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## "Pass the Pickles": Viewing Class and Dining in Virginia City, Nevada through the Pickle Castor

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“Pass the Pickles”: Viewing Class and Dining in Virginia City, Nevada through the Pickle  
Castor<sup>1</sup>

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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April 28, 2023

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<sup>1</sup>Anne Frances Springsteen and Margaret Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress: a Manual for the Pantry, Kitchen, and Dining-Room*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894, 37.

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## Introduction

On the 15th of August, 1888 in Elko, Nevada, Mr. Joseph Dahms and Miss Kathleen Thorpe were married in residence.<sup>2</sup> They proceed to have a glorious dinner of a “bountiful collation,” with champagne and wine to accompany the meal.<sup>3</sup> After the festivities, the bride and groom were presented with a multitude of wedding gifts; among them, they received a pickle castor from a guest, Mrs. Jas. McMullen. In this small Nevada town, these newlyweds may have enjoyed their pickle castor on their new table. This record of a pivotal moment in the life of this couple is memorialized, both in the newspaper, and in the list of objects that accompanied their day.

Objects are not people, yet they are what people of the past leave behind. Material culture challenges us to understand people through objects, through the things that they touched or used, no matter how often. Material items carry a multitude of meanings with them: practical, economic, mental, or emotional.<sup>4</sup> It is through these meanings, and the objects that carry them, that historians discover stories about the people who lived in the past. The everyday experiences of people, especially those living through a specific historical moment, are often left behind in favor of a grander narrative. Microhistories and object histories aim to get beyond the grand narrative, and back to the human, realistic experience. Objects reveal this experience and the people around it in ways that written records cannot. They can indeed go past the written record, and shed light on people who did not make it to those pages.

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<sup>2</sup>“The Dahms-Thorpe Nuptials.” *Daily Independent*. August 16, 1888.  
<https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/620548921/?terms=%22pickle%20caster%22&match=1>.

<sup>3</sup>“The Dahms-Thorpe Nuptials.” *Daily Independent*.

<sup>4</sup>Tiya Miles. *All That She Carried: the Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*. First edition. New York: Random House, 2021, 269.

My object of study is the pickle castor; it exists in all of these object meanings, and can connect us back to the human experience.<sup>5</sup> This 19th-century American dining object represents an intersectionality between the unique social and economic space of Virginia City, Nevada in its silver rush Bonanza (1859-1882) and 19th-century dining processes. A study of all these aspects shows that the pickle castor was an object made from 19th-century dining ideals of ritual and process; the object was then utilized in Virginia City by upper and middle classes to both adhere to the dining standard, and to either display or emulate the wealth that surrounded the town from the silver rush.

Within the space of dining in Virginia City, there remains a question; why a pickle castor? There are many other objects from this time period that operate in either the dining sphere or the sphere of Virginia City. The pickle castor, however, sits in a particular place across both of these spaces, allowing a more thorough interrogation of the spaces and the people within them. In addition, the pickle castor is not a carefully studied or well-known object. It exists in the imagination of many Nevadans, but not elsewhere. This localization and general lack of attention given to the object warrants more interpretation of the object itself, and the environment around it.

This study will be broken down across three chapters. Chapter One serves as a comprehensive study on the life of the pickle castor itself. This chapter shows the object in its wide variety and conformity, where it exists both socially and geographically, and when it was popular; it displays the pickle castor as a middle to upper class dining object concentrated in the American west from around 1850-1910, providing images of these items in Virginia City.

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<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that there are two ways to spell the object name: pickle castor and pickle caster. Both are accepted spellings of the object, but to prevent confusion, I have remained consistent with the former, "pickle castor."

Chapter Two focuses on Virginia City, Nevada during the time of its silver rush Bonanza from 1859-1882. Through its establishment, growth, and the economic and social environment, Virginia City became the proper environment for the pickle castor, and similar objects, to flourish. The context of the silver rush, and the wealth that it generated in the town supported a population preoccupied with wealth and class opportunity, therefore making it a community more aligned with acts of conspicuous consumption usually found in different social arenas.

Chapter Three focuses on one of these social arenas, dining. This chapter places the pickle castor into the context of 19th-century dining as a whole. During this period, dining was a highly ritualized and materialistic act imbued with ideals of propriety, morality, and high class performance. The pickle castor fits into this practice as both a dining object of hyper-specificity and conspicuous consumption. Each of these chapters serve as one more piece in a puzzle, which connects the pickle castor to a broader social phenomenon and reveals realities of social life in 19th-century Virginia City.

I approached this study initially by breaking it down into three sections, which now correspond to one chapter each. In research, I isolated the pickle castor, Virginia City, and 19th-century dining by themselves both out of organization and necessity. Organizationally, it was imperative to start off with a deep dive into the object of concentration itself, then place it back into the two contexts. Out of necessity, it was easier to separate these topics due to their more separate historical fields. Pickle castors themselves have not been written about extensively, but the literature lies outside of the realm of Nevada history.

Nevada history, specifically Virginia City history itself, is a smaller field in comparison to the field of 19th-century American dining. Yet, within this field, there are a few dedicated names that I utilize in scholarship. Historian Ronald M. James and archaeologist Kelly J. Dixon both

write on social aspects in Virginia City. Dixon's work especially helped me place the pickle castor in spaces within historical imagination. This use of historical imagination and the exploration of Virginia City and its dining spaces through the lens of the pickle castor will build on and deepen the works of these previous scholars.

After each section is established, I consider the pickle castor in its different contexts, and connect it with each chapter and then as a whole. In my analysis, I take into account both primary and secondary sources and my own observations in my research and travels. I emphasize the use of this specifically within chapters one and two, as my travels to Virginia City itself have provided a reinforced framework to work within. This approach will help connect objects back to the people who used them. By studying the pickle castor, we can understand why Mrs. Jas McMullen gifted a pickle castor to the newlyweds on that day in 1888. We can understand the human drive behind the objects.



## Chapter I: What Came First: the Pickle or the Jar?

Most people are not familiar with what a pickle castor is, especially those far away from the western United States. I will help you understand all of their whats, wheres, whys, and hows. This chapter serves as a comprehensive, informational introduction to this object. However, it also serves a greater purpose than to be purely informational. Through an in depth look into the pickle castor, we can apply this knowledge to the social and historical context in which people used it in the 19th century. It must be understood, however, that there is not much scholarship on this object. There are oral histories, from people who lived in Virginia City, Nevada and beyond, and other sources that prove it was an in-use dining and serving dish primarily sold in the western United States, existed in many homespaces and dining establishments, and was a part of a luxury dining culture. With the acknowledged sources aiding us to fill the gaps in information, the following exploration of this curious and neglected 19th-century object can begin to come alive.

Pickles and pickled products are most commonly seen in areas with low crop diversity or yield; the pickled food acted as a dietary necessity for people in these areas who grappled with this lack of crop diversity.<sup>6</sup> In 1870, Virginia City itself was described as a “...dreary, desolate spot...” with “...not a living thing green on the barren desert waste[...].”<sup>7</sup> The town in the middle of the desert was rich in silver, yet lacking in agricultural potential, warranting and necessitating food preservation for the residents of the area.

During the 19th century, people in the West and all across the United States pickled food, specifically within the home.<sup>8</sup> In Virginia City resident Alf Doten’s diary, he wrote on August

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<sup>6</sup>Mary Willan Mason. “The Pickle Caster.” *Antiques & collecting magazine* vol. 107, no. 8 (2002): 32.

<sup>7</sup>George W. Pine. 1870. *Beyond the West....* Utica, New York: T. J. Griffiths. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, American West, [http://www.americanwest.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/G\\_89.694](http://www.americanwest.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/G_89.694), 368.

<sup>8</sup>Pickling, in this case, refers to the act of preserving foods for longevity, not just the common cucumber pickle.

4th, 1883 of picking up a 5 gallon home pickling barrel.<sup>9</sup> There are advertisements, some from Shepard & Goodrich selling keg pickles in Gold Hill, Nevada, that do confirm the pickling process on a more commercial scale, but not on the mass market scale we think of and have now.<sup>10</sup> Particularly, the process of home pickling was commonplace until food industrialization in the early 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

This food industrialization, and the mass supermarket style commercial products we see post World War II did not come until the creation and mainstream usage of refrigerated trucks and other transport vehicles. With the introduction of more wide scale refrigeration and transportation, there was no longer a high need for households to produce the long-shelf-life foods, like pickled items. Regardless of this decrease in need for pickled items during the first half of the 20th century, pickling as a practice was primarily situated in homespaces, and in fast growing towns across the Western United States, the homes and families participating in this practice would have varied in class because everyone needed to pickle or preserve food.

The significance of this brief introduction to the process of and need for pickling itself is to situate the object of inquiry, the pickle castor, with its associated food and food practice. If pickling in the homespace and local communities was not common, or did not exist at all, there would not have been a need for the object in question to exist. With this practice of pickling established, we move to the object of my academic affection, the beautiful, peculiar pickle castor.

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<sup>9</sup>Walter Van Tilburg Clark. Ed. "The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849-1903," University of Nevada Reno, Nevada Humanities. <https://clark.dotendiaries.org>, 1472.

<sup>10</sup>"Groceries and Miscellaneous." *Gold Hill Daily News*, October 27, 1865. [https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/622472474/?terms=pickle&pqsid=dBfUTohRTJK\\_GYOroiejUA%3A178000%3A1895931580&match=1](https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/622472474/?terms=pickle&pqsid=dBfUTohRTJK_GYOroiejUA%3A178000%3A1895931580&match=1).

