Water and Rhyolite, or

The Indian Springs Water Company and its contemporaries

When mining boomtowns were created in the Nevada desert, they came with many needs. The primary one was water. The towns of the Bullfrog Mining District were no exception. From Amargosa to Bullfrog to Rhyolite, water was an issue from the start.

Initially, water had to be brought in by barrel. Freight companies were formed to not only bring in needed supplies, but also work with those individuals or companies which controlled springs in the area. Often these were many miles away, and required long periods to continuously supply the needed water. As Rhyolite became the primary boomtown after its founding in January 1905, wagons would bring barrels of water to the new town every day.

The water was sold from $2.00 to $5.00 per barrel, which could become quite expensive very quickly. The water was flavored from the barrels being used, as well. In his reminiscence of life in Rhyolite, Rhyolite *Herald* publisher Earle Clemens remembered,

> "*Even the teetotalers were subjected to a strong solution of corn-juice in tea and coffee, for all the water used was hauled in whiskey barrels which had only recently been emptied of their original contents.*"

The freighters hauling water would take it around town, and residents could come out and buy what they needed daily. It was not an ideal way to serve the community, but it was a start. Nearly everyone had a barrel or can at their house or place of business to keep water in, so that it would be available when needed. However, there was a nighttime thief that would drink the water, no matter how you tried to keep it covered.

These were the many burros in the town. To quote Earle Clemens again,

> "*…what an industry the water business was! There were scores of teams on the road day and night between Beatty and Rhyolite, hauling the precious fluid. Every household had its water barrel or can, and one forgets not the*

frequent raid made upon them by the resourceful burro in the wee small hours of the morning. Watering burros for sweet charity's sake came high, but nearly every householder was forced into doing so at one time or another. You can't keep burros out of water barrels or cans. They will stop at nothing; not even at pulling the plug."

As the town grew, the entrepreneurs starting companies were successful, and Rhyolite would be well-supplied with water, but not until later in 1905.

Rhyolite's first company was the Indian Springs Water Company. It was created by R. W. Gorrill, Curtis Mann, and C. L. Milward in early 1905. They had a small pipeline running from Terry Spring by June 1905 into Rhyolite to their headquarters at the head of Golden Street. They were still freighting in water by barrel as well, as they were waiting for the pipes needed to build the line from the Upper and Lower Indian Springs, about five miles away. Those supplies did not make it to Rhyolite until July 1905, and were laid in August and September.

The Indian Springs Water Company, as soon as they had water available, advertised that burros could drink for free at their offices. The company also began laying a pipeline down Golden Street, with some lines into the housing areas of town.

Eventually, thirty-four blocks of Rhyolite had water lines. If you wanted to be hooked up, it was $15.00 for the initial water meter connection deposit, and one cent per gallon of water used. Eventually 20,000 feet of pipe was laid throughout the town, and 200 water meters were installed. The Company also built two 20,000 gallon tanks on the hill above Golden Street for storage.

The company also installed, in November, 1905, six fire hydrants. The charge to the town was $250.00, which Rhyolite paid. The town then ordered the needed supplies so that they could be used in case of fire. Rhyolite never suffered a major disastrous fire in its history.

By November 1906, Mann sold his interest in the company to Gorrill, who continued to invest in the company. He also invested in Rhyolite itself, building the first stone building in town, and later adding a second story. He continued to manage the water company throughout the boom years of the community.

The water company allowed Rhyolite to become known for being well supplied with water. There were even houses which had lawns, not an easy feat in southern Nevada's desert environment.

One, the home of partial Indian Springs Water Company owner C. L. Milward, was known for a lawn and many roses. Other homes, such as those of the Postmaster M. L. Moore, and Dr. Fred Brown, were noted for having fine yards.

