

GERLACH

A Boyhood Story from the Edge of
the Black Rock Desert 1950 to 1952

Richard Phillips Neely

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-105-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.
Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

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CHAPTER 1

A RUMPLED, UNMADE BED OF A TOWN

I want to tell you about Gerlach, Nevada. The way it was in the early 1950s, this dirty, dry, dusty, desolate destination. A godforsaken, unbridled, dead-end town of the Wild West, located in the eastern reaches of Washoe County, 120 long, hard miles north of Reno.

I want to tell you about the place and the people. What it was like to live there. To tell you about my mom and dad because I think I won the parent lottery. About Maude McGinnis, a pioneer descendant from the Oregon Trail who had a knack for getting things done, especially when she had an axe in her hand. About bad-boy bully Stanley Carter and how he met his match. About Bill Phillips, a young former University of Nevada athlete who brought our community together and left an imprint on our lives. I want to tell you about others, too, but mainly, I want to tell you how I came to love this place and its people so much.

I did not live there—I lived in Empire, seven miles to the south. But I spent the last part of my sixth, all of my seventh, and part of my eighth-grade years attending school in Gerlach.

In the last months of Mom's life, she was mostly bed-ridden from a stroke. When I visited, we would reminisce about her early life and our lives together. We agreed that our most fascinating and fondly remembered time was in Empire and Gerlach, 1950 to 1952. I mention this because

part of the reason I love this place and time so much is because Mom did, too.

How do I begin? If you saw the movie *Bad Day at Black Rock* with Spencer Tracy, the opening scene of the train pulling into this remote, grimy desert town will give you some idea of what Gerlach was like. Black Rock looked seedy; Gerlach was far worse. Gerlach was not the end of the world, but you could certainly see it from there and, to paraphrase a line from *A Chorus Line*, to commit suicide in Gerlach “would have been redundant.”

Gerlach was a rumpled, unmade bed of a town squatting on the hot desert flats near the base of Granite Mountain and bordering the great Black Rock Desert. From Empire, it could only be reached by crossing a narrow road, atop a berm, with vast stretches of parched, alkaline, dry lake on either side. During the wet season, passing oncoming cars required a carefully choreographed do-si-do to prevent either car from sliding down the berm and into a very muddy dry lake.

This town was situated on a high-altitude desert, 4,000 ft. above sea level. Temperatures could soar over 110 degrees in the summer and drop to below 20 degrees in the winter. Snow and rain were not uncommon in the winter, but rain was practically unseen in the summer. Droughts spawned small, tornado-like dust funnels called dust devils. Dust devils and tumbleweeds were frequent visitors in the hot months. They could be seen twisting and tumbling around in town or giving a distant performance in the surrounding sage, sand, and hard rock desert.

Water was the life force that allowed the towns and ranches to exist in this harsh and unforgiving country. It was supplied by aquifers and artesian wells, of which there

were many—nature’s gift to Gerlach. These natural water sources were harnessed for irrigation, drinking water, and Gerlach’s mineral springs “spa.”

A mile outside of town, at the foot of Granite Mountain and near Gerlach’s Boot Hill, was a cluster of natural cold and hot mineral springs. Enterprising townspeople directed these springs to create large, black, sulfur mud puddles. The town’s drunks would lay down in these mud craters and use them to sober up. Others used them for mud-pack health and beauty treatments.

Planks were laid across the boiling-water springs, and huts resembling outhouses were erected on them. People would sit in these huts, and the rising steam would provide a steam bath. Then there were those who would squat on the edges of these hot springs, and dip their dead chickens into the water in preparation for plucking.

Adjacent to the swimming area were broken-down, decaying-wood bathhouses that served as changing rooms. A diving board was erected over one of the cool-water pools. The spring was a frightening and dangerous place to swim because it had no bottom. As you descended, scary underwater ledges and outcroppings that formed on sides of the pool could snare your swimming trunks and trap you. We had one drowning that I recall—I rarely swam there. The pool was too spooky and it scared me.

So, as you can imagine, this “spa” was a muddy, feathered mess, but it served a good purpose, and was a testament to Western ingenuity.

