

The 1864 Clarksville Diary of James W. Virtue
by
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Grit and determination are the qualities that define James W. Virtue, for whom Virtue Flat and Virtue Mine were named. This miner, sheriff of Baker County (1866-1870), banker, mining expert, and legislator showed his determination in 1878, when he risked criminal prosecution by forcing H. C. Durkee at gun point to sign a retraction of a political article Durkee had published. As wished, the retraction was published, but Virtue and his friend John J. Dooley, who had accompanied him to Durkee's store, were arrested for Assault with a Deadly Weapon. However, since no one was harmed, charges against both men were eventually dropped.



James W. Virtue

I wrote about that episode in Virtue's life in the *Baker City Herald* in 1981. In the intervening years, Virtue's grandson's widow, Viola Hardy, and her sister, Maybelle Lacy, both of San Francisco, have generously given Baker County some memorabilia of the Virtue family, including Virtue's 1864 Clarksville diary.

It took a lot of grit to be a miner at Clarksville in 1864. That mining camp was located in the wilds of Eastern Oregon about a mile above the confluence of Clark's Creek and Burnt River at the east end of Hereford Valley. Mining was cold, lonely, hard work. The January 4th entry reads, "Cold frosty day. No work. Spent the day up town. 18 below zero."

If one ran out of supplies, there was no supermarket. "Saturday, January 9th. Still at Cottonwood [between Clarksville and Mormon Basin]. Dry goods all gone. Grub gave out." And, of course, no snowmobiles. "Sunday, January 10th. Left Cottonwood 10 a.m. Snow 3 feet deep and still snowing. Crossed mountain to Mormon Basin. Got good practice on snowshoes [probably skis]."

If one got sick, there was no doctor, just home remedies. "Thursday January 14th. Cold chill last night. Laid up." The next day, "Some better today. Able to move around. Opium my principle medicine."

Virtue lived alone in his cabin in Clarksville. "Sunday, February 21st. Spent day alone in my cabin reading over old, dear letters from home. What a lonely life." But his next entry shows he had visitors that very evening. "Matt and Doug stayed with me last night. Went up town. Boys on a bender." Then a couple of days later, more visitors. "Work in claim. Eckelson and Caststeel arrived from Canyon City. Staying with me. Miners coming in every day."



Clarksville, Oregon

Mining camp located southeast of Bridgeport. Only one building remains.

Virtue's diary must have been his constant companion, as evidenced by the fact that he made an entry almost every day in 1864. Measuring just 3 inches wide and 6 inches long, the diary is covered in dark brown leather held shut by a tab that fits through a loop of leather on the front. Inside the fold of the tab is a leather tube for holding a pencil or pen. About as many entries were written in pencil as in pen. A little sticker on the inside cover indicates that Virtue purchased the diary from R. B. Ironside's Drug and Chemical Store, seventeen miles away in Auburn, Oregon.

This small tome was not just a diary with the usual place for daily entries, but was also a businessman's reference. The first 31 pages contain handy information, such as a list of Sundays for 1864, eclipses, difference between time in San Francisco and other cities, festivals and fasts of the church, Hebrew calendar, rates of postage, hack fare in San Francisco, and value of foreign coins.

It's interesting to see that apparently there were no time zones in those days, since the

difference in time between San Francisco and other cities was done to the minute. For example, noon in San Francisco is 59 minutes past 1 p.m. in St. Paul, Minnesota. Also noteworthy were the twelve different coins for German cities and states, which were not united into one country until the end of the century.



Virtue's 1864 Diary, cover

In the back of the diary are pages for recording cash account transactions. On January 1st, 1864, Virtue's first entry shows that he had \$25.00 "on hand." Some other entries during the month include: stamps \$.50, dry goods \$1.00, pants \$4.00, received from Packwood \$30.00, oysters \$2.50, paid Packwood \$15.65, received in draft from I. H. Atkinson \$100.00. (The Packwood referred to was William H. Packwood, who, along with Virtue, was one of Baker County's biggest early-day entrepreneurs.)

Of special interest in this section of the diary are entries called "clean up," which refer to the amount of money Virtue got for gold he periodically cleaned out of his sluice boxes. On February 4th clean up was \$69.75, on the 8th \$80.00, and on the 20th \$238.00, an extraordinarily profitable month.