Of course, the fact that such homes were noted in the local paper showed how unusual it was to grow flowers or grass on your desert property. One water bill was reported on in the Rhyolite *Herald* in 1907. Fred Remick had a house which had a water bill for September, 1907, for $58.73. The article noted that he did not do his laundry at home, nor did he eat at home, but he did have a lawn. It was determined that the lawn cost .15 per square foot per month.

The company continued to supply water to Rhyolite throughout the community's existence. In 1915, it acquired the rights to the Beatty Spring, which was later known as the Revert Spring, for two years, presumably because it was closer to town.

In 1925, long after Rhyolite had ceased to exist as a community, the company's pipeline was rebuilt to the Montgomery Shoshone mine when it was reopened for a short time.

The company buildings still stand at the head of Golden Street in Rhyolite, across the parking lot from the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad Depot.

The Upper and Lower Indian Springs still flow and are now used by the town of Beatty. It should be noted that the town of Indian Springs, where Creech Air Force Base is located, is not the same Indian Springs as the ones use by the Indian Springs Water Company of Rhyolite.

There were two other water companies in Rhyolite during its heyday in 1905-1911. These were the Bullfrog Water Line and the Patrick Line.

The Bullfrog Water Line was created by H. H. Clark and associates as the Bullfrog Townsite, Water and Ice Company. It owned the Goss ranch and Goss spring, and Geyser Spring, both about ten miles from Bullfrog in Amargosa Valley. The company ran a pipeline to a standpipe in the middle of the Bullfrog town, just

below Rhyolite, and then laid pipes throughout that town. Water was then piped up to Rhyolite.

The Patrick line was created by brothers Lucien L., E. T., and William F. Patrick, who purchased the Beatty Ranch in March 1905. There were many small springs on the ranch and they had a pipe run a little over five miles to Bonanza Mountain above Rhyolite to a storage tank. Their water company also ran water lines down Golden Street and through town.

In 1907, all three companies coordinated their rates. Water in Rhyolite was now one cent per gallon for the first 1,000 gallons, ½ cent for the next 4,000 gallons, and ¼ cent for any usage over 5,000 gallons. A little different pricing structure than today.

One other thing these water companies allowed for in Rhyolite was the building and operation of three public pools in town during its heyday. These were the Bullfrog Swimming Pool, in Bullfrog but on the Rhyolite side, and the Rhyolite Swimming Pool, at Amargosa and Gold Center Streets, both operated by McCauley and Robichau, and Charlton and Hill's Nevada Swimming Pool on Chico Street. The idea that there was enough water to support three pools in a desert boom town shows how much water was coming into town.

And how did the residents react when all this water started flowing? Well, let me take another quote from Earle Clemens,

> "*There was genuine rejoicing when the first water line came, although it was only an inch pipe from Terry spring, a mile or so up the gulch toward Busch peak. In the course of time, more water came; also the telephone, the railway, the electric light, and other improvements.*"

Rhyolite's water companies provided the desert boom town running water in its homes, a functioning fire hydrant system, three public swimming pools, a few green yards (if you wanted to pay for the water – it could run as much as $90 per month in water bills), an ice house, and a much more pleasant life in a very hot land. Had the problems with further investment not happened, it would have been a nice community to live in.

And those problems? Well, most investment in Rhyolite came in from coastal investors. The 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, and the 1907 Wall

