

## Grosh Brothers Story

By Hal V. Hall



It was about 1873 that a Professor Bousley along with a companion drifted up in a balloon and landed a mile or so south of Last Chance. Located on Balloon Ridge, behind the old town site and on a beautiful knoll in a natural wild setting is a small, well-preserved cemetery. Buried here is a very famous man, Ethan Allen Grosh. His story follows:

In 1849, Ethan Allen Grosh, then twenty-four, and younger brother, Hosea Ballou Grosh who were both sons of a clergyman, left their eastern home of Reading, Pennsylvania, with a company heading for the famed gold rich land of California via Tampico and Mazatlan, Mexico. Both were well educated and daguerreotypists which was an early form of photography produced on a silver or copper plate covered with silver. Wherever they stopped for any length of time, the two brothers would set up their camera and darkroom and take pictures of notable town folk. In Tampico they made daurerreotypes of the Mexico's hero General La Vega.

Hosea contracted malaria and dysentery on the journey and by the time they reached San Francisco that August, he was too ill to continue toward the Sierra Nevada placers. Allen carefully nursed Hosea while supporting themselves by making daguerreotypes. It was nearly summer by the time enough of a savings was put aside and with Hosea feeling well again. They promptly bought the necessary outfitting and were off to Mud Springs in El Dorado County.

Like so many others the Grosh brothers had made their way west to make a quick fortune and then go back home. Unlike the others fortune hunters fortunately they were better prepared, for they had considerable knowledge of chemistry and metallurgy as well as having bought equipment to test and assay ore. In the first season they prospected along the South Fork of the American River and made about \$2,000 above expenses. However, they later lost it all in a vain effort to flume the river so they could wash the rich gravel from the bed. This mixture of good luck with bad was to be for the years ahead a pattern of life for the Grosh brothers.

They visited Carson Valley, in Nevada (then the Utah Territory), in 1851, on the reports of riches to be found only to return back to California. But in 1853 they made it a longer visit, and thoroughly prospected portions of the Carson Valley, Gold Canyon, Lake Valley and Washoe Valley. Those already in Gold Canyon had found gold enough to justify its name, but all the ore was mixed with rock that the two brothers wanted samples of. After their return to California, with specimens for full examination, they were gaining information that was gradually acquiring respecting modes of testing their value. They found what they believed to be carbonate of silver from a specimen. One of the brothers wrote, "It was a dark gray mass, tarnished, probably, by the sulfuric acid in the water. It resembles thin sheet lead, broken very fine - and led the miners supposed it to be (and threw it away in disgust). The ore we found at the forks of the canyon; a large quartz vein - at least, boulders from a vein close by here shows itself. Other ore of silver we think we have found in the canyon, and a rock called black rock - very abundant - we think contains silver."

They remained in California and along the American River, looking for any gold-bearing quartz and "trying to get a couple of hundred dollars together," as Allen wrote his father, so they might return to Gold Canyon which they believed to be rich in silver. After gathering enough capital in May of 1857, they obtained an outfit by organizing the Frank Mining Company and of other California friends. They soon rediscovered their former discoveries and what they called "our Monster Vein" along with other discoveries near the forks of the canyon. They also mention, "suits of veins crossing the canyon at two other points," and "a mammoth vein of copper - copper pyrites - twenty-five or thirty miles north of the canyon, containing considerable silver and resembling copper."

They found difficulties in making reliable assays, in the nature of the ores, being, "not, as we had supposed, magnetic oxide of iron, but the magnetic sulfuret of iron," and other mixtures such as little money adding difficulties in toilsome and tedious labor, with deficient materials and imperfect apparatus. But their assays showed the blackish, purple and violet rock to be rich in silver. The ore was unbelievably rich, "Our first assay was one-half ounce of rock; the result was \$3,500 of silver to the ton . . . We are very sanguine of ultimate success," Allen wrote to his father. After much time and labor there was poverty. To procure food, they had to use nearly every hour not absolutely needed for rest in gold digging and washing - leaving only a few spare hours for roasting and smelting.

While engaged in digging earth on Gold Hill near a small ravine to the right fork of the main canyon, Hosea struck his pick into hollow of his foot on August 19, 1857. There was no doctor around, and they had trouble finding "a few simple lotions to poultice the wound." Water treatment was used as a last resort. Infection developed, signs of lock jaw appeared, and he died on September 2, 1857. Hosea's death was a crushing blow to Allan. Hosea was buried respectably by his fellow-miners, and his remains have since been removed to a cemetery at Silver City and a memorial stone placed there by his father.

