

## Celebrations at Auburn and Clarksville in 1864

by  
Gary Dielman

“88th national Independence ushered by the boom of the cannon.” This diary entry dated July 4, 1864, is twenty-seven-year-old James W. Virtue’s description of the opening Fourth of July festivities in the gold mining camp of Auburn. To celebrate the holiday, Virtue and “a select party of us went to the (Auburn) reservoir,” above town, where they “had a grand pick nick,” followed by a “dance in evening at Brattain’s.” Virtue “had a good time” but added the melancholy note, “How much better it would be if I & one other could be to each other as in times past. With how much lighter heart I could battle against the vicissitudes of life.”



*James W. Virtue*

Virtue is referring to “Sue,” whom he had left in Nebraska to come west after being bitten by the gold bug. Born in Ireland in 1837, Virtue grew up in a small farming community east of Toronto, Canada. Deciding a farmer’s life was not for him, in late 1855 at age eighteen he was living on the banks of the Missouri River in northeastern Nebraska as one of the founding fathers of the town of Dakota City. He worked in real estate and banking. At age twenty-one he was appointed county clerk and subsequently twice elected to that position. But, when the railroad bypassed Dakota City, the town stagnated.

So, in the spring of 1863, Virtue forsook Dakota City, leaving behind the graves of his wife and infant child who had both died in 1857 within a year of his marriage, and headed to eastern Oregon. His diary, which covers the calendar year 1864 and was given to the Baker County Library by Virtue’s grandson’s widow, Viola Hardy, shows that on January 1 of that year Virtue was placer mining in Clarksville, Baker County, Oregon. Clarksville, of which only a lone

stone building remains today, was located on Clark's Creek about three miles southeast of Bridgeport in southern Baker County.

The June election in Clarksville afforded another reason for celebration. Virtue, who in 1866 would be elected Baker County sheriff and later became eastern Oregon's most influential political power broker, "Worked hard at the polls for [William H.] Pack[wood]. Run him head of [Democratic] ticket." Virtue does not indicate for what political position Packwood was a candidate but caricaturizes the election, as a "hot time, votes challenged, men drunk, and H[el]l to pay generally." Election day was followed by a day of "horse racing inaugurated in creek." "Lightening," the champion horse of the day, "won 3 first heats."



*Clarksville, Oregon, located three miles south east of Bridgeport.  
Today only one stone building remains.*

Virtue's first entry in his 1864 diary describes New Year's Day at Clarksville. The celebration lasted several days beginning with "a Bachelors New Year dinner" shared with "several of Basin boys," who had come over the hill from the nearby mining camp at Mormon Basin. The fare consisted of "duff [a flour pudding], whiskey & corn beef," reflecting the meager selection of food stuffs available to the miners in the wilds of eastern Oregon. In the evening there was a "Dance in town." "What a change from last N. Y.," wrote Virtue referring to New Year's Day 1863 back in Dakota City. "I wonder if they miss me--or the Dear one (Sue) who I then was with will sigh for my absence."

The next day celebrations continued. "Dance still goes on & whiskey down." And on January 3, "Still the dance goes on." But Virtue is not cheered by the festivities. "I am terrible blue & wish the time to pass more rapidly so I could see dear ones once again." The severe weather may have had something to do with

Virtue's mood, for he notes that January 4 is a "cold, frosty day" with the temperature at "18 below zero."

Virtue served as "Clerk of Election" on general election day, Tuesday, November 8, 1864. "Every vote sworn in." Running for reelection was President Abraham Lincoln against George McClellan, former General of the Army of the Potomac, whom Lincoln had fired for tarrying too long to take the war to General Robert E. Lee, whose Southern army was camped within a few miles of Washington, D. C. "Only 12 votes for Mac, 29 for Abe. Voted for Mac. My first vote cast for President." Apparently Virtue had become a naturalized citizen since the last general election. It was probably his last vote for a Democrat, since in later years his affiliation was always with the Republican party. The celebration, which mixed politics and liquor, resulted in "Men drunk & a fight every ten minutes." The next day it was back to "work in claim" with "men getting sober & feeling, I should think, blue," wrote Virtue.

As Christmas time approached, Virtue finds the weather "cold enough for an Icelander" and "the drift the warmest place," referring to a mine tunnel in which he "struck rich ground. Can pick the gold out of the dirt. This does our soul good." On December 24 Virtue puts the finishing touches on his new cabin. "Covered cabin with dirt. Fixing up for Christmas." He spends that evening "writing letter home. Christ-Eve and so far away from loved ones."

On Christmas Day, Virtue, and presumably others, "Took dinner with Mrs. Wilson. Had an old fashion Irish time." In town the next day the holiday continued with "great preparations for a dance and supper." But Virtue stayed in his cozy new cabin, "Reading & writing in evening." "I fried some supper meat by my fire at home. Home Sweet Home." But in town he can hear that the "dance goes on. Everybody getting on a big drunk." The next day Virtue goes back to work in the drift, which he finds, "Caved in this morning for 10 feet & ½ full of water. Enough to discourage an old miner." But his mood is lifted the very next day. "Getting 70 cents to pan & bed rock ok. This makes a poor Devil of a man feel good. You bet! [Wheel] barrow runs light with such dirt & we sing working for Nellie."

New Year's Eve finds Virtue working in the drift again. Then, at 11:45 p. m., he addresses his last diary entry to the diary itself. "Goodbye old 64.... Old diary, my companion so many months, I will lay you aside, not as one forgotten but to be referred to in after years, for this is a moment of life & lesson for the future.... Already the cold damp sweat of death is on his [1864's] brow."

Postscript about James W. Virtue:

In 1867 Virtue married Margaret Amelia Bowen, age 18, daughter of Baker County pioneer businessman I. B. Bowen and sister of I. B. Bowen, Jr., later editor of Baker City's *Morning Democrat* newspaper. Four children issued from

Virtue's second marriage. Daughter Lilah was born in 1868, followed by Robert in 1869, Maude in 1872, and James William, Jr., in 1876. In 1879 tragedy again struck Virtue's family when both Maude and James died of diphtheria within three weeks of each other. Robert remained a bachelor his whole life. Lilah married a Baker City businessman and had two children: a daughter, Eleanor, who died in 1889 within four months of birth, and a son Edwin. The graves of all three children (Maude, James, and Eleanor) are buried in the Catholic section of Mt. Hope Cemetery. When Edwin died childless in 1964, Virtue's line of descendants ended.

Virtue was re-elected sheriff in 1868 but declined running in 1870. Instead he built Baker City's first stone building, in which he opened the county's first bank. His banking business was probably financed by the sale of the Virtue Mine, which he and A. H. Brown owned for several years in the late 1860s. Virtue left Baker City for Portland in 1891, after having suffered losses in his banking business during a nation-wide depression that saw the closure of many banks. Virtue soon moved on to Jackson County, where he bought a placer mine and a year later was elected to a term in the Oregon legislature. In the final year of his life, Virtue's services as a gold mining consultant and advocate for gold mining in the Northwest earned him a special commendation from the governor of Oregon and the Oregon legislature. At the time of his death in 1903 at age 63, Virtue was back living in Portland. Virtue and wife, Amelia, are buried in Lone Fir Cemetery in Portland.

Readers interested in reading more of Virtue's 1864 Clarksville diary may do so by reading the author's article with photos "May Live and Die a Miner": The 1864 Clarksville Diary of James W. Virtue," which appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, available in the Oregon Room of the Baker County Library.

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