Aurora of my childhood. Excitement and fear reigned supreme in my mind as I tried to appraise my past and my present.

Humorously, I thought of my studies in college and how they had prepared me for this journey--the Deserted Village was Aurora in my fancy. The gothic novels in

far and distant lands became my dark landscape of memory. Yet my fancy was overshadowed by a haunting realization that history betrays us. We live out a certain time, then die. History tries to recover us, make something of what never was. But it fails. Only the particular historian is saved from the rubble. It is that simple and bleak. My father's father was a printer and, following his trade, lived in many places in the west, from Missouri to New Mexico to Colorado to Nebraska. His final job was in Glendale where he, a few years before his retirement, suddenly died. His passion was growing roses, and he seemed content with his garden and his small house. At sixty he was secretly and quietly resigned to the fates and aware that everyday living hammers us into a finely tuned and malleable working machine. My father never said much about his father, and I have a clear but scant image of him--a short, slender man in a ballooning white shirt bending over his prized roses.

My son slept soundly beside me and was not concerned with these simple and ordinary truths among fathers. Adulthood broadens our childhood thoughts, yet still we remain miraculously childlike. We work and move around in the solemn duty of work, yet one person cultivates experience while another grows roses and still another, like my father, builds model trains. All are trapped in the particular, but they have developed minds to transport them willingly from such prosaic matters to that other world--the intense moment where one is suddenly focused and alive. And I am hammered on that anvil with my father and my father's father. My son slept in unawareness, yet he too will be forged into that resigned silence and escape.

It was difficult to sleep that night. Finally, and with the gradual lessening of tension, my thoughts of sorrow and excitement passed into the darkness around me; and I was oblivious. Our thoughts so often escape unnoticed, as slight moments that roll and drift in a certain comfortableness, then vanish to await another silent entrance.

It was a clear morning with a slight cold breeze. The road out of Bodie had changed. I could see traces of the old road my father and I had taken on the other side of the creek. The road was graded and wider; they had built culverts where my son and I now crossed the creek. I had problems finding the turn off to Aurora. Something was changed--they had put a new road through. We were not traveling the same roads, yet we were nearing the same canyon. As we drove higher into the pinion forest, I saw the first signs of mining. A ridge of tailings spilled from a dark

tunnel above us, a tumbled down rock cabin held precariously to a cliff where a narrow rock-lined road switchbacked above us. This was a country I vaguely remembered. The road smoothly lifted toward the top of the crest and a jackrabbit lay smashed on the beveled edge of the gravel road--it almost made it into the high brush.

My father simply crested the hill and there it was, but we were on a different hill and the town of Aurora eluded me. I came to the place where I thought it was: the valley below and the surrounding hills seemed familiar. But there was little that was the same. A pick-up was parked below us and two men, a few feet away from it, were digging beside a narrow and heavily eroded road. I decided to drive back and see if I could find where the old road came into the town. But it wasn't there. I returned to where we started and drove into the canyon and parked where three roads joined. Where had I made my mistake? My son was impatient.

The men looked up as we approached, and I asked the inevitable question. And their answer brought back the eerie forebodings and doubts of last night's sleeplessness. We were standing in the center of Aurora. Around us were the last remnants of that once fabulous place.

The hills surrounding us were bare of houses. Looking up the road where we stood, I saw the faint remnants of a couple of buildings and the shine from a downed roof of tin. Quickly surveying the terrain around me, I saw a few bundles of dry boards that were once cabins. But there was little to see of the old town--some gigantic holes that once were basements, a few scattered bricks and broken board. The Aurora of the past was gone forever. My son was clearly disappointed. Looking out over the nothing that for him never existed, I wondered how he felt on seeing this vast vacancy.

I felt a sudden sense of betrayal and loss. My son can never see what I saw or would like to see again. The frustration of his look I felt keenly, and it brought me back to that other early morning so many years ago when I was eager for discover. The silence of that place was broken by voices, the scraping of shovels on rock, a distant sound of an engine. The vision I had kept tucked away all these years was broken, irredeemable.