Allen later told his father in a letter describing Hosea's accident, death and burial, "In the first burst of my sorrow I complained bitterly of the dispensation which deprived me of what I held most dear of all the world, and I thought it most hard that he should be called away just as we had

fair hopes of realizing what we had labored so hard and for so many years." A few days later he wrote again saying he missed Hosea so much, he was at times "strongly tempted to abandon everything and leave the country forever, cowardly as such a course would be." For Allen's father's sake he carried on.

After working long enough to wash sufficient gold to pay the funeral expenses and determined to go to Grass Valley, California, to obtain needed additional financial aid for developing the project, Allen and a friend, Richard Maurice Bucke, set out over the mountains on November 15th. To us this would seem a hazardous, foolhardy attempt in the face of the violent storms, the heavy winter snows, and the intense cold of the Sierras, but the hardy prospectors of the time had made the crossing before then, and it was not uncommon to cross the Sierras in that region as well as at Donner Pass in the late fall or early winter. Before leaving, Allen made up a waterproof packet containing ore samples from the silver claims, a diagram of the veins, and his assay books. His remaining papers, maps, and books he boxed up left in their stone cabin, in trusting care of Henry Thomas Paige Comstock, a trapper and mountain man, known to his friends as "Old Pancake." With an untrustworthy pack mule bearing their mining and camping equipment and what they thought were adequate supplies, they started across the mountains and camped the first night below the eastern summit of the Carson Range. In the morning they pushed on over and down to the northern shore of Lake Tahoe along Scotts Route (now known as the Western States Trail) which they followed until nightfall. It rained that evening and snow fell on the peaks. They went to Squaw Valley and attempted to take the trail over Squaw Peak to follow down the Middle Fork of the American River.

Mules have an innate sense of direction, which way to travel when a storm is brewing. It seems their cunning animal got away during the night, and had started back heading toward the milder climate of the Carson Valley where cattle and horses usually migrate in the fall. Several days were wasted before finally capturing the critter. Turning around and traveling back to the place where they formerly camped consumed valuable days. In the meantime, a threatening storm was coming upon them.

On November twenty-second brought more rain and even deeper snowdrifts and snowpacks to the mountaintops. They hasten their pace and tried to cross the summit that same afternoon after reaching the valley. But as Bucke had written, "We soon came to snow, then lost the trail, hunted for it until it began to get dark, and then turned back to Squaw Valley, lit a fire, had supper, dried ourselves as well as we could . . . and lay down by our fire until morning."

The next morning saw more snow falling. The two men made the ill-fated decision to continue on rather than to go back. They even considered returning to the Truckee River perhaps to follow it out of the mountains, but because they knew nothing about its course, they felt it might prove to be impassable. They pressed on.

They fought the blinding snow and the cold, and soon after the pack mule, which was forced to subsist on twigs in the absence of fodder, became too weak to go on. The small animal had plunged through the deep snow, but became useless at the high elevation. They were already out of provisions and, since they could not take the mule with them, decided to kill him for food.

Shouldering their camping and mining equipment, and as much of the meat of the mule as they could carry, they staggered on through the snow drifts over the trail which were only casual paths marked with infrequent blazes in summer. It was the 27th and 28th of November that they made two more vain efforts to reach the summit and were driven back each time to their camp. It began to seem as though Squaw Valley had both of them locked in an inescapable icy prison. However, on morning of November 29th Richard Bucke describes a, "fine, bright day," and they began with hope of a better day's journey. Through waist deep drifts they climbed from point to point by

pulling themselves up by bushes and rock out-cropping until they finally reached the summit near present day Watson Monument.

They quickly descended the steep western slope into the canyon of the Middle Fork of the American River and that night came to an empty cabin used in the summer by cattlemen and by weary mountain travelers known as the Greek Hotel in Little American Valley. Bucke had been over the trail before and had stopped here as well. He thought there would be provision in the cabin; however, the cupboards were empty. The unwritten law of mountains had been broken; always leave a little for the next comer. Their only subsistence was the tough unappetizing mule meat, which they could only stomach because of their intense hunger.

A new storm began to break. From the cabin they were only about thirty miles from the settlement of Robinson Flat causing them to ponder the thought of the impossibility to keeping to the trail on thickly wooded ridges unless it was clear enough to see the blazes in the trees. They waited two days in the cabin for the storm to pass while their mule meat began to dwindle in supply.

On December second the day was bright and clear of foul weather so they pressed on, but the snow was again so deep in places that they kept losing the trail. By sundown they had lost it completely finding themselves traveling in a large circle and noticing they had followed fresh track of their own and not the high hopes of someone else's. Bucke explains, "Then we knew that our only chance of life was to find shelter immediately." To conserve their strength, they started throwing away items they were carrying such as their gun that was to wet and rusty anyway and could no longer fire, and Allen's packet of ore samples and papers. At this point Allen tied up his maps and assay records in a piece of canvas and deposited them in the hollow of a large fallen pine tree, blocking the opening with a rock, and drawing a rough cross on the bark with his knife. They carefully memorized the location of the tree for later identification and staggered on.