Virtue's 1864 Diary, inside

Virtue's diary is full of the up's and down's of a miner's life. In October the weather has gotten colder freezing up the water that is the life-blood of a placer operation. So Virtue retreats to the inside of a hardrock mine he has just opened up. He writes that his "hands are getting very sore," apparently from all the shoveling, and he is "feeling blue as H__I." But on Thursday, October 27th, things are looking brighter. He has "rocked out 36 buckets" making \$42 in his mine, and the "bedrock and ground sluices look well"

too, leading him to the conclusion that, "Mining is not such a bad thing after all. May live and die a miner."

On Tuesday, November 15th, Virtue is again down in the dumps after a "hard day's work" during a snowy, very cold day. "Such weather makes a man curse his luck for being poor. It is now a dreary looking prospect." But, then, just a few days later life gets a little brighter when, "McClanahan moved into town with his family. Clarksville can boast of one lady--bully!"

In November Virtue is building a new cabin. On Sunday the 27th, he travels to B. F. Koontz's sawmill in Hereford Valley to get some lumber to finish up the job. The next day he, "Started out at day light for home. Moved into cabin this evening. Now at home getting things comfortable as I have been since coming to this county." Then it's back to work on his placer mine. On the 30th it takes all day for things to warm up enough for water to start running through his claim. "Got water about sundown and cold as H__I. Got bedrock shovelled into ground sluice. Let it freeze and be d__d. Such is miner's luck."



THE VIRTUE MINE AND MILL.

In 1870 Virtue and A.H. Brown bought the mine and sold it three years later.

His luck is about to turn even worse. On Thursday, December 1st, Virtue writes, "Everything frozen up in claim. Started for Auburn on foot. Snow 2 feet deep on mt. Arrived 7 p.m. My toes on right foot frozen." He stays the night with C. E. Brainard, who was elected Baker County's first recorder in 1862. He notes the next morning, "Suffered very much with feet last night. Swollen. Cannot get my boots on. Very sore. Fear I will be laid up for some time."

But Virtue is lucky, for on December 9th he is able to make it back to his new cabin in Clarksville. By contrast, three years later, in February 1868, B. F. Koontz, the lumberman, died of exposure, when he attempted to snowshoe in a snow storm over Dooley Mountain from Auburn to his home on Burnt River.

Virtue spends the nights reading books he picked up in Auburn early in the month. On December 12th he was “studying fractions and grammar.” During the day he is back “drifting,” that is, punching a drift (horizontal mine tunnel) into the mountain. On the 13th he tells his diary, “Drifting goes all ok. Wheeled out 80 buggies. This I find a much pleasanter (as well as profitable) way of spending the winter than sitting in the cabin playing cards and drinking whiskey, as I did last winter.”

Another reason Virtue likes working in the drift is the relative comfort compared to working in the elements and freezing water on his placer claim. On December 14th the “snow is coming down thick and fast. Yet inside of tunnel it is as comfortable as sitting in cabin.” That evening he’s studying geography and history, while down the road, the “boys are having a regular **hoe** down in the road house.” On the 20th it’s “warmer yet cold enough for an Icelander. I find the drift the warmest place.”



James W. Virtue shortly before his death in 1903

Christmas morning found Virtue alone in his cabin writing letters home and to friends. But later in the day, he “took dinner with Mrs. Wilson. Had an old fashioned Irish time.” Then, just two days later, his luck almost ran out. “Work in drift. Caved in this morning from 10 feet and half full of water. Enough to discourage an old miner.”

At a quarter till midnight on New Year’s Eve 1864, Virtue made his last entry. “Good bye

old '64. I will not part from you in anger, rather in sorrow. From your hands I have received but few favors but many hard knocks.”

Virtue may have been down but he was not out. In the next few years, his grit and determination helped him achieve success in mining, business, and politics. Shortly before Virtue's death in 1903, Oregon Governor George Chamberlain honored Virtue on the floor of the legislature describing him as “a gentleman of the strictest integrity and one of the most competent and experienced mining men of the Pacific Coast.”

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