The men had been camped at Aurora since yesterday and showed us some of the artifacts they had dug in the ruins. A few bottles, an iron grate, assorted pieces of iron. That was all that was left of Aurora. They had dug into a dump some five feet into the ground and pulled out pieces of

bone and plate and rusted tin cans. Each stratum held a different Aurora. They tossed out pieces of melted glass from the oldest layer, the Aurora of the early 1860s. Then dug higher into the bank that was caving in and scraped out pieces of a later Aurora during its last, short-lived boom at the turn of the century. They could date the shards of glass and the rusted artifacts, but even these discoveries of such wonders could not reclaim the town of my imagination.

The excavations and the unearthed remnants of the town fascinated my son. We walked over the site, but it was difficult to piece together where the buildings stood. The Last Chance Saloon still partially remained, but the Cain house, which dead-ended the street, was gone, except for an occasional broken brick. I noticed for the first time the many flat places where buildings had once stood, but my memory of those buildings failed. We walked what was once the main street and I tried to imagine where the major building had been.

My son was excited. He wanted to dig for artifacts and walk over the hills into the mountains. He was ready to travel, to set up camp and start looking around. How do you know where to dig? Let's walk over that hill and explore. So we spent a week in Aurora and walked the surrounding hills and farther back. We followed washed out roads the car couldn't take and searched old cabins in the mountains many miles from the town. We became fascinated by the country and the exploration. Yet the other Aurora always remained in the back of my mind. I saw my father walking the main street in silence with his large Graphlex. The squeezing of the bulb, the long exposure, and the loud metallic snap of the closing shutter. What became of that man and boy?

After the vacation my son and I returned home to discover more about that place. The two fathers and the son dug out the old photographs. The two fathers tried to reconstruct what they saw twenty-one years ago--where each building had stood and how large the town actually was. The

older father knew more about the place than did the younger father. His photographs revealed much detail that had been forgotten. Yet the photographs seemed of an alien place to the younger father who remembered the sagebrush and the overall deserted town shimmering from that height in an early morning light.

The older father had not taken any photographs of the entire town, but merely this particular building and that particular building. How can my son understand what the fathers had seen on that spectacular day? My son couldn't understand why the fathers had not returned to that place. And why had not more photos been taken to show where buildings were? But the fathers were tenacious in their quest to piece together the town. They kept comparing the photographs that each had taken--the ones with buildings and the ones



without buildings. They were resolute in their quest, and the older father had some very early photographs of Aurora in a book. Comparing the 1889 photographs to his and his son's photographs, the older father was suddenly amazed: "Here's where the saloon was, remember that cross street? Here's where that hotel stood, the one on this end of town," he gestured. "Remember, it was farther down the main street than the saloon. Look here," my father insisted. "Here's that fancy mansion and that shadow must be the bank."

My father was quite proud of himself. He patched up time, took out the abstract and replaced it with real brick. He reorganized my photographs of empty sites or holes where buildings had once stood and matched them to an image of real buildings. Streets came alive for him as he squinted over this old photograph and

transcribed its arrangement onto these newer ones. He shifted the glass from one building to another, from one photograph to another, from darkness to light and from one rearrangement to another with perfect satisfaction. He saw again the town he photographed and was convinced of his rightness. "Look," he reaffirmed. "This was the large hotel on the other corner. Here's that place with the fancy scrollwork. Remember. What was that guy's name, Cane? Anyway, he must have built a garage on sometime after this photograph was taken." I watched him there, puzzling over his reconstruction. My son and I finally confirmed his findings, yet I wasn't positive.

That's the way our reconstruction went. I made several trips to the library and found chapters of books on Aurora. I found more photographs taken of it, one a panoramic

view taken at the turn of the century. But this was a different town than I had remembered. The buildings seemed the same, but the landscape was different. The main street in the photograph seemed on higher ground than the actual main street I remembered. And the main street that my son and I had walked, filled with basement cavities and scattered bricks, was a deeper ravine yet.