"We kept nothing but our blankets, a butcher's knife, and a tin cup in which was the miserable remains of our meat, and ran for our lives."

The next day as they groped their way helplessly through the snow, they threw away their wet blankets, and then fear struck them further when the dampness kept them from starting a fire with their matches. They began lighting the campfire by a flash of powder from the gun. Yet, this quickly ran out and to keep from freezing to death during the night they made burrows under the snow and crawled into them to lie until morning. Sleep was difficult and "very little" for the warmth of their bodies together was melting the snow above them and which was soaking them to the skin. They had made their way to the bottom of the ridge and to a little ravine that sheltered them from the bitter wind that they also had to battle all day.

In the morning they decided that it was useless to climb back to the top of the ridge and try to find the trail that Bucke had traveled over several times before. They kept to the ravine (that was later determined to be Little Duncan Canyon), knowing it would lead to the river. Their meat had run out that night, "which amounted to not more than two or three mouthfuls apiece." On December fourth, they reached the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American River, and followed it until dark. They had hoped for some sign of a muddy creek where miners may be working. But all the streams found no evidence of this and unfortunately no sign of habitation.

The next morning found both of them extremely weak. "We did not feel hungry, but we had a sinking feeling much worse than hunger." Later that day Bucke recalled being, "exhausted and despairing," and suggested they give up and die right here. "Let us make our bed for the last time, for we shall never leave this place. I am done for, so let me die." Allen Gosh's strength was failing fast, replied, "No, we will get somewhere yet." Finally realizing they were lost and doomed to die, they talked of the past and cursed their impatience in trying to reach the Mother Lode during the storm.

Their sleep that night was torturous with strange visions as Bucke had dreams of feasting on quail and other delicacies. The two young men had eaten nothing in four days, and their legs were frozen well above the knee. Being so weak they crawled much of the way, slowly on their hands and knees the next morning, lucky to be alive and to discover possible salvation. They came to a mining ditch with water in it and by following it, saw cabins ahead. "Our troubles are over," Bucke muttered, yet both men fell short and collapsed.

They lay in the snow dying when two Mexican miners from nearby Last Chance, who had been deer hunting, found the two men. The miners carried them both on sleds pulling them up the ridge to the town of Last Chance and cared for them as well as they could. Here a miner named Hamilton took them into his cabin. For the first time since leaving Lake Tahoe they were warm and dry. Both men were severely frostbitten and suffering from starvation. They could not sleep and every time they ate it made them sick. Gangrene began to set in. Both men grew delirious, as the miners of the camp searched for a doctor in the mountains.

Bucke's legs were badly frostbitten and gangrene was setting in. Without an anesthetic, and with a crude hunting knife, the miners amputated one of his legs and part of the other foot. Both of Allen's legs had to be amputated. Allen fell into a coma and regained consciousness before dying on December 19, 1857, but was never able to speak or to give any clue as to the location of his claims. Carried with him to heaven was the secret of the "Blue-Stuff" that was later to become famed as the Comstock Lode as his papers were never found.

Richard Bucke was nursed back to health and later recovered. The miners of the camp took him to Michigan Bluff and raised a subscription fund to send him back to his home in Canada. In the spring while in tears he left for San Francisco knowing he had survived the horrors of the frozen winter in the Sierra Nevada mountains. He spent some time with a friend in San Francisco before returning to London, Canada. He went on to Europe to study medicine, and became a noted neurologist and the Superintendent of the Dominion Insane Asylum, in London, Canada. Years later he had a headstone delivered, shipped via around Cape Horn and carried by mule train, to Last Chance and had it placed over the grave of his friend. The marker still stands among others in the quiet old cemetery of this remote ghost town.

The miners of Last Chance never realized their part in the drama in which the secret of the first discovery of silver died with the sealed lips of Allen Grosh, for Bucke did not know the location of the claims, so carefully had the Grosh brothers been to protect their secret. He did, however, relate to Bill Leet, the storekeeper at Last Chance, the story of how he had seen the Groshes performing their crude assay of the silver ore. The finding of the two dying men was recounted later by Johnson Simmons, who was in Last Chance at the time. Bucke did, however, recount to Simmons the details of the depositing of the assay records and maps in the hollow tree. He remembered Allen marking the spot where he so carefully placed his secrets. In spite of these clues, the Grosh records never yielded their valuable secret. Miners agreed later if Bucke knew his friend's secret, he could have, and probably would have been one of the richest men in the west.