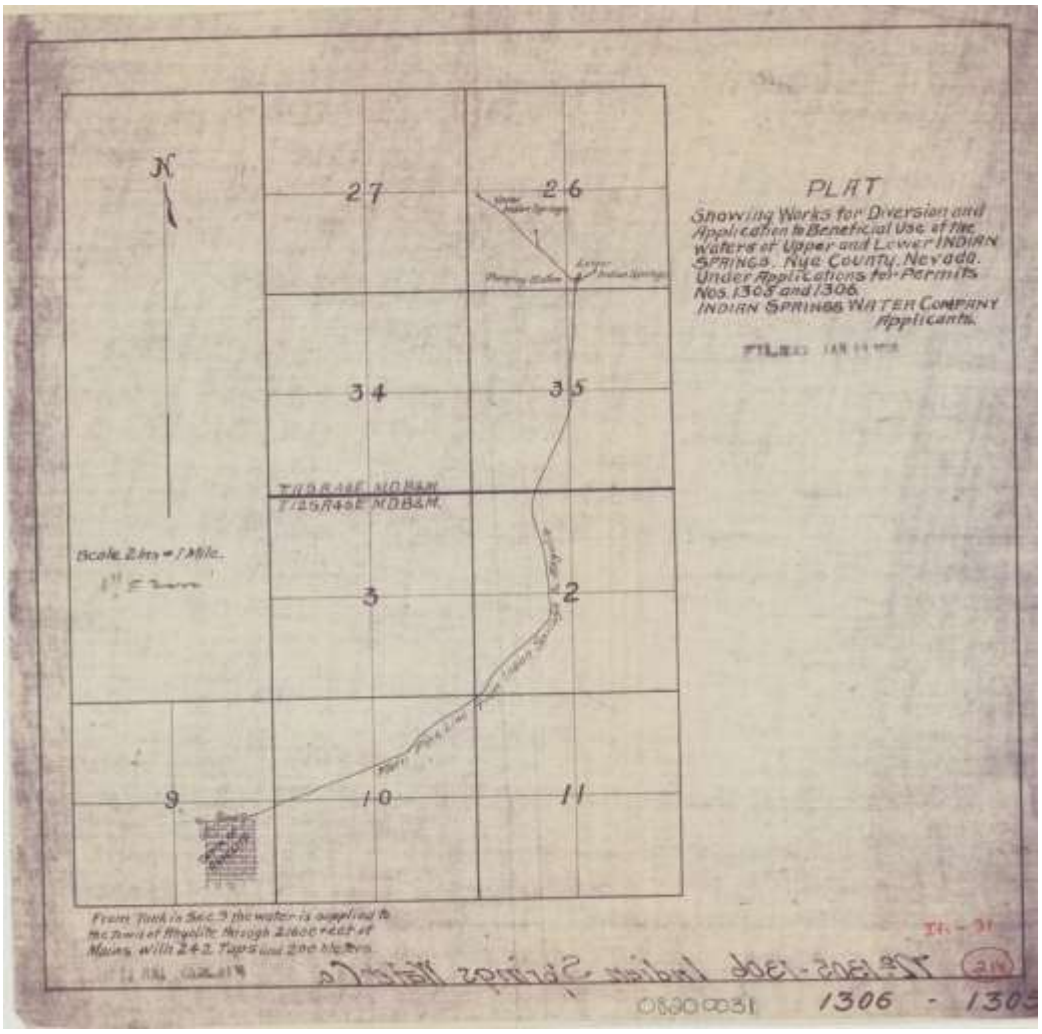
Street Panic, where the New York Stock Exchange lost 50% of its value between September and October, dried up nearly all money available for investment in the Rhyolite mines. Though the town limped on, people started moving away in droves, and the town began to shrink.

By 1912, the *Herald* stopped publishing. The town, which had boasted a high of perhaps 2,000 to 3,000 residents in 1907, showed 611 in the 1910 census. By 1919, the post office was discontinued, and the 1920 census showed a population of 24. Rhyolite, to all intents and purposes, was no more.

The ruins were still there. A few would come to visit, and people did own individual places. The LV & T depot was later reopened as the Ghost Casino, but Rhyolite was gone as the great boom town it had been.

And the Indian Springs Water Company had done its part to make it a success.

What sayeth the brethren?



This is an original map of the Indian Springs Water Company pipeline route from 1905. The original of the map is in the collection of the University of Nevada, Reno, Special Collections.

For those clampers who wish further reading:

Lingenfelter, Richard E., Death Valley & the Amargosa; A Land of Illusion, University of California Press

Patera, Alan H., Rhyolite, The Boom Years, [Western Places, Vol. 3 #2], 1994

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