



## Central Nevada Road Trip (N24A)

With a small gap between medical appointments, I didn't have enough time for my usual April trip up to Utah, so I swapped it with May's planned Nevada road trip. And it worked out well, as Nevada had much better weather than Utah did while I was on the trip.

I've taken a number of road trips around Nevada, but I haven't spent much time in the Carson City/Reno area, and the state operates some museums in Carson City that've I've wanted to check out. This trip focused on that area, and had a particular emphasis on Nevada's mining history.

However, I started with a return to Death Valley, which I had just visited two months ago in February. The rain that had created temporary Lake Manly in Death Valley's Badwater Basin reportedly also sparked a spring wildflower superbloom, so I thought I'd split my drive up to Carson City/Reno over two days in order to check out the wildflowers. Alas, although there were some pretty patches of wildflowers to be seen, they didn't compare to the last Death Valley superbloom back in 2016.



Patches of wildflowers can be found in places in the 2024 Death Valley landscape.



This photo is from the 2016 Death Valley superbloom.



When I visited Death Valley in February, people were allowed to kayak on Lake Manly, the temporary lake that filled normally dry Badwater Basin. Only a week later, the water level had dropped enough that boating was banned. But the now-much smaller Lake Manly is still hanging around in Badwater Basin.





There are several old mining sites in Death Valley, including this, the Keane Wonder Mine, a gold mine that dates back to the early 1900s (the last active mine in the park closed in 2005). The mine was left unstable, and lead, mercury and cyanide levels (used in processing at gold mines) were high, so the park kept the mine closed to visitors until late 2017 for safety reasons. Ruins of the mine, an aerial tramway and stamp mill can be seen during a short hike at that site.



View from Keane Wonder Mine towards Badwater Basin





I drove as far as Tonopah, Nevada for the night (Tonopah marks the site of Nevada's second richest silver strike, but I've toured its mining-related highlights during past visits). With a bit of extra time on my hands en route, I made a return visit to the International Car Forest of the Last Church in Goldfield, Nevada to see whether and how it might have changed since my first visit there five years earlier.



The car forest has a surprising connection to Nevada's mining history. There once were numerous small mineshafts at this spot (a lot of gold was mined at Goldfield). Cars and buses are held in their upright positions without obvious supports by sticking their front ends in abandoned mineshafts and closing off the openings.



Although I was planning to stay in Carson City for a few nights, I made a swing through nearby Reno, Nevada's third largest city, as I had never really checked it out before. It's mostly known as a gambling mecca, especially for its casinos along Virginia Street downtown, and for its proximity to Lake Tahoe. It also became known as a place to get a quickie divorce, making it a popular destination for celebrities, although there are a couple wedding chapels downtown for those seeking quickie weddings.



Downtown Reno is home to a couple of large modern casinos as well as a handful of older style casinos – and repurposed former casinos. It looks nothing like the Las Vegas Strip – perhaps downtown Las Vegas' Fremont Street would be a better point of comparison, but Fremont Street gives off a nightlife vibe I didn't see in downtown Reno.





Reno's National Bowling Stadium is also home to an extension of the Arlington, Texas-based International Bowling Museum.



The biggest surprise I came across in downtown Reno was this historical marker for Jacob Davis's Tailor Shop. Davis came up with heavy duty work pants using cotton duck fabric and cotton denim. He strengthened them with copper rivets at the stress points. His fabric supplier was a San Francisco-based dry goods business – Levi Strauss & Company. As demand for the pants grew, he approached Levi Strauss to become his business partner. They were granted a patent, Strauss set up a facility to mass produce the pants, which Davis ran, and that's how what we know as Levi's got their start – invented in downtown Reno.



In the late 1840s, people heading west to California crossed what is now Nevada and stopped for water along the Carson River. In 1849, while waiting for snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains to melt so they could continue their journey, Abner Blackburn found a gold nugget in a nearby creek. By 1850, a mining camp set up at the creek – now called Gold Creek – and miners began working their way up the canyon through which the creek flowed – now called Gold Canyon. This was the start of what is now Dayton, Nevada, the oldest settlement (but not the oldest town) in Nevada. Over the next decade, mining activity led to the establishment of Silver City and Gold Hill near the top of the canyon. The Comstock Lode, the largest silver strike in Nevada history, was discovered in 1859, resulting in the creation of Virginia City. The influx of people helped Nevada become a state in 1864. Pictured is the old Union Hotel, now a private residence, built in 1870.



Nearby is the still operating Odeon Saloon. The 1961 movie *The Misfits* was filmed in part in the area, including at the Odeon. This was the last movie made by both Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe.