<sup>11</sup>Jordan Laio. "Kitchen Garden Harvest: A History of Pickling at Home." *Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News*. Washington: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2011.

### Introduction to the Pickle Castor: the Object in Context

A pickle castor is, in its most simple explanation, a condiment container. Pickle castors were not necessarily only for the traditional cucumber pickles that people automatically think of; these objects were for pickled foods of many kinds, including pickled asparagus, pigs feet, and the traditional gherkin (the more common cucumber pickle). Pickle castors came into being out of the aforementioned necessary pickling culture and process. Before the glass jar was introduced, pickling was done with the 18th-century predecessor, earthenware containers.<sup>12</sup> Coming into the 19th century, pickling moved away from earthenware and into glass for both storage and serving. Pickle castors are made of a glass jar inserted into a silver frame, commonly paired with a set of tongs of a matching style as the frame.<sup>13</sup> As seen in a display case from The Way it Was Museum in Virginia City, Nevada (Figures 1 through 4), pickle castors come in a wide variety of shapes, colors, and sizes regarding both the glass or the silver frame encompassing it. Silver frames could contain nature motifs, be high and geometric, or shorter and round, and their tongs could be traded for the long, three-pronged forks seen in Figure 1.<sup>14</sup>

Glass colors of cranberry, ruby, amber, deep blue, teal, white, clear, yellow, and green (although this was not as popular because its hue supposedly clashed with the green of some pickles) were common.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the color design elements, the glass containers could be cut or painted for more texture and ornateness to a specific castor's design. Floral or animal designs were particularly fashionable, and some higher end castors included gold enamel on the

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<sup>12</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 32.

<sup>13</sup>Anne McCollam. "Genteel Victorians Used Fanciful Pickle Castors." *Antiques & collecting magazine* 102, no. 12 (1998): 14.

<sup>14</sup>Figure 1, and the other images referenced in this chapter, may be found in the image key at the end of the chapter.

<sup>15</sup>The note holds up in my own observations, as I have not seen many green glass castors; Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 33.; Richard V Simpson. "The Pickle Caster: Great Grandmother's Dining Table Necessity." *Antiques & collecting magazine* 115, no. 3 (2010): 30–, 33.

glass.<sup>16</sup> The leaded glass that was used in castors was developed and innovated in the early 18th century as a more affordable alternative to silver and gold serving pieces. Leaded glass could even still match the intricate designs of its metal counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

The castor frames were made either of sterling silver or silver plated metals; silver plating was achieved with the process of electroplating. The use of the silver plate process in metal products, especially the pickle castor, made these items significantly more accessible to lower classes because of the drop in production cost. The process of electroplating initially grew in the 1840's, with Connecticut silver company *Rogers Brothers* being the first to use the silver plate process in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Both silver plate and sterling silver tarnish. However, silver plate can be identified from sterling silver in that it may chip easier, revealing the base metal underneath.<sup>19</sup> As for the design of the silver frame, they are commonly rectangular, but are not completely formulaic.<sup>20</sup> There are often floral, angelic, or decorative line designs on the top of the castor, where the handle is. The variety in design across the silver frame and glass can be seen in Figures 5 through 7 from the shelf behind the bar of the Bucket of Blood Saloon in Virginia City. Pickle castors could come in sets of two, but this was not common.<sup>21</sup> There were other types of castors that were common, yet these were used for different condiments like mustard or oil; these were normally in sets of two to six and were popular starting from the 1850's.<sup>22</sup> An example of these smaller castor sets can be seen in Figure 8, showing the Mackay

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<sup>16</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 33.

<sup>17</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 32.

<sup>18</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 33.

<sup>19</sup>Cast iron, brass, steel, or copper were common base metals for silver plating; Beal, Eileen. "Dining in Style." *Antiques & Collecting Magazine*, 11, 2001, 62-65  
<https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/dining-style/docview/197166754/se-2>. 64.

<sup>20</sup>It is unclear if there were any specific trends in framing designs over the course of the pickle castor's life.

<sup>21</sup>It is possible that castors in pairs have not survived as well as single castors, but the prevalence of single castors in newspaper advertisements and collections point to this trend; Richard V Simpson. "The Pickle Caster: Great Grandmother's Dining Table Necessity," 32.

<sup>22</sup>Richard V Simpson. "The Pickle Caster: Great Grandmother's Dining Table Necessity," 31.

Mansion dining room. These smaller castors would have frequented the same table as the pickle castor, especially at a table as big as the Mackay Mansion. The two other pickle castors can be seen in Figures 9 and 10, with a full view of the dining room in Figure 11. All of the images included in this chapter show pickle castors in all their variety and conformity. They all follow the same general shape, glass jar, silver frame, and serving utensil; yet reality is more complex, with variations in the jar shapes, colors, frame designs and motifs, and utensil style. In the next section, we will explore just how these different looks were achieved.

Through its production, the pickle castor was connected to the broader industries of glass and silver making, and it was a multi-level process involving more than one industrial field.<sup>23</sup> Mount Washington Glassworks and Pairpoint Manufacturing Company (both in Massachusetts) were two common names seen in pickle castor production.<sup>24</sup> These two companies became one in an 1894 merger, resulting in a single company that produced castors from start to finish.<sup>25</sup> The process started with the silversmiths. Frames were made out of sterling silver, or silver plated metals using the process of electro-plating. The metalworking technique of electroplating emerged in the 1840's.<sup>26</sup> Electroplating is the process of plating one metal with another in order to either strengthen it by preventing corrosion or for purely decorative use.<sup>27</sup> This allows for the cheaper production of a product by only plating a less expensive metal, such as steel, with a

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<sup>23</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 33.

<sup>24</sup>Richard V Simpson. "The Pickle Caster: Great Grandmother's Dining Table Necessity," 33.

<sup>25</sup>Susan and Jim Harran. "Pickle Castors." *Antiques & collecting magazine* 100, no. 12 (1996): 38.  
<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=e884bd91-b3d5-4f09-b1ae-bf0a2bcd3918%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxlcmwsc2hpYiZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=9602066952&db=f5h>.

<sup>26</sup>Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 33.

<sup>27</sup>Vaishali Mitta, "Electroplating." *Libretexts Chemistry*, University of California Davis, 2020.  
[https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Analytical\\_Chemistry/Supplemental\\_Modules\\_\(Analytical\\_Chemistry\)/Electrochemistry/Electrolytic\\_Cells/Electroplating](https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Analytical_Chemistry/Supplemental_Modules_(Analytical_Chemistry)/Electrochemistry/Electrolytic_Cells/Electroplating).

more expensive one, like silver. In addition, it provides structural reinforcement with a stronger metal as a base.<sup>28</sup>

When the frames were complete, glass jars were ordered to fit their casted silver frames.<sup>29</sup> Different colors of glass required different production processes. Cranberry glass was made from powdered gold and amber glass, “peachblow” glass was achieved with a combination of pink and blue-gray glass bases, satin glass (glass with an opaque finish) of blue, yellow, or pink hues were made with a hydrofluoric acid wash, and splatter glass was made with a multicolored glass base.<sup>30</sup> The decorative techniques were achieved with enameling, etching, or applying crystal “prunts and rigaree” which give the glass different textures.<sup>31</sup> Air bubbles could also be trapped in the glass during production to provide different textured patterns of circles, squares or diamonds.<sup>32</sup>

By looking into the complex processes, some of which were new for the 19th century (such as the aforementioned splatter, amberina, and satin glass), the time, effort, and money dedicated to the production and commercial consumption of this object is clear. It was not created offhandedly, but through many materials and many hands. With an idea of what pickle castors look like and their production process, we can more easily conceptualize them within a physical space, both on a broader and local level.

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<sup>28</sup>Vaishali Mitta, “Electroplating.”

<sup>29</sup>Mary Willan Mason. “The Pickle Caster,” 33.

<sup>30</sup>Susan and Jim Harran. “Pickle Castors.”

<sup>31</sup>Susan and Jim Harran. “Pickle Castors.”

<sup>32</sup>Susan and Jim Harran. “Pickle Castors.”

### Placing the Pickle Castor in Time and Space

In the wider, geographical sense, pickle castors appeared in catalogs across the United States, even in the northeast.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the best place to study them as active objects is in Virginia City, Nevada. Practically, Virginia City provides a lot of material evidence, but it also provides historical context with which we can apply further research.<sup>34</sup> The Fourth Ward School Museum archive in Virginia City pointed me towards the diary of Alfred Doten, a Comstock miner and Virginia City resident. In his diaries, Doten mentions his practices of home pickling throughout his years on the Western frontier.<sup>35</sup> These mining towns, like the ones that Alfred Doten inhabited, were not established in areas with high food resources. That was not the first priority, or the reason for establishing the towns. The people, resources, and industry went where the ore was, where the money was; in Virginia City's case, they followed and stayed for the silver.

On a more individual scale, pickle castors were primarily found and used in the homespace, frequently on dining room tables. However, these objects were sometimes used in communal dining spaces, notably in the Bucket of Blood Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada. A space like the Bucket of Blood Saloon was not focused primarily on dining, like other establishments in Virginia City, yet the saloon's owner still provided light food in the form of pickled items.<sup>36</sup> Although the items are no longer in use, the display of pickle castors above the bar in the Bucket of Blood Saloon shows them within a context of a lower to middle class

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<sup>33</sup>The most well known catalog of the 19th century was the Sears & Roebuck catalog, but there were many other department store catalogs. These catalogs allowed consumers to order and purchase items from the catalog themselves by mailing in an order, or in store. These catalogs were widely distributed, and a catalog from 1910 encouraged consumers to "show this catalog to your friends and neighbors" to reach an even wider audience; Sears, Roebuck, and Company. *Catalog, Spring 1910 (no.120)*. HathiTrust Digital Library. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101066804954&view=lup&seq=7>.