What I saw in these earlier photographs was that there was not a single Aurora. What had been has changed and again changed.

So the two fathers and son returned to this many-layered city with their varied points of view. We looked the place over and camped on a small knoll a short distance beyond the town site. In the evenings we made our plans, selected locations where an unsuspecting artifact might be unearthed. The two fathers drank coffee with brandy to keep the chill off. The nights seemed colder to the fathers, but the son was ready for adventure. We felt good under the excitement of impending exploration. I had reaffirmed that valuable lesson of how fathers and sons endure and live out their time. We escaped into the desert to labor intensely under another hot sun; yet we were happy in that

wilderness. My father poked around the fallen buildings and caved in basements and, with the wisdom of the older, showed my son where to dig. And I, another slave to pattern, followed in their shadow, trenching and digging exploratory excavations in a town already desecrated under the prurient hands of the greedy.

And yet, years later, I reflect upon the illusiveness of experience, of place and time. My son, now a junior in college, struggles to find place in the social rung. I think back to my time in college and don't believe how time foreshortens. What is the distance, miles or light years? Place is illusive in and out of time. We make our reconstructions and live with them.

I sit by this window next to the patio and hold to the light a trade token my son found years ago when he and my father were walking in one of the farther canyons. On its circular brass surface on one side reads AURORA, NEV. On the reverse side, GOOD IN TRADE 5 CENTS. I am curious. What was this token good for, and who traded it and for what? Was the exchange a fair one, I wonder? I hold this small token in my hand and turn it over. It sparkles in the light of the room and remains mute. But the Aurora of this token was not the real Aurora. The real Aurora was earlier. The man or woman who exchanged this token for a commodity was living in a defunct Aurora of the 1890s--an Aurora that had already drastically declined. Many empty houses must have dotted the valley and many of the cabins that I saw as a child must have been abandoned to the open air by that time.

Many of the buildings built by the city fathers in the early 1860s were already gone, either torn down for their sturdy beams or burned by accident. Perhaps the temporary owner of this token dragged wood off for mining beams or shoring timbers. But the fathers of this city had long vanished by then. They had erected a city of brick to rival San Francisco and knew that Aurora, such a queen among goddesses, would remain forever constant. They would erect no temporary buildings to celebrate her fame. She ruled Nevada and California with a dual county seat, her silver was plentiful and pure, and her people would give eternal promise to the continuing frontier. The city fathers had envisioned this city of brick and golden streets to stretch for miles and miles into an inviolate kingdom of rising stocks and bonds. Did Midas exchange his gold for silver and whisper to them his best-kept secrets? But even as they built their city, it was vanishing into the surrounding desert wilderness. The city prospered but the fathers left within ten years, leaving it to

the hordes of speculators and the unprosperous. The vision of the Golden Dawn failed them, and they, too, must have felt betrayed by this unpredictable and maddening queen.

History is fraught with the unpredictable and the least expected. A few weeks ago my wife and I happened to be in the vicinity of Rhyolite and decided to pay that old haunt of my father's a short visit. The town had a few residents and tourists were driving down the main street taking photographs of the ruins of the Cook Bank, the crumbling walls of the hotel, and the remaining iron front of the L. T. Porter store. Although it is not the same town my father knew, nor the same town I saw as a child, he would be happy to know that his town is lasting. Its crumbling concrete walls seem to be holding firmly which would be to my father's liking. If luck holds firm, his town may still be standing well into the Twenty-First Century.

With Rhyolite behind us, I saw through the mirror a tourist scrambling a crumbling wall of the bank and another walking backwards down the main street, each holding a camera to the ruins. They seemed to be looking for the appropriate shadow or the suitable point of view that would extricate the modern from the vision of focus. As we turned off the main street and headed east to Beatty Junction, I thought again of that illusive place of Aurora and how I would like to see it again under that early morning light. And I suddenly remembered my father's ironic pun when he for the first time saw the rubble that once was Aurora and couldn't believe what he saw before him. "Mutability, my dear son, Mutability. That's what killed the queen--Long live the Queen."

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