A Farmall H tractor on display at the Historic Dayton Museum



An old mine in Silver City, Nevada





Many original buildings survive in downtown Virginia City, which draws a lot of tourists. Although there are some museums and other authentic evidence of the town's rich mining history, most of the buildings now are home to bars, restaurants and assorted souvenir sellers.

Because of all the gold and even more silver that was mined here, Virginia City quickly became the largest city in the southwest and the richest city per capita in the country (and possibly the world) for a while.



The building on the left was home to the Territorial Enterprise newspaper. It was while he was working as a reporter for the newspaper in 1863 that Samuel Clemens first used the pen name Mark Twain. Clemens left town in 1864 to avoid a duel with someone who was upset with Clemens' reporting.

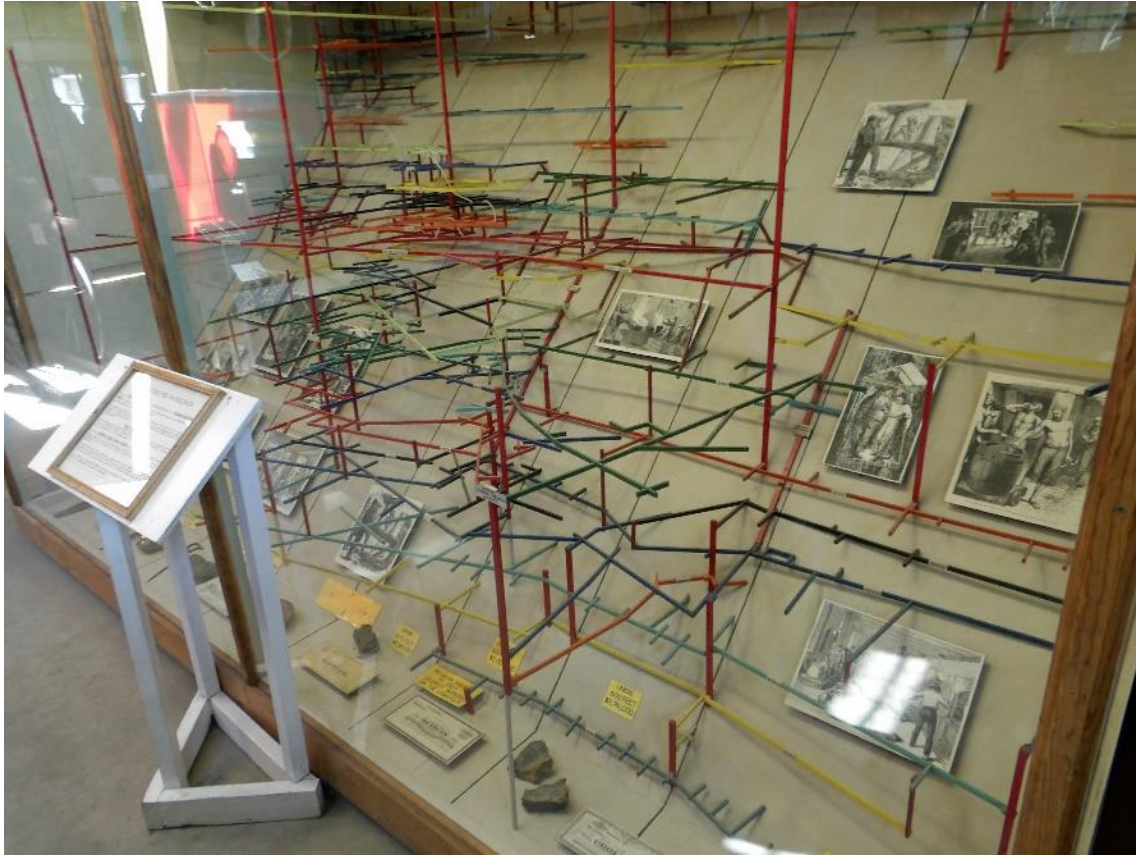


Virginia City's Union Brewery, which was established in 1863, is home to the Men's Northside Crisis Center



Virginia City apparently also had options for women in crisis. The city's The Way It Was Museum includes this product in its display of old-time pharmaceuticals.





The Way It Was Museum also features this model of the mineshafts that were built under Virginia City.



If you watched the TV series *Bonanza*, you'll recognize this map. Note the location of the Ponderosa ranch relative to Virginia City, Carson City, Reno and Lake Tahoe – and that north is off to the left.





With maps usually having north at the top, here's a more normal view of the Ponderosa and nearby cities.

To add a little international flavor to my trip, I stopped at the Republic of Molossia, an 11-acre micronation recognized by no other country, after finishing the day's other sightseeing.