<sup>34</sup>Part of Virginia City's value in the study of pickle castors lies in the sheer number of these objects in the city. They exist both in context (in saloon spaces and home dining spaces) and out of context (in antique stores and museums), providing a wide array of observation experiences.

<sup>35</sup>Walter Van Tilburg Clark. Ed. "The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849-1903."

<sup>36</sup>Kelly J Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons : Archaeology and History in Virginia City*. Pbk. ed. Reno, Nev: University of Nevada Press, 2006.

perspective. This middle class perspective transfers to the homespace, another physical operating space of the pickle castor.

It is difficult to find records of homespace pickle castors within lower or middle class. There are a few found instances where they were given as wedding gifts, but it is unclear the exact status of these families, or how they interacted with their gifts of pickle castors.<sup>37</sup> Within my own research and travels, I have only seen a pickle castor in a home dining context in the Mackay Mansion of Virginia City. This mansion, which was built in 1859 and served as silver king John Mackey's home from 1871 until the early 20th century, is an example of the extremely wealthy in Virginia City, and elsewhere in the United States.<sup>38</sup> The pickle castor was well within reach for John Mackay, but its price left it open and available to the non-elites of Virginia City.

The price of pickle castors varied over the decades of its existence, but the changes were not drastic. In August of 1893, the *Oakland Tribune* reported that a pickle castor at the San Francisco Golden Bazaar ranged from \$1.00 for "extra quality" to \$1.50 for "colored glass."<sup>39</sup> After the turn of the century, a 1908 Sears & Roebuck catalog listed a pickle castor for \$1.18-\$5.63, depending on the type and materials of the castor itself.<sup>40</sup> When placing this within the context of Virginia City, these dishes would not have been outside of a miner's pay, which was around \$4-\$6 per day.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>"The Cook-Osborne Nuptials Splendidly Observed." *The Pioche Record*, July 9, 1891.  
[https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/375402357/?terms=%22pickle%20caster%22&pqsid=gUoj0KADVXISiUr\\_H4UVWg%3A336000%3A519129024&match=1](https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/375402357/?terms=%22pickle%20caster%22&pqsid=gUoj0KADVXISiUr_H4UVWg%3A336000%3A519129024&match=1).

<sup>38</sup>"Welcome to the Mackay Mansion." Mackay Mansion Museum, 2022.  
<https://www.therealmackaymansion.com/about>.

<sup>39</sup>"Golden Review Bazaar: San Francisco." *Oakland Tribune*, August 29, 1893.  
[https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/71864488/?terms=%22pickle%20caster%22&pqsid=gUoj0KADVXISiUr\\_H4UVWg%3A4400000%3A1106849408&match=1](https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/71864488/?terms=%22pickle%20caster%22&pqsid=gUoj0KADVXISiUr_H4UVWg%3A4400000%3A1106849408&match=1).

<sup>40</sup>An inflation conversion rate is unable to be performed, as most inflation calculators do not go back to 1908, and I am not proficient enough in math to perform any sort of calculation myself; Mary Willan Mason. "The Pickle Caster," 34.

<sup>41</sup>Ronald M. James. *The Roar and the Silence : a History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998, 225.



In some cases, people did not have to pay for their castors, but could instead win them. In Virginia City, Nevada and the surrounding areas, like Gold Hill, community organizations often held fundraising athletic competitions. In the fourth annual picnic and games of the Virginia Caledonia Club of Gold Hill, the first prize for “throwing a light hammer” weighing 14 lbs, was a “Silver pickle castor.”<sup>42</sup> The Caledonia Club, Good Templars, and Storey County Knights of Pythias offered pickle castors quite often in their annual picnics or charity events, offering an opportunity for people to win the desired object.

Overall, the pickle castor's use began to decline closer to the turn of the 20th century. This is reflected with the sample of newspapers mentioned above, and is attributed to the growth in refrigerated transportation and home refrigeration.<sup>43</sup> With an increase in the availability of fresh food, there was no longer a high or common need to produce pickled items at the same quantity. Pickles were no longer staples of a western American diet, and their highly specific serving dish followed that path into decline. In addition, a source from 1906 indicates a possible turn against pickle castors as wedding gifts because they are more decorative in nature, as opposed to something that a newlywed couple could truly put to good use.<sup>44</sup> This reflects a change from the newspapers from the late 19th century, where pickle castors were common wedding gifts in the western United States.

After visiting Virginia City in the summer, I am confident that I have seen every publicly facing pickle castor in the old mining town. The first ones I came across were in the Bucket of Blood Saloon. Next, the Way it Was Museum (which my mother has assured me has not been updated since her own childhood), then the Mackay Mansion. In all of these places, the castors

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<sup>42</sup>“Fourth Grand Annual Picnic and Celebration of Games of the Virginia Caledonia Club.” *Gold Hill Daily News*, July 21, 1879. <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/848216140/?terms=pickle&match=1>.

<sup>43</sup>Mary Willan Mason. “The Pickle Caster,” 33.

<sup>44</sup>Hilda Richmond. "GOLDEN RULE WEDDING GIFTS." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 06, 1906, 44, <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/golden-rule-wedding-gifts/docview/17155192/65/se-2>.

were kept either behind glass, behind a barrier, or up on a shelf out of the reach of rowdy patrons. However, in the Virginia City Antique mall on South C Street, there was an assortment of different colored pickle castors that were within my reach. All I had to do was ask, and the employees were happy to let me look at one. I picked out a very bright blue, sterling silver framed one, looking at its lid, frame, and glass.

It was quite an experience to hold a pickle castor that was not in a museum, and although it was not on a dining room table, it was closer to its original context, especially just being in Virginia City. Being in the space with those objects makes exploring this history that much easier. This object was used; sometimes it's easy to forget this fact when we only see pickle castors in museums. Answering all of these questions concerning the pickle castor highlights the specific goal of microhistory and material culture. By understanding the small and tangible, we can chip away at the large and conceptual.

We can hold in our hands what past people held in theirs. It makes them feel closer, more understandable, more human. People of the past were just as complex as we are now, just with different living contexts. It is easy to get caught up in the assumption that life was simpler for them. This chapter and its methodology fight against that.

Chapter I: Image Key<sup>45</sup>



Figure 1: White glass pickle castor with floral design, The Way It Was Museum, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 2: Pickle castors with a variety of frame shapes, The Way It Was Museum, Virginia City, Nevada.

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<sup>45</sup>All of the following images were taken by the author, Sage Bouch er and her mother, Mary Claire Bouch er, in August 2022.



Figure 3: Pickle castors of green, blue, and cranberry glass, The Way It Was Museum, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 4: Clear, cranberry, and yellow glass pickle castors, The Way It Was Museum, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 5: Close up of pickle castors behind the bar, Bucket of Blood Saloon, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 6: Pickle castors behind the bar, including the short informational sign, Bucket of Blood Saloon, Virginia City, Nevada.





Figure 7: Pickle castors behind the bar, left side of the center mirror, Bucket of Blood Saloon, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 8: Set of cranberry glass condiment castors, Dining room, Mackay Mansion, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 9: Cranberry pickle castor, left side of the dining room, Mackay Mansion, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 10: Cranberry pickle castor, right side of the dining room, Mackay Mansion, Virginia City, Nevada.



Figure 11: Full view of the dining room, Mackay Mansion, Virginia City, Nevada.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Due to the camera lens used, and the blocked doorway entry of the museum, the two pickle castors cannot be viewed in this picture because of their placement on the wall closer to me.



## Chapter II: Bonanza!: Virginia City as the Silver Capital

Sitting just over 6,000 feet elevation and tucked away in the hills of Storey County, Nevada is Virginia City. Seen in Figure 1, a map of Nevada and California's mining hubs, Virginia City sits northeast of Lake Tahoe (then titled Bigler Lake) and east of Washoe Lake.<sup>47</sup> It was established because it was the site of the silver rush, and this fact drew people and corporations to this location, pushing the area from a mining camp to an established city. This town, with a current population of less than 800, was once a booming city of diversity, debauchery, innovative infrastructure, and economic dreams. In addition to all of that, it is, for my purposes, the perfect place to study the pickle castor. Virginia City holds a concentrated, specific tie to the pickle castor; its social and economic environment during its heyday of the mid to late 19th century was conducive to the type of people who would desire, buy, and/or own a pickle castor.

Virginia City, Nevada is first and foremost a product of the silver rush, and therefore cannot be divorced from its historical context. Although this paper's central focus is not the silver rush itself, the pickle castor as an object is intrinsically linked to that history. Below is a telling of Virginia City's establishment and growth from mining camp to flourishing boomtown, and the people, enterprises, innovations, and products that aided in the Bonanza.

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<sup>47</sup>Figure 1 and other images for this chapter may be found following the end of the chapter in the Chapter II image key; "The Comstock Lode." Mining Maps and Views - Spotlight at Stanford, September 12, 2019. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/mining/feature/the-comstock-lode>.

