

Elkhorn

Where the Cross of Gold oration was given

South of Helena are the last remains of a classic, scantily inhabited ghost town called Elkhorn. From the false-fronted balconied Fraternity Brothers Hall to the bullet marks on cabins, to the emporium, to broken window glass, to creaking doors, to the hotels, to the Elkhorn and Midnight Bell Queen and Golden Curry mines, to the cemetery perched high above the fairly well-preserved town, down to the sagebrush on the streets, Elkhorn measures up to preconceptions most visitors have of what a ghost town is supposed to look like. And to top it off, scenes from the television documentary *The Real West*, narrated by Gary Cooper, were filmed at Elkhorn.

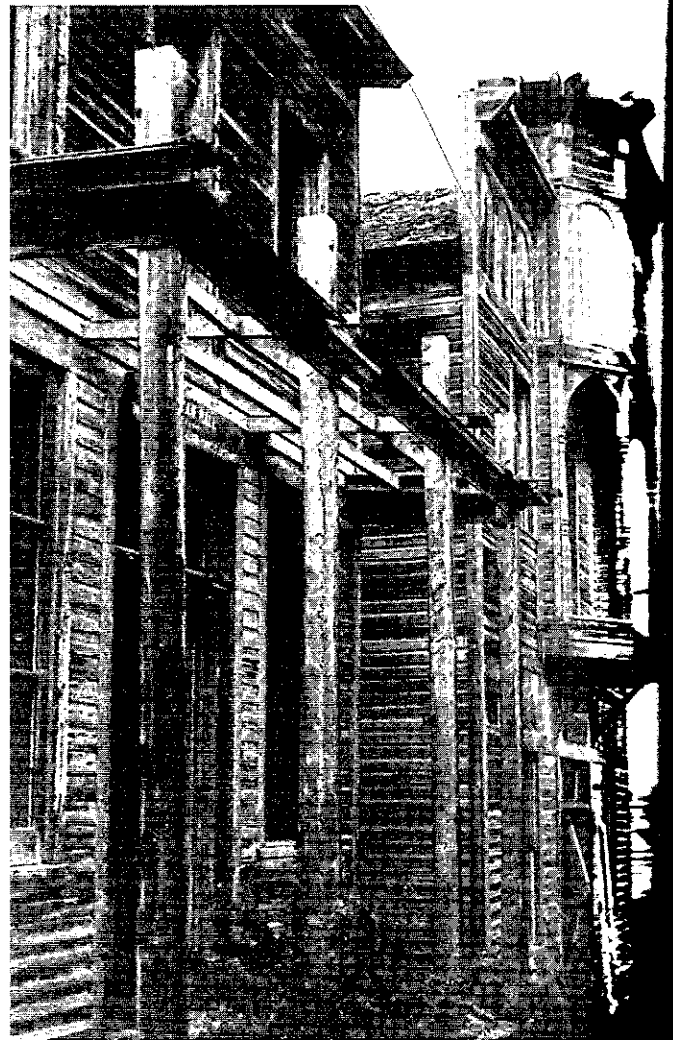
Silver, gold, and lead poured from the mines: \$14,000,000 in silver alone. And everything that mining normally brings, it brought to Elkhorn: disease, homicide, mining and woodcutting accidents, supply problems, fires, brutal hours of work, hurdy-gurdies and saloons, prostitution, gambling. All timber is second-growth, evidence of the work of the 500 wood cutters out to get the cordwood needed to supply the mill and homes in Elkhorn. They used about 1,500 head of horses to haul that precious wood to the mill and about seventy-five structures that were originally a part of the town.

A fascination for some visitors to Elkhorn is a huge wagon, which is slowly decomposing, on the edge of town. The wagon was especially constructed to transport a transformer that weighed thirty tons from the rail-head to the mill. Twelve head of horses pulled the wagon, twelve head pushed. Even today the rubble of old cyanide tanks can be found at the mill.

It was here that orator William Jennings Bryan delivered his famous "Cross of Gold" speech, and a few signs indicate where candy stores and saloons or other business establishments once stood. A picnic ground is at the edge of town, and the site is relatively easy to get to by car. One sign points to a still-standing "dog house," complete with bed, behind a regular house where the

man of the house presumably could retreat to avoid his wife's scolding.

The cemetery was preserved by a group from the Boulder River school during the 1960s. Stone and wooden markers spanning a century are there. Markers at head



Note the ornate front of Fraternity Hall.

and foot are common, as are metal and wooden paling fences surrounding grave sites. The markers tell of a diphtheria epidemic¹ that claimed the lives of many infants and children primarily during the summer of 1889.

Near Elkhorn² were the settlements of Dagotown and Sourdough. A half-dozen structures remain at Dagotown, but all traces of Sourdough have disappeared. A bit of mining is still done in the area.³ In 1972 the Elkhorn mine, which had been shut down in 1912, was being

pumped of water down to the 500-foot level in anticipation of reactivating the mine. But chances appear slim that mining will be reborn in Elkhorn.

In 1972 the Fraternity Brothers Hall and adjacent structure were purchased by the Western Montana Ghost Town Preservation Society with the intention of stabilizing the two structures. The Fraternity Brothers Hall is considered to be one of the most historically significant western American structures still standing.

Concentrates from the Elkhorn mill being loaded for shipment circa 1908. Photo courtesy of Fred Bell Sr.