The Republic of Molossia's customs station at its border with the United States





The border between the United States and Molossia is clearly marked.



You can check out some of Molossia's wildlife at this croc pond. Don't get too close because medical care in Molossia is pretty limited at best.



Fort Fenwick is home to the Molossian navy.





I used Carson City as my base for exploring Reno, Dayton, Virginia City and Carson City. I checked out its modest downtown, which features a couple casinos, some stores and the state capitol complex, but my real motivation for staying here is that it is home to three state museums that I wanted to see.



The Nevada state capitol. The capitol and capitol grounds is the only part of Carson City I've explored during past drives through the Carson City. With fewer than 60,000 people, Carson City isn't a very big city, but there are 13 state capitals with even lower populations.



The very good Nevada State Museum has a number of interesting displays covering early Native American communities, the western explorers, mining, pioneer days, geological history, gambling and the old Carson City mint (part of the museum is housed in the old mint building). Not a lot of fossils, but a pair are noteworthy.



The ichthyosaur is the state fossil of Nevada. It was a large fish-like lizard that appeared in the ocean fossil record about 250 million years ago. About forty of these fossils were found at 7,000 feet elevation in the Shoshone Mountains near the Berlin ghost town. The elevation gives you an idea of how much Nevada's geology has changed over millions of years.



This Imperial Mammoth fossil is the largest mammoth ever found in North America. It was found in northwest Nevada, which was home to the massive Glacial Lake Lahontan during the Ice Age.



The Nevada State Railroad Museum was a bit disappointing. Although it featured a handful of cars and engines primarily from the Virginia & Truckee Railway (the line connected Virginia City to Carson City and then eventually to Reno), the signage was pretty limited.

I'd recommend the Nevada Northern Railway Museum in Ely, Nevada as a much more interesting alternative.



In a number of areas, it was government policy to forcibly remove Native American children from their families, and send them to boarding school. The purpose wasn't just to provide a standard education, but also to assimilate the children into white culture. Native clothing, food, hair styles, language, traditions, spiritual beliefs and contacts with their families were all banned, making these children almost unrecognizable to their parents when they were finally reunited. The Stewart Indian School was one such school. The federal government operated the school from 1890 to 1980.

The Stewart Indian School Museum and Cultural Center preserves the site. It has a smallish exhibit hall, and visitors can take a walk around the campus to see the surviving buildings, many of which were built by the students themselves as part of their vocational training, including the dining hall, pictured. Several state agencies now occupy many of the campus buildings.



In 1986, Life Magazine named US Highway 50 across Nevada as “The Loneliest Road in America”. It starts just west of Carson City and cuts east across the state to the Utah border through a rather desolate part of the state. Even with increased development in the Carson City/Reno area, once you get past Fallon (supports a military base), you’ve only got three small town along the rest of the route – Austin, Eureka and Ely. There are also deserts, forests, 17 mountain passes, and a handful of outdoors destinations.

I’ve pretty much covered the route a handful of times on various trips, but I keep having plans thwarted to see Hamilton – a mining ghost town along the way. So, I made Hamilton a target for this trip, and then added some eastern Nevada stops along my route back to Las Vegas.

Out here, much of US Highway 50 follows the old Pony Express route, so there are a handful of Pony Express and stagecoach station ruins sites along the way.



Ruins of the Overland Stage Station and corral near Cold Springs. The ruins of an old telegraph station are a short walk to the east. The Cold Springs Pony Express station ruins are a two-mile hike to the south.

Silver and some gold were found further to the east, leading to the creation of the town of Austin, which by 1865 was the second largest town in Nevada. That didn't last for very long, though, and today, Austin is what some call a near-ghost town.



Highway 50 through the heart of Austin



With plans to go only as far as Eureka this day, I stopped along the way at Hickison Petroglyph Recreation Area, where I did a repeat hike of its Interpretive Trail to check out a few petroglyph panels and scenic views.





There was a scenic view of one of Nevada’s mountain ranges from the Interpretive Trail, but it looked ominous for my Hamilton plans. Central and northern Nevada had a relatively snowy winter, and I had noticed that snow was lingering in the higher elevations.



The discovery of silver led to the founding of Eureka, and by the mid-1870s it had replaced Austin as the second city to Virginia City. The town looks a bit more lively than Austin does, with some obvious sprucing up, e.g., its old opera house is now a small convention center/meeting hall. Still, for dinner Sunday evening I only had one restaurant option.



There's no waiting in line to go to the bathroom at the Eureka visitor center. The Bartine outhouse, which is on display there, is a five-seater.