### The Establishment of Virginia City

The earliest mining in the surrounding Virginia City and Mount Davidson area began in 1856.<sup>48</sup> There were some early reports of placer mining attempts by Mormon settlers in 1850.<sup>49</sup> However, there was no yield (meaning amount of ore mined and collected) high enough to warrant establishing camps, designated routes, or larger mining operations.<sup>50</sup> The early claims of 1856 were of silver, but misfortune struck; the founders of the claim died shortly after its discovery, and their claim died with them.<sup>51</sup> The discovery of gold in April of 1859 rejuvenated the mining in the region. This claim, in the aptly named town of Gold Hill, reported a promising, “8 feet of consistent yield” at its start.<sup>52</sup> Although these early newspaper reports of the claim were exaggerated, there was still improvement and growth.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, in June of 1859, silver was found in Virginia City, and thus began the Comstock Lode.<sup>54</sup> The Comstock Lode, named after famous and often mythologized prospector Henry Comstock, became the name for the main vein of silver in the area, and referred overall to the silver rush of Virginia City. A sample of silver ore in 1859 was valued at \$3,000 per ton, rating it higher than the gold standard at the same time, which was only \$876.<sup>55</sup> With this assessment, the focus on gold in mining (influenced by the California gold rush ten years prior), had shifted to silver.<sup>56</sup> By late 1859, silver had caught up to gold in yield.<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that, in the

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<sup>48</sup>Ronald M. James. *The Roar and the Silence : a History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998, 7.

<sup>49</sup>Placer mining is the process of mining loose bed or clay from a stream to separate ore from the surrounding earth. Placer mining best yields gold because the mineral is not chemically bonded with surrounding elements, unlike silver.

<sup>50</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> “Claim” here refers to the act of ‘claiming’ land above and underground for mining. In the early days, these claims belonged to individuals or a small group of men, but they later belonged to companies in the area. James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 11.

<sup>54</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 11.

<sup>55</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 11.

<sup>56</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 12.

early years of the Comstock Lode, Virginia City was anything but a city. It started out as a mining camp, a spot to eat and sleep for prospectors and early miners. It was not until the 1870's that Virginia City grew into its full height. Such growth into a fully established town is distinctly tied to the growth and innovation of the silver mining industry.

The arrival of the newspaper, the *Territorial Enterprise*, in 1861 marked the first turn towards a diversified, full city.<sup>58</sup> The Virginia City community began growing when these early news reports spread word of opportunity, luring in those who dared to take a risk at striking it rich with a discovery of gold or silver.<sup>59</sup> The population in the first few years was dynamic, following the rise and fall of an uncertain mining environment.<sup>60</sup> Both silver and gold mining were Virginia City's driving and only industry in the establishing year of the Comstock Lode.

The establishment of the mining industry was not without turbulence. However, it is through these early innovations in mining technology that drove the mining in Virginia City to fully industrial and corporation run, with a full town running supporting industries. Milling posed the first problem in the mining process.<sup>61</sup> Milling is the process separating ore from rock and other rubble, then distilling it into bullion, otherwise known as a 'bar' of ore. These processes are different between silver and gold, and milling in the surrounding region was aimed at the gold in Gold Hill, just south of Virginia City. Silver, unlike gold, is chemically bonded to the surrounding rock, and therefore required separation with heat, water, or mercury (a process that was first used in 16th-century silver mining in Mexico) before being fully refined into silver bullion.<sup>62</sup> The stamp mill closest to Virginia City, the Washoe Gold & Silver Mining Co. Mill in

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<sup>58</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 46.

Gold Canyon, was equipped more for the gold mining of that area; when used for silver extraction, there was a high loss of silver ore due to incorrect processing.<sup>63</sup>

The first successful silver mill was the Gould & Curry Mill in 1861, and many mills followed.<sup>64</sup> This new mill system can be marked as one of many revolutionized industries sparked by the unprecedented silver rush industry. Other developments include square set timbering in mineshafts, introduction of dynamite and improved ore extraction, and the creation of iron rope in mine cages (which were later used in San Francisco street cars).<sup>65</sup> In addition to developments in minings itself, other infrastructure followed physical mine progression, such as rail lines, air conduits, and, after 1877, both phone and electrical lines.<sup>66</sup>

Virginia City, as a place of massive industrial growth, produced many firsts during its Comstock bonanza (1859-1882). These innovations influenced the rest of the United States and their respective industries. Virginia City was a place watched by the nation, seen by the economic and industrial power that brought its statehood on October 31, 1864, despite an insufficient population.<sup>67</sup> Through its first years, Virginia City saw the rapid growth of population, economic power, and industry, which turned it from a “rat-hole” mining operation to a professional, commercial enterprise. It ushered in diversity in population (in country of origin, gender, and age). By 1860, there were people hailing from thirty-one different places of origin, including the US, Ireland, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, China, France, and Britain.<sup>68</sup> In that same year, the population was only 5% female; ten years later, that percentage had increased to 31%, indicating the settling of families and livelihoods.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 48.

<sup>64</sup>I had trouble finding the exact location of the New Gould & Curry Mill, but it was generally towards the southeastern side of Virginia City; James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 55, 125, 129.

<sup>66</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 128.

<sup>67</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 66.

<sup>68</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 245.

The city went from 2,345 residents in 1860 to 10,917 in 1880.<sup>70</sup> The silver rush foundations of Virginia City attracted a certain kind of person, one who was actively thinking about the possibility of material gain and wealth. The idea of striking it rich in gold or silver was a driving factor for many, despite the reality of a freewheeling Comstock dwindling as the mining industry became more corporation based.<sup>71</sup> This motivation, however improbable, still created a population who were used to thinking about the material on an everyday basis. Whether it was the silver miner handling the ore, miller holding the bullion, general store owner selling food or silver products, life revolved around the economic powerhouse of silver mining, and this shaped the worldview of Virginia City citizens.

### Economic Life: Virginia City's Bonanza

With this understanding of Virginia City's establishment and population, we can now examine the realities of economic life across class lines. Economic equity came primarily from silver mining. The yield across dozens of mines brought wealth across all classes. To display this, we can look at a combination of the abundant records taken during the Bonanza period (considered from 1859-1882), which include data from the United States Geological Survey, Storey County assessor's records, and other independent mine reports.<sup>72</sup> Within these records, however, it must be acknowledged that the proceeding numbers are not exact. There are biases within independent company mine reports, and regular, encompassing reports on mine yield were rare after 1886.<sup>73</sup> In addition, there was no distinction between gold and silver yields before

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<sup>70</sup>“The Comstock Lode.” Mining Maps and Views - Spotlight at Stanford, September 12, 2019. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/mining/feature/the-comstock-lode>.

<sup>71</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 69.

<sup>72</sup>Grant H. Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*. Nevada: Nevada state Bureau of mines and the Mackay school of mines, 1943, 294; “The Comstock Lode.”

<sup>73</sup>I was unable to find any indication as to why these reports were rare after 1886; Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 294.

1866. Despite these possible inaccuracies, these reports can still perfectly display the level of material wealth that was extracted and processed from dozens of mines in the Bonanza period.<sup>74</sup>

From 1859 to 1882, the Consolidated Virginia mine (1873-1883) yielded the highest profit of \$61,125,757 for 809,275 tons of ore.<sup>75</sup> The next highest yield went to the New California (1875-1882), with \$44,031,733 for 588,586 tons of ore.<sup>76</sup> These high numbers continued with twelve of the fifty-four Bonanza period mines breaking the one million mark, and eight mines breaking the ten million mark.<sup>77</sup> The peak year of production was 1877, with a total of \$14 million of gold and \$21 million of silver.<sup>78</sup> The Comstock Bonanza finished with a total yield of \$292,726,310 for 7,189,430 tons of gold and silver.<sup>79</sup>

The mines did not just occupy the economic space, but the physical space of Virginia City and the surrounding area. An 1873 map of the Comstock Lode and Washoe mining claims in Figure 1 illustrates just how much physical space was devoted to mining.<sup>80</sup> The town was both physically and monetarily surrounded by the silver rush, meaning the money made from the rush was circulated in the city itself. The economic impact reached beyond Virginia City and the immediate surrounding area. It is the impressive economic capital of the Comstock Bonanza period that helped industrialization and the 1870's post-Civil War reconstruction across the

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<sup>74</sup>Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 292.

<sup>75</sup>The Consolidated Virginia mine was in between the Best & Belcher mine and the California mine, and can be seen in Figure 2 in the large orange outlined box, just to the right of the center. In addition, it should be noted that, in any citing of numbers from Smith's "History of the Comstock," any possible inflation rate adjustment is unclear. It is not specified whether the numbers given reflect reality in the Bonanza period or at the time of the sources publication in 1943. Therefore, I am unable to properly adjust them for inflation in 2023; Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 292.

<sup>76</sup>The New California mine is not present in Figure 2, as the map predates the mine by 2 years; Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 292.

<sup>77</sup>Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 292.

<sup>78</sup>This source calculates the rates of inflation in its 2019 publishing year and reports them as \$329,393,750 for gold and \$494,090,625 for silver; "The Comstock Lode."

<sup>79</sup>By the end of the Comstock Bonanza (1859-1882), production was estimated to be 60% silver and 40% gold; Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 293, 295.

<sup>80</sup>Figure 1, and the other image for this chapter can be found at the end of the chapter; "The Comstock Lode."

United States.<sup>81</sup> It helped lift California out of an economic downturn from the waning yield of the gold rush, bolstering San Francisco as a metropolitan center as wealth from the elite of the silver rush flowed into the city.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the capital centralized in Virginia City, great wealth eluded most of the population. The majority of the benefits went to a select few in charge of mines.<sup>83</sup> This is how men of the “Bonanza Firm,” John Mackey, James Fair, J.M. Walker, and Jack O’Brien, acquired their unprecedented wealth.<sup>84</sup> However, these silver kings were the exception to the norm in terms of interaction with Comstock wealth. This level of massive wealth eluded the majority of Comstock workers, especially once wealth became concentrated in the hands of mining companies and their upper management.