When the news of the death of Allen Grosh reached Virginia City there was speculation as to what discoveries they had made. Henry Comstock, after whom the Lode had been named, was an ignorant, unscrupulous opportunist who had taken his turn at placer mining in Gold Canyon and had followed the varying winds of fortune in the gold fields. He had known the Grosh brothers and had visited them at their camp. He had accompanied them in their prospecting and when he heard of the death of the remaining Grosh brother he tried to learn their secret. According to one associate of the Grosh brothers, Comstock ransacked the Grosh cabin in his search for papers and data. It is unlikely that he found any specific clues as to the location of the claims. In spite of the

fact that he had been over much of the area, either with the Grosh brothers or by himself, Comstock was not able to locate the claims and only guessed at the presence of worth-while deposits in staking out claims for himself on what he thought was likely ground. By the spring of 1859 Comstock was deeding ground which he had staked out himself to newcomers who still thought of the claims as gold property. It was not until June of 1859 that Melville Atwood in an assay at Grass Valley, California, found silver assaying 15-20% in ore from the Ophir diggings on Mount Davidson. This assay marks the legitimate beginning of the history of the Comstock Lode as an inconceivably fertile mother of bonanzas and of the beginning of history of silver mining in Virginia City, Nevada.

In an interview with Mrs. Laura M. Dettenrieder, a friend of the Grosh brothers and who was a resident of Nevada in 1853, said, "I should like to know what became of the record book they showed me, that was left in Comstock's possession." Her concern was that Comstock upon learning of Allen's death took advantage of perhaps an important piece of evidence left him by Grosh before his departure to California that may have led him to believe the Groshes were near a discovery of some sort. Thus, he ransacked their cabin to learn more.

The two men's father, Reverend Aaron B. Grosh, a Universalist clergyman, by letter dated July 8, 1879, gave his account of their discovery to a long-time family friend, Mrs. C. B. Winslow, M. D. He said near the close of the letter, "A writer from Virginia City, in the New York *Herald* of December 30, 1878, in giving a description of the "Comstock" Lode and other mines, gives an account of my sons, their discoveries and deaths, which is generally correct, and says: From association with the brothers Grosh, previous to their unfortunate deaths, Comstock, in some way or other, at their melancholy ending, came into possession of what property they left. Dr. Bucke, who knew all the parties well, says there was no intimacy between Comstock and my sons, nor was there any likelihood of there being any confidence reposed in the former by the latter, so widely different were they in character, disposition and habits. And if reports may be relied on, Comstock himself told so many different stories in accounting for his possession and sale of the lode, that it came to be believed that he took possession of books, maps, and other papers which Allen had boxed up for safekeeping, and thus learned of the existence of the mines they had discovered, and claimed them - sometimes as his own discovery; sometimes as having been left in his charge, for which he was to receive one-third or one-fourth; sometimes, as their partner; and sometimes as being on the spot, and therefore nearer to them than any distant heirs: having the best right, that of possession." Comstock had formerly been one of the grog-drinking bums around Johnstown with enough gall to claim all he could ever lay his hands on. He later moved to Alder Gulch thinking he could find another "Comstock" in Montana, but despondency got the best of him. He blew his brains out with a shotgun before making the next pending "discovery."

Dan De Quille in mentioning these men in his book, Big Bonanza, states that,

"When Allen Grosh left to go over the mountains to California, Comstock was placed in charge of the cabin, and it is very probable that whatever books and apparatus there may have been were carried away."

He further indicates that the two Grosh brothers were undoubtedly first discoverers of silver in Nevada.

It was a trick of fate that deprived the men who first became aware of the silver treasure in a Nevada mountainside that they nor their relatives received not one cent from their discovery. What became of their maps and data in that tree stump - no one but dear Fate herself knows. As to the name of their discovery, they don't even have that credit. The ran-sacker of their cabin after their deaths has full claim to that honor. Heirs of Grosh later attempted to establish a claim, but courts ruled there was insufficient evidence to show that Grosh had ever made a valid filing.

Allen Grosh was a frontier fighter of the first degree. He was courageous and brave with only the fear of God etched in his veins. He ate mule meat and fought the elements through blinding snowstorms and blizzards. He had the sinew, and mental fiber that makes men.

ALLEN GROSH

The blizzards you fought and subdued them;  
Misfortune you met with a soul.  
Gold, you had found, on Comstock ground.  
Success had at last reached your goal.

But fury came frozen in frenzy -  
'Twas the god of fate's decree.  
Lo, the angel of death, then came with his breath,  
To set all your suffering free.

Mule meat you ate for survival,  
Till Mexicans, gentle and kind,  
Dug out a grave, for Allen the brave.  
Your spirit, - you left behind.

At Last Chance the hero lies sleeping  
Up on the Middle Fork trail.  
The country is cold, all laden with gold  
Where riders come through with the mail.

by W. F. Skyhawk, 1956