Snow-covered Mt. Hamilton. The road up to Hamilton is a bit rough in the best of dry circumstances. It's closed in the winter, which for Hamilton purposes has lasted well into April this year. Maybe next time (for the fourth time; last time when I was in the area in 2022, my radiator sprung a leak, canceling my Hamilton plans on that trip).





I knew that Hamilton wouldn't fill the day, so I had a few "if I have time for..." plans in the Ely area, where I was going to spend the night. I made my first visit to the White Pine (County) Public Museum, which features a collection of area items from the county's history. This is a display of wooden molds used in the making of hats.

The Ward Mining District was a silver mining area that developed in the 1870s and was abandoned about a decade later.



Building ruins in the old Ward townsite. The Ward cemetery is nearby.





Old tin cans and broken dishes can be found scattered on the ground of the Ward townsite, even after about 140 years.



Improvements in mining techniques led to two later attempts to mine silver here, including this 1960s site, but neither attempt was very productive.





It takes 30-50 bushels of charcoal to smelt one ton of ore. These six well-preserved Ward charcoal ovens were used to reduce pinyon pine and juniper wood into charcoal. Each oven held 35 cord of wood, which burned for 12 days, producing 50 bushels of charcoal per cord. It took about 6 acres of trees to fill just one oven, so local forests were stripped clean for miles around in just a few years.

There were ruins of a couple lime kilns nearby. Lime was needed to make the mortar used to build the charcoal ovens. The lime kilns and charcoal ovens had more permanence than Ward itself did.



Further east along US Highway 50 is the Swamp Cedar Natural Area. It's a grove of Rocky Mountain juniper trees in Spring Valley, an area with a high water table. The area – Bahsahwahbee to the Native Americans – is also sacred to the Western Shoshone and Goshute people, both as a long-standing tribal gathering area and as the site of three massacres of Native Americans. There's a proposal to make Bahsahwahbee a new national monument.



Pretty much the last major site to see along the Loneliest Road in America before it heads east out of Nevada into Utah is the Snake mountain range, which includes Wheeler Peak at the left, the second highest point in Nevada. Wheeler Peak is at the heart of Great Basin National Park, home to Lehman Caves and the only surviving glacier in Nevada.

After spending the night in Ely, I headed south to the Basin and Range National Monument area for my last day of sightseeing. At Basin and Range, I returned to the White River Narrows Archaeological District. I stopped there last fall, and checked out rock art sites I through V on that trip. Site VI is in a different area, so that was my first target of the day.

It's actually the largest rock art site at White River Narrows, with lots of newer petroglyphs carved on top of older ones. Styles include a mix of Fremont culture and hunter-gatherer Basin and Range culture, with a bit of Pahrnagat culture thrown in.





The lower reaches of the rhyolite (volcanic tuff) rock pictured here are covered with rock art.



The site features a jumble of styles and motifs. The lighter petroglyphs are the newer ones. Some White River Narrows rock art is from the Archaic period, and dates back as much as 4000 years.



I ran out of time for the Crystal Wash Rock Art Site when I was in the area last year. I did hike around here once before, back in 2017. At that time, I started at the lower end of the wash and worked my way partway up the wash. This time, I started at the upper end and worked my way downstream. The two visits did end up overlapping a bit. The hiking was much slower going this visit, and I ran out of time, so I didn't see all the marked panels that I missed during my first visit here, but I did also see a couple unmarked new-to-me panels.



This is why it was slow-going. It was a longer walk from the parking area to the wash, and with two medical boots and two canes, I had to carefully pick my way across the rocky landscape.



This is one of the unmarked petroglyph sites I came across while exploring Crystal Wash. Most of the rock art at Crystal Wash is from the Basin and Range culture.





This is Site 4 in the main rock art area of Crystal Wash. The figure to the right, enlarged, shows up at other rock art sites in the region, and its darker color is evidence that it is older than the other petroglyphs on this panel. These suggest that it once had some cultural significance to the people who occupied this area, but its meaning has been lost to the ages.

With a few more marked rock art sites (and undoubtedly some unmarked ones) to see at Crystal Wash, I'll need to return there someday when I've got about 4-5 hours to explore the place. There are marked rock art sites at the nearby Mt. Irish Archaeological District in Basin and Range National Monument, along with the Shooting Gallery rock art site to check out, too. There are also some panels along a trail at Pahrnagat National Wildlife Refuge about 30 miles to the south, reportedly including an excellent example of Pahrnagat Man, but that trail has been closed for the last few years. So, I've got good reasons to return to this area.

After spending the night in Caliente, I headed home.