Mining was the drive of Virginia City, and within the industry itself, there were bookkeepers, time keepers, secretaries, watchmen, firemen, engineers, assayers, and foreman were all needed for a smooth and proper operation of a mine.<sup>85</sup> The sheer prevalence of mining did not hinder the diversity of other occupations. Out of the 6,598 adult men in 1870, 766 were in mercantile occupations, 234 in saloons, 325 in construction, and 498 in other miscellaneous occupations.<sup>86</sup> Of the 2,201 women in Virginia City, 160 worked in prostitution, fifty-eight as seamstresses, fifty-three as servants, twenty-eight in lodging and board, and fourteen in laundry; other occupations for women included “keeping house,” teaching, health care, charity, millinery, and restaurants.<sup>87</sup> This occupational diversity in both mining and the surrounding infrastructure

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<sup>81</sup>The economic export from Nevada during the Civil War contributed to its earned statehood in 1864, and it continued to bolster reconstruction efforts after the war; Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 290.

<sup>82</sup>Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 298.

<sup>83</sup>Smith. *The History of the Comstock Lode 1850-1920*, 289.

<sup>84</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 108.

<sup>85</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 131.

<sup>86</sup>The 1870 census that reported these occupations listed any adult, men or women, as 15 years or older; James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 92.

<sup>87</sup>James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 94.

in conjunction with the population growth over the course of twenty years, and therefore, a wage-earning class emerged. This class operated as a middle group, who did not have excessive wealth or mass amounts of expendable income, yet were still able to own homes, partake in entertainment, and overall live sustainably. This ability placed Virginia City middle class residents ahead of their counterparts in eastern United States industrial centers.<sup>88</sup>

Combining the occupational diversity and the experience of a more defined middle class, we can begin to speculate about some gray areas in economic mobility that were unique to the Virginia City silver rush environment. Firstly, there is the broader, looming perception of the rags to riches story of the silver rush. This, while many may not have achieved it in actuality, still greatly affected the psyche of the community members, contributing to their self-perception as economic agents. It created an environment where the possibility of reaching mass wealth was just that: a possibility. No matter how small the odds, people had seen it happen before with men, including those in the “Bonanza Firm,” and therefore could justify a more liberal imagination in regard to the potential fluidity of their economic status.

This created an economic environment where people of this middle class were not just thinking of living day to day, but attaining greater wealth and furthering their circumstances in various ways. The collective idea of economic mobility and the existence of a middle class sets Virginia City residents apart from other United States cities. In application, interactions between people of different classes were more common in Virginia City than eastern urban centers.<sup>89</sup> The nature of the mines lend itself to cross-class cooperation, which further feeds into a social and economic gray area. Mine owners and superintendents cannot get their wealth without the ore and the miners to collect it, and the miner’s receive a stable, living income for their work. As

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<sup>88</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 216.

<sup>89</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 225.



Miriam Leslie pointed out in 1877, “The mines embrace every class of men [...]”<sup>90</sup> This embrace created a sort of unique bargaining power for miners. In conjunction with the consciousness of economic mobility, this shows the specific ways that residents interacted with, displayed, and spent their differing levels of disposable income. This, in part, can manifest with visual communications of class, such as access to childcare, architecture, and clothing.<sup>91</sup> People within these middle classes participated in conspicuous consumption, like the upper echelons of the silver rush. This participation is not at nearly the same level, but analyzing these middle-class consumption patterns serves to explore residents’ own attitudes towards their wealth and the community around them.

The visual communication of this conspicuous consumption is an important environmental factor allowing the pickle castor to thrive as an object. The pickle castor, while serving a function like dress or architecture, represents that elevation from purely function to fashion, luxury and material consumption. People were actively participating in that show of wealth, and a pickle castor played right into that dynamic. It was an object that was not out of the economic reach of the middle class, yet was more elevated than the average dining set. It allowed those residents to participate in the show of wealth from the silver rush; the pickle castor served as a representation of this act, meaning it is both an object bought with wealth from the silver rush and made from the same material. It holds power as an object of silver that is bought from money made through the silver business.

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<sup>90</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 228.

<sup>91</sup>Clothing was a particularly interesting class visualization, not because it displayed harsh binaries between rich and middle class women, but because it acted more as an equalizer. Women were able to dress affluently across a range of their husband’s mine wages from the standard \$4/day to a possible \$1,000/month for superintendents; they all participated in the flashy visual display of clothing. Dress becomes more apparent as an equalizer when, as quoted in James’ *The Roar and the Silence*, Mary McNair Matthews explained how women would get their dresses and jewelry from the same shops in town, and therefore they all knew the value of each other’s dress; James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 216, 233, 225.

### Social Life and the Pickle Castor

With an examination of the economic basis of Virginia City's residents, we can piece together how people of different economic statuses operated within their social life. Social and economic networks were wide, especially with a population as diverse as Virginia City's. The city hosted a high foreign born population, representing 35% of the Comstock population in 1860.<sup>92</sup> These numbers evolved into individual communities like that of the Chinese, Irish, Indigenous, Mexican, African American, and other Euro-American populations.<sup>93</sup> These diverse populations are reflected in the social establishments of the city, specifically food and drink establishments.

This particular section will narrow in on these entertainment establishments that are centered around consumption of food and drink. However, these establishments were not the only arenas of social entertainment; there were other forms of entertainment, such as brothels, dog fights and other violence based entertainment, theater, and music. The saloon, however, represents a specific culture of Comstock consumption that is explicitly tied to the pickle castor.

Saloons represent diversity in ethnicity, culture, and economic status, which is reflected in the audiences of the different establishments in Virginia City.<sup>94</sup> The Piper's Old Corner Bar represented the highest end, primarily male establishment in the city.<sup>95</sup> The O'Brien and Costello's Saloon and Shooting Gallery hosted a lower end, primarily Irish audience. Hibernia Brewery was another lower end saloon, and the high end Boston Saloon hosted a primarily African American audience of both men and women.<sup>96</sup> These four examples are not the only

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<sup>92</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 35.

<sup>93</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 34.

<sup>94</sup>Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons : Archaeology and History in Virginia City*. Pbk. ed. Reno, Nev: University of Nevada Press, 2006, 153-154,

<sup>95</sup>Piper's Old Corner Bar was a part of Piper's Opera House, which currently sits at Union and N. B street.

<sup>96</sup>The Boston Saloon sat behind the Bucket of Blood Saloon. The site is now a parking lot on the corner of Union and D street, but was excavated in 2000. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 159.

saloons and bars in the city during its peak, but the scholarship on them is more extensive thanks to archaeological efforts.<sup>97</sup> The prevalence of spaces like this not only shows diversity, but further signifies Virginia City's transition from a mining camp to a full city—with a diverse population, supporting industry, and entertainment spaces—by the late 1860's.<sup>98</sup>

Despite their targeted audiences, the patrons of these saloons were not just constrained to Irishmen for O'Brien and Costello's or African Americans for the Boston Saloon; it was not that simple.<sup>99</sup> Archaeological evidence shows saloons as dynamic spaces, where socioeconomic and ethnic lines could be blurred. The saloons follow the precedent of the mines, where workers of all backgrounds would be occupying the same space. Because of this, saloons operate as a snapshot of the residents of Virginia City. Therefore the physical space and social dynamics within them are indicative of the larger Virginia City social dynamics. By connecting this back to the object of study, saloons show that there is diversity in who could have interacted with pickle castors as objects because there is diversity in Virginia City. It is an object that is transient between classes, just like these social spaces of saloons, and sometimes the home.

So, why are the saloons of Virginia City, or Virginia City in general, the place to study pickle castors? As shown in the previous chapter, pickle castors are prevalent in both the home and saloon spaces, and Virginia City is the place where these objects are most easily traceable and visible. The newspaper ads place them in the hands of residents and organizations, and oral histories and archaeological work place them in saloon spaces. Pickle castors exist closest to their original context in Virginia City; the majority of them are not placed behind museum glass, but on saloon bars and on dining tables. In addition to this visibility, the city's dynamics of

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<sup>97</sup>The saloons listed are a few of dozens like them in the city. These particular examples were situated in the center, higher populated areas in the city, not the outskirts.

<sup>98</sup>Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 153.

<sup>99</sup>Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 160.

socioeconomic class and self-perception help explain why pickle castors were prevalent. The pickle castor is able to reflect the people of Virginia City, just as Virginia City is able to represent the pickle castor.

These early silver rush days were a formidable foundation of a “Wild West” legend. It was situated in two decades and has lasted centuries.<sup>100</sup> In the American psyche, mining rushes and the Wild West were environments where anyone had the chance to make it rich, no matter the moment. While that may have been true in the early days of the Comstock, once companies like the Chollar-Potosi Co. or Ophir mining Co. stepped foot on the ground, put up mills, and established hierarchy, the opportunities for the everyday man dwindled, and became merely a dream.

Yet, that feeling of opportunity, regardless of class, loomed over Virginia City in its time as a boomtown (1859-1882). Industrial and supporting occupations were not as economically rigid as they were in East coast industrial centers. There exists this idea of a binary; on one side is the mine worker, milling or mucking, they make a living wage under their employment, and food, housing, and some entertainment on the weekends is all they could afford. On the other extreme, are men like George Hearst and John Mackey, those who have almost incomprehensible amounts of wealth.

These are the two extremes. In reality, some occupations of Virginia City had room to spend in moderation. Not everyone could live like the silver kings, but some people had enough disposable income to be able to enjoy minor instances of wealth. Not only would they be able to enjoy it, but instances of minor wealth or disposable income would be signs to other community members that they were able to achieve a hint of the Wild West dream of wealth.

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<sup>100</sup> James. *The Roar and the Silence*, 20.

Virginia City is special, but in no way is it the only place where people would have experienced similar social and economic environments. However, the plentiful information provides an in depth look into these circumstances and people who experienced them. It is the perfect environment to examine a pickle castor in its larger context, and how and why people interacted with it. The distinct economic environment of Virginia City, with its existing middle class, class mixing, and the perceived possibility of attainable economic mobility, contribute to the phenomenon of the pickle castor.



Figure 1: Map of the Washoe Mining Region, featuring the borders of California and Nevada (referred to here as part of the Utah Territory), circ. 1860<sup>101</sup>

<sup>101</sup>“The Comstock Lode.” Mining Maps and Views - Spotlight at Stanford, September 12, 2019. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/mining/feature/the-comstock-lode>.



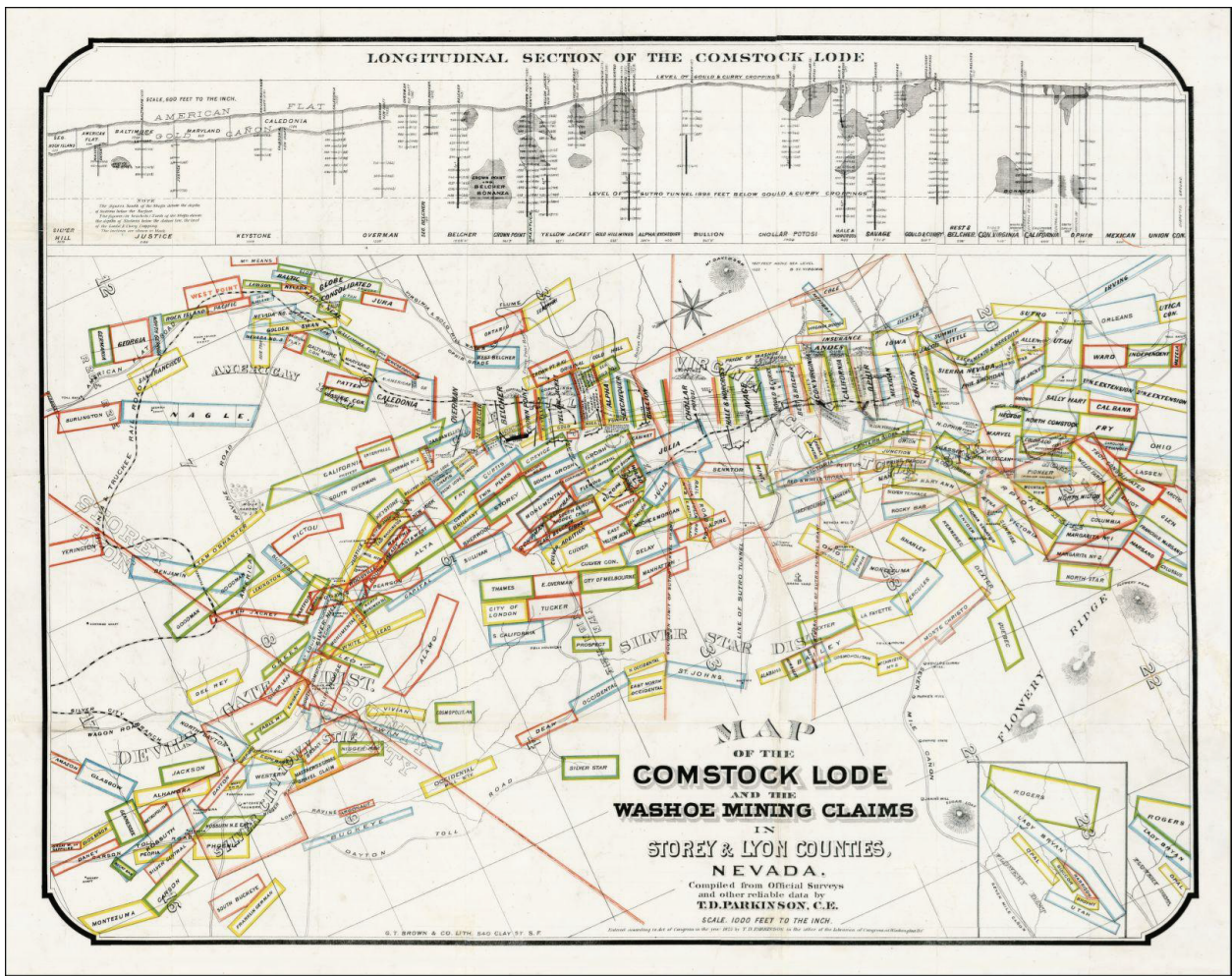


Figure 2: Comstock Lode and Washoe Mining Claims Map, 1873<sup>102</sup>

<sup>102</sup>“The Comstock Lode.”

### Chapter III: The Right Way to Dine

In order to fully understand the pickle castor, we must now explore its function as a serving dish. Mealtimes exist integrally in the lives of every American, and the pickle castor gives us a lens into this world of 19th-century ritualized dining. Ritual, within this context, refers to the dining codes and etiquette that were established and refined within the 19th century and explained the right way to dine in order to be proper or genteel. In order to understand the action of dining and its reflections on class, consumption, and Virginia City, I will begin by explaining the practical elements of dining, how they were codified, and how people interacted with these dining etiquettes. I will then transition into the present class and social dynamics through the lens of the pickle castor itself, further highlighting how its existence portrays aspects of everyday life for 19th-century Nevadans.

There are a multitude of sources on the history of dining in the 19th century, yet the majority of them either talk more about Victorian England, the broader United States, or specific east coast contexts. There is a gap in scholarship concerning the 19th-century American West, creating a stylistic gap between this and the previous chapters. As a remedy, this chapter builds off of a localized model by applying known 19th-century dining etiquette and dynamics to the social context of Virginia City and its residents.

#### The 19th-Century Dining Environment

During the 19th century, dining went through a notable transition. In the early decades of the century up to the Civil War, Americans preferred dining in the “Old English” style.<sup>103</sup> This style, originating in the 18th century, consisted of placing all food on the table before people sat

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<sup>103</sup>Robert K. Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn.” *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1999): 39–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616671>, 50.



down.<sup>104</sup> It was customary for diners to serve themselves, meaning an extra server was not needed.<sup>105</sup> After the Civil War, upper-class dining turned to the “À la Russe” style.<sup>106</sup> This style changed the practice of food items being placed directly on the table; instead, elaborate decorative centerpieces occupied the table space.<sup>107</sup> This Russian style, which originated in Europe, focused more on the opulence of dining due to its upper-class origins.<sup>108</sup>

Without food being placed directly on the table, more servants and extra plates were needed for different courses.<sup>109</sup> This also meant that serving dishes on the table were rarer, with only a few glasses or sauce dishes remaining.<sup>110</sup> Due to the Russian style's more expensive nature, the “American” style emerged as a more lax, adaptable, and economically accessible version.<sup>111</sup> This style kept the elaborate centerpieces, but did away with the need for extra servants by tasking food dispersal to the host or hostess.<sup>112</sup> Food serving dishes would have been placed on the table, served, then removed, or set on a side table.<sup>113</sup> This style came towards the later decades of the 19th century, and was seen as a more private, regularly used style than its predecessor.<sup>114</sup>

Despite being a more relaxed version of the opulent Russian style, the American style shared in the overarching themes of the previous two styles. Dining in the 19th century served as

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<sup>104</sup>Michael T. Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical: Ideology and Compromise at the Late Nineteenth-Century Dinner Table.” *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 4 (1994): 80–93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616344>, 82.

<sup>105</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 82.

<sup>106</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 82.

<sup>107</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 84, 82.

<sup>108</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 82.

<sup>109</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 82.

<sup>110</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 82.

<sup>111</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 83.

<sup>112</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 83.

<sup>113</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 83.

<sup>114</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 83.

a vehicle to educate and participate in “good society”.<sup>115</sup> Good moral behavior was desired, and dining provided an easy way to display this skill within society.<sup>116</sup> These good moral behaviors manifested in a drive to show proper refinement; by refining or ritualizing elements of daily life, upper-class people elevated these experiences to a level of moral height. The ability to participate in this moral goodness through ritual was closely related to wealth, which further perpetuated class differences in different social arenas.

Within this mindset, eating was an animalistic act, and by elevating the dining experience, humans created a recognizable separation between human and animal.<sup>117</sup> Upper and middle-class peoples used this thinking in order to create a distinction between themselves and working-class people. The curated dining experience heightened this divide by making the direct comparison of upper-class to humans and lower-class to animals. The way a family dined became a part of this distinction, and a notable differentiator in class.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, food and dining were seen as a distinctly social experience.<sup>119</sup> By elevating one's dining experience with formality, etiquette, and ritual, one would be societally linked with the associated civilized poise and moral goodness. The appropriate use and display of these symbols and interactions were integral to class interaction and acceptance.<sup>120</sup> Dining was a battle ground, and etiquette was a tool to gain status into a higher class.

Homespaces were the main setting for these social rituals of dining. As examined previously, dining styles had adapted within the homespace depending on what a family had at their disposal (whether it be a complete wait-staff, a single server, or only an extra side table). In

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<sup>115</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical, 83.

<sup>116</sup>Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn,” 49.

<sup>117</sup>Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn,” 54.

<sup>118</sup>Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn,” 40.

<sup>119</sup>Brillat-Savarin. *Handbook of Dining; or Corpulency and Leanness Scientifically Considered*. 3rd ed. London: Longman, 1865, 116.

<sup>120</sup>Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn,” 40.

addition to the ingrained sense of moral uplift with dining, meals were also used to emphasize time spent together as a family.<sup>121</sup> It stressed the importance of family life, celebrating the reunion of the family unit at the end of a grueling work day.<sup>122</sup> Within this overarching idea of family, dining is also built in a framework to educate and raise children in a moral, middle-class way.<sup>123</sup> Within the growing middle-class of Virginia City, and the number of families following a regular work schedule, these 19th-century ideals were reflected within the homespaces of Virginia City middle and upper-class residents.

While these named styles of dining were mainly constrained to the more private, homespaces, dining itself was not. Saloons were public spaces in which, although their main focus was not a full table service, dining still occurred. Saloons' priorities remained as drinking establishments; in the Boston Saloon archaeological dig, more glass drinkware than ceramic dishware was recovered.<sup>124</sup> Yet, light food was still served. In addition to their drinks, some saloons, like Piper's Old Corner Bar, advertised different snack and meal choices in newspapers, like "choice" or "superior hot lunches."<sup>125</sup> These meals were likely often meat based (seen in archaeological evidence of animal bones at the Boston Saloon), but they served more diverse menus.<sup>126</sup> These meals, which were popular among single men in mining towns, commonly consisted of cheese, potatoes, and mutton pie.<sup>127</sup>

Although the saloons of Virginia City were more skewed towards drinking, this archaeological evidence shows they still participated in dining. This participation means the

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<sup>121</sup>Fitts. "The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn," 50.

<sup>122</sup>Fitts. "The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn," 50.

<sup>123</sup>Fitts. "The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn," 50.

<sup>124</sup>Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City*. Pbk. ed. Reno, Nev: University of Nevada Press, 2006, 104.

<sup>125</sup>Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 73.

<sup>126</sup>Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 73, 95.

<sup>127</sup>Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons*, 73.

spaces were subject to the underlying context of it in the 19th century, just as they reflect the local society in which they are placed. Saloons can represent the social mixing space between local morality and morality within dining, showing us the more unique ways that Virginia City residents might interact with their peers in dining spaces. Morality is at play in these spaces because of their backgrounds, so we can get a sense of how people are performing these moral and social behaviors within their own context.

These specific ways of dining were not established out of the blue, but codified through a combination of upper-class pretentiousness and an emerging genre of etiquette manuals. The upper-class pretentiousness comes from the desire to not just be a member of the upper class, but to actively display that status in day-to-day activities in order to assert their place in the social hierarchy. These upper-class patterns of conspicuous consumption became embedded in acts like dining, dress, travel, and housing.<sup>128</sup> These are all acts or areas in which upper-class people can show off both wealth and status; it was consumption solely for the sake of brandishing status. When this wealth is actively flaunted, it creates a desire within lower classes to achieve the same wealth and status, or at the very least, emulate it within their own means. These desires and attempts to emulate the upper-class manifested in the new market of etiquette manuals.

These etiquette manuals were popular for the majority of the 19th century, even stretching into the 20th century. Around 100 were made from 1830-1860, and production increased to five or six per year from 1870 to 1917.<sup>129</sup> The books covered both dining and behavior across a wide range of social arenas, like daily affairs, evening parties, and weddings.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>“Conspicuous Consumption” here refers to consumption of goods for consumption’s sake, and showing off one’s own wealth, or excess thereof, through material goods (either practical, or not).

<sup>129</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 81.

<sup>130</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 81.

As their presence became increasingly ubiquitous, the audience for these manuals grew across the United States.<sup>131</sup>

These manuals acted as the practical application of the social agenda surrounding dining. Dining, as previously mentioned, existed as a form of civilization and legitimization of elite, upper-class status.<sup>132</sup> With these etiquette books, more middle-class people were encouraged to set themselves apart from the lower-class by incorporating genteel behaviors and specific rituals in their everyday dining experience. These books were also written for not just diners, but their wait-staff.

Anne Frances Springsteed and Margaret Armstrong's 1894 manual, titled *The Expert Waitress: a Manual for the Pantry, Kitchen, and Dining-Room*, walks the reader through several dining scenarios (breakfast, lunch, dinner, supper, afternoon tea), care of dining objects, and general rules for a waitress.<sup>133</sup> Within each meal section, the manual is sure to explain exactly where each serving dish should be placed on the table.<sup>134</sup> In addition, the meal sections begin with a list of possible menu items. Notably, gherkins (pickled cucumbers) and mustard pickles are suggested for both lunch and supper, respectively.<sup>135</sup> By examining this etiquette book, we can see the intricacies of ritual expected of both diner and server.

This manual also identifies specific serving dishes and materials used in the dining process. Its explicit mention of soup serving dishes, "gherkin dishes," and "pickle dishes" place the hyper-specific serving dishes that lend themselves to 19th-century dining onto the physical

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<sup>131</sup>Lucas. "A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical," 81.

<sup>132</sup>Lucas. "A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical," 81.

<sup>133</sup>Supper is explained as a meal in place of dinner when "it is necessary to gain time for an evening entertainment, or when...a shorter instead of longer meal is desired."; Anne Frances Springsteed and Margaret Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress: a Manual for the Pantry, Kitchen, and Dining-Room*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894, 32-33.

<sup>134</sup>Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 2.

<sup>135</sup>Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 14, 32.

table.<sup>136</sup> In addition to materials, processes of dining are also revealed; a waitress is instructed to ask the host his or her specific dining preferences, make sure everyone has water, and to never stack china on top of silver.<sup>137</sup> Its silver care section, which instructs a weekly “electro-silver” clean and polish, places dining and serving tools of silver onto the 19th-century table.<sup>138</sup>

Looking into this specific manual, and the hundreds of others that have been published, reveals what upper and middle-class people were experiencing within dining. These cannot be exact representations, for this manual prefaces that it’s “intended rather as a working model of a set of rules from which there is no appeal.”<sup>139</sup> They reveal, rather, a framework in which 19th century diners were operating as opposed to a set of inflexible strictures.

The influence of desired upper-class life and the etiquette manuals both contributed to the rise and codification of dining codes and expectations that framed the 19th century dining experience. Increased gentrification of dining led middle-class people to change the practical elements of their dining experience to more closely adhere to the genteel, following proper dining expectations while staying within their own capabilities and parameters. Whether it be changing their specific style, hiring a maid, or spending a small amount of disposable income on a specific dining object, 19th-century diners were participating in an increasingly ritualized experience. Such experiences are reflected clearly in the objects used in dining, and how diners interacted with them.

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<sup>136</sup>It is unclear if the gherkin or pickle serving “dishes” are pickle castors, but regardless, it states that dishes specific to pickles were actively interacted with; Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 24, 20, 37.

<sup>137</sup>Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 84, 6-7, 75.

<sup>138</sup>Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 59.

<sup>139</sup>Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 1.

### Inserting the Object into the Dining Space

Objects, just like people, cannot be divorced from the context around them. The material surrounding people can be just as alive, and represent the hierarchies and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and the blurring of those lines.<sup>140</sup> When there are changes in the human context, such as a new adopted dining attitude, the associated objects change along with it.<sup>141</sup> Notably, it was improper to mix different foods in the same vessel; this justified the increased use of more specific dining vessels.<sup>142</sup> Etiquette manuals would often tell readers how to use these specific items, further enforcing the feeling that they are needed in order to properly dine. Out of this, items like celery vases, sugar cube tongs, relish platters, and pickle castors thrived.

Nineteenth-century dining saw an increased emphasis placed on order, ritual, and opulence. All of these can be reflected if we think about experiencing 19th-century dining for ourselves. These characteristics mirror themselves in our modern perspectives of old fashioned dining, with plates for a several course meal, multiple utensils, and specific orders to use each one. One may observe how the host or hostess chooses the serving style of the meal: whether they have a maid or just a side table to place serving plates on a side table. Food and drink serving dishes may be placed near the host.<sup>143</sup> Diners were not helping themselves in accordance with the “Old English” style, as the switch had been made to the “Russian” and “American” styles with the host and servers taking on that responsibility. The act of requesting service at the dinner table would have added an extra layer of formality to the experience, further imposing

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<sup>140</sup>Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical, 80.

<sup>141</sup>Although this shift occurred outside of the Bonanza period of concentration, the size of dinner plates themselves serve as an interesting example. In the 1880’s-1890’s, there was a decrease in the average diameter of a dinner plate. This follows with the Russian and American styles of dining, where less food and serving dishes were placed on the table in favor of decorative centerpieces. Dinner plates decreased in size, as only a few items were actually served onto the plates per course; Lucas. “A La Russe, à La Pell-Mell, or à La Practical,” 84.

<sup>142</sup>Fitts. “The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn,” 53.

<sup>143</sup>“Pour claret and leave the decanter near the host.”; Springsteed and Armstrong. *The Expert Waitress*, 27.

that properness that the upper classes intended. It was a way of making the necessary (preserving food) into something heightened, elegant, or special. In addition, being served by a wait-staff imposes a visual emphasis on class difference and hierarchical standings. The layers of ritual and added interaction with objects enforces these ideals of moral and behavior order.

Objects are intrinsically linked to the act of dining, and have been for centuries. Because of this, they are efficient lenses to understand more specific social positions and dynamics. With a background on dining and its associated objects, we can now explore how the pickle castor allows us to see into these dynamics. First and foremost, the pickle castor was not an essential dining item, like serving dishes, plates, or cups.<sup>144</sup> Because of this, the presence of a pickle castor can be understood as an object of excess and conspicuous consumption, either by purchasing or desiring it. As an object, it is not necessary, thus making it an object of desire. As a desired object, it is not a need. Instead, it fulfills a desire to show excess in wealth and cooperation with genteel dining etiquette. The desire for pickle castors can be seen today in the recorded presence of them as prizes to be won in local competitions, showing how more Virginia City residents actively wanted to participate in the upper- and middle-class act of wealth and consumption.<sup>145</sup>

The pickle castor encourages the localized application of overall dining codes to Virginia City, Nevada. With this background, we can theorize how Nevadans were viewing consumption, material wealth, and dining through the way they interact with and/or desire pickle castors. Whether dining in a saloon or a homespace, people in Virginia City most likely did, interact with pickle castors or other hyper specific dining ornaments. We have established that there was a growing middle-class during the Bonanza period (1859-1882). This middle class, as the rest of

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<sup>144</sup>Fitts. "The Archaeology of Middle-Class Domesticity and Gentility in Victorian Brooklyn," 53.

<sup>145</sup>In this diary entry on Oct. 1, 1896, Alf Doten describes how he gave Mrs. Hiller a prize ticket, with which she won a pickle castor; Walter Van Tilburg Clark. Ed. "The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849-1903," University of Nevada Reno, Nevada Humanities. <https://clark.dotendiaries.org>, 1062.



Virginia City, was already surrounded in the preconceived notion of wealth and possible class mobility. There is an overabundance of wealth surrounding Virginia City, so its upper and middle-class residents desired to display it. There is a participation in luxury, and it is one that manifests in both the city itself and its possible dining experience.

This object is understood as occupying three spaces and carries three meanings that compliment each other. As a member of those increasingly popular hyper-specific vessels, it shows consumption and excess that began bleeding into the dining space. As an object of dining, it exists in the space of morality and proper behavior that was embedded in the 19th-century dining context. Lastly, as an object made from silver (or plated in it), it occupies a space of possible affection or pride for silver: the material that Virginia City residents are used to profiting from and being surrounded by. Dining spaces became a performative space for both wealth, morality, and material, just as Virginia City did. Nevadans in Virginia City were able to experience combined desires within the pickle castor: wealth, material, and morality. These desires were then performed with the purchase and use of a pickle castor in its multitude of spaces.

Nineteenth-century American dining, in its many different forms, carried a context of moral uplift through carefully curated rituals and objects. These dining objects compensated for changes in dining, proving that dining objects can be used as reliable storytellers in an historical exploration of social dynamics within dining. The pickle castor acts as this storyteller to display a Virginia City dining environment that is active in its community surrounded by material and wealth. For the upper and middle classes, dining in Virginia City was an act of conspicuous consumption, moral superiority, and material excess; it was solidified by the upper-class through participation and spread to lower classes through the new genre of etiquette literature. These

behaviors were then emulated by a growing middle class, through participation and material acquisition, in order to adhere to propriety. These social phenomena allowed an ostentatious object, such as the pickle castor, and many other extremely specific dining tools, to flourish in Virginia City.

## Conclusion

I was fourteen years old when I first saw a pickle castor. My mother, sister, a few family friends, and I were staying at a bed & breakfast in Virginia City for my birthday. The owner had walked us around the old Victorian style house, sharing tidbits of Comstock history as we passed through each room. When we reached the dining room, we were met with a nearly floor to ceiling clear cabinet case. The owner opened it, reached inside, and pulled out a curious looking thing which he called a pickle castor. From then on, I knew it as some dish that the people of the Wild West used to set their table, and that was the end of it. It existed in my mind as simply a fun fact, a quirky little object that was unfamiliar to non-Nevadans.

This object is alive and well in the modern spaces of Virginia City. They are found in antique shops, bed & breakfasts, and saloons. One of these spaces, the Bucket of Blood Saloon (est. 1876), could be mistaken for an antique store if it were not for the long bar, stage towards the left side of the floor, and slot machines lining a full wall. Nathan Scott, the bartender who entertained my many questions, told me that the owners are antique dealers as well, and have done a magnificent job of filling the place with Victorian lamps, guns, portraits, maps, flags, and, last but not least, a row of shiny pickle castors behind the bar. As I sat at the bar with my mother, I looked across their extensive collection, which provides a beautiful snapshot into the different forms a pickle castor can take; there are castors of textured, painted, or smooth glass, castors of pink, clear, blue, yellow, and deep purple, and castors with square, round, or overhanging frames.

It is easy to dismiss these items as a simple novelty or just something pretty. While they are beautiful, they have the power to tell a more complex, encompassing history. This project has brought that history to the forefront, and with it, a deeper understanding of daily life in bonanza

Virginia City. The pickle castor does not just exist within my memory but in the broader historical memory and the lives of so many other Nevadans.

We have landed in the silver rush bonanza of Virginia City, Nevada (1859-1882); it exists in myth as a wild, rags to riches place surrounded in wealth and debauchery. Some myths do have a basis. The reality shows a fully established, diverse community that was entrenched with silver and gold mining and its supportive industries. This wealth from the mines was visually communicated in different arenas across Virginia City, like architecture, dress, and dining.

Dining operated as the theater of the pickle castor. The highly ritualized act, which ingrained mealtime with a sense of moral uplift and the flaunting of material wealth, was codified through upper class implementation and widely distributed etiquette literature. Newer dining styles, like “à la Russe” or “American,” stressed increased specialization in serving dishes, and order in serving and eating. Within these new hyper-specific serving dishes, the pickle castor thrived. New design techniques within glassmaking (like the creation of splatter, peachblow, and satin glass) and silver making (with electro-plating) contributed to the proliferation of the pickle castor in markets. Both the contexts of dining and the new material techniques made the pickle castor available, and the specific economic and social climate of Virginia City, Nevada made them a desired item. As the site of the silver rush, Virginia City operated as a community built on and forever influenced by the material. This material, silver, acted as a vehicle for both profit and wealth display. With the dining space as an arena for this display, the pickle castor acts as a material manifestation of silver rush wealth and its convergence with genteel dining ideals. The object is a representative of a community driven by and tied to wealth and their desire to display that wealth in material ways.

Within this study, its limited time frame, and small scholarship field, there are still some unanswered questions and untouched topics. Lower-class individuals are not as present in this paper as others who lived in Virginia City; this is not to say that lower-class individuals were not present in Virginia City, but they are less visible within the focused genteel dining spaces, and were less likely to have the means to partake in the phenomena of a pickle castor.

In addition, I was unable to trace the silver supply used in pickle castor manufacturing, which may have shown Virginia City silver as a source for the pickle castor. In addition, I could not find information regarding the exact technique used to make the silver pickle castor frames. Lastly, in terms of saloons, pickle castors can be placed there conceptually and with my historical imagination, but there is a lack of archaeological or textual evidence that they were in fact present. While pickle castors exist in modern saloon spaces in Virginia City, it is not a guarantee that they did back then in the 19th century. Yet, it also does not fully exclude them either. With 19th-century dining, and the existence of meals and snacks in saloon spaces, it is reasonable to input them within these specific social spaces.

These unanswered questions still hold value, as they show where there may be further gaps in secondary research and primary sources themselves. In line with this scholarship, I suggest the exploration of other dining objects within Virginia City; these different objects will allow different perspectives on the dynamics of class and dining. Yet, there lies opportunities outside of dining as well. Virginia City is an area surrounded in the material, and a history into any such material would yield important scholarship to advance the historiography of Virginia City, Nevada.

Whether by the histories of the gold rush, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, Virginia City has been largely overshadowed within broader American history. It exists very strongly in the

minds of Nevadans, being a staple of the state's mining heritage or a common place for a school field trip. Regardless of the modernity laying over Virginia City like fresh paint, the layers underneath show how Virginia City once was. The inescapable architecture, antiques, and Comstock maps around every corner create an interesting paradox of Virginia City. On one hand, it provides a fun, tourist “Wild West” experience, one that feeds off its Bonanza past. However, past the tourists lies the remnants of historical truth.

From abandoned mineshafts and under-restoration mills, the historical association information signs, to the long standing Catholic Church, history is visual and active in Virginia City. Once the tourists leave with their classic “eureka” pot of fools gold in a mini-bottle, the people, establishments, and things that have deep roots here remain. So, although the landscape is partly curated towards a tourist eye, Virginia City is still a fascinating, rich place to study history and material culture. It is a place full of opportunity, a place of national importance, a place of wonder, hardship, of bonanzas and borrascas, of fact and myth, but most importantly, it is alive.

Virginia City is a palimpsest, with layers of different historical eras stacked on top of each other, yet they all remain visible beneath the surface. It is the objects of Virginia City that allow this look. When the people of the silver rush had passed, their legacy remained within the material. We can imagine how the richest men like John Mackey hosted grand dinners, with pickle castors and other decorative dishes adorning the table. We can imagine the middle class mining family reuniting after a work day for dinner; their table sports the pickle castor that they take pride in as an object of disposable income and conspicuous consumption. We can picture the crowd of miners and other workers in a saloon, socializing and enjoying a meal together.

Pickle castors offer a lens into how Nevadans were united in their contexts. Across class, ethnicity, gender, or occupation, Virginia City residents were socially and visually surrounded in the material and wealth of silver, and this bled into the way they navigated the space and objects around them. Their historical fingerprints are left on the objects that remain behind. These fingerprints are proof, not only of a unique experience, but that they matter. The people of Virginia City were not just numbers, paychecks, or hands in the silver rush; they came from a fully established community, concerned with their place in that community and others' perceptions of them. They lived their daily life in this key historical moment, and the pickle castor can capture a hint of that lived experience.

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