Gerlach’s population was posted at 150 residents. It would balloon to more than 400 on weekends, when the cowboys from nearby ranches and the gypsum plant workers would invade the town. It became a drunken, brawling scene with

fistfights and knife fights. Lots of blood, bumps, and bruises—and one killing. The victim was a gentle, 19-year-old French boy, Arno, who was a ranch hand on the Deep Hole Ranch. He had just come to this country to seek his fortune. I knew him. Very sad.

Gerlach had one long, crooked main street. It ran east and west and parallel to Granite Mountain. The dirt street was a sloppy mess when it was wet; a rutted washboard when it was not. Surrounding the main street in an irregular pattern were buildings or structures masquerading as houses. Dwellings built from railroad ties and tarpaper with coal piles outside, and lean-tos with stovepipes and scattered kindling dotted most of the town. There were just a few decent houses with modern propane or oil tanks at their sides. All were weathered, unpainted, or in need of new paint. No pretty yards, no grass, some trees. A few houses had half-tire and barbed-wire fences for imagined protection—a shanty town existence in the mid 20th century.

The main street was right out of the movie *Shane*, only bigger. On one side, and 30 yards off line with the main street, was a Western Pacific Railroad station. The depot was oversized for a town the size of Gerlach, but the gypsum plant and the cattle and sheep ranches gave the railroad plenty of business. It looked like the station houses in Western movies, with a waiting room, a small porch, a ticket booth, and a telegrapher's office. The telegraph was one of two ways this isolated community could communicate with the outside world. The other was the radio-telephone in my dad's office in Empire. The station house and the school were the only buildings in town that appeared to be built by sober carpenters.

Heading west, on the south side of the street, was the town's elevated water tower, which was supported by a

patchwork of wooden beams and flat boards. Close by was Carter's General Store. This was an all-purpose dry-goods store with a step-up wooden sidewalk. It carried everything: canned goods, shoes, tools, nails, razors, soap, lipstick, linens, shirts and pants, magazines, candy, chewing tobacco, ice cream, and some (allegedly) fresh vegetables. It had the obligatory potbellied stove, glass-top counter display case, rocking chairs, and a large 8 ft. by 5 ft. Wells Fargo safe.

People would bring their valuables to Mr. Carter, the owner and proprietor, to safely store their valuables in the safe. He would place them in a leather pouch, tie it closed, place it in the vault, and provide a receipt for its contents. While this practice seemed ripe for mischief, I never heard tell of any.

Not far from the general store was the jail. It was a small, rickety, ramshackle structure in desperate need of repairs—just like every other building in Gerlach. The jail was a walk-in, walk-out affair. You were put in jail only if you wanted to go; it could hold no sober person who was of a mind to leave.¹

The sheriff, Henry Hughes, was an original native of Gerlach with a colorful history. He fought in the last pitched Indian battle in the United States in 1910. Henry was elected sheriff partly because he was the only one willing to run for office, but primarily because he was 78 years frail. He walked with a noticeable limp, and would only arrest those who would let him. He proudly wore a holstered gun strapped around his waist. When Henry limped into one of the bars, placed his hand on a patron's shoulder, told him he had had enough, and announced he was going to jail, the

¹ In February 2015, I found an article from the *Nevada State Journal* dated April 26, 1953, a year after I left Gerlach. The article mentioned an audit of the Gerlach jail by Washoe County commissioners. During the audit, they discovered that most every citizen of Gerlach possessed a key to the padlock on the jail. It made me laugh—no wonder I remembered it as a walk-in, walk-out affair!

patron could either slough Henry's hand off and go back to drinking or accompany Henry to jail. Perp's choice. Such was law and order in Gerlach.

Crossing to the other side of the street was a lineup of five bars, an auto repair shop and gas station, a small rooming house, and a few restaurants to include Bruno's and Johnny Capooches' Restaurant Saloon and Barbershop. Most of these places had slot machines and poker tables. Some were painted, most were weathered-wood, and none seemed to be standing straight. Later, a movie theater was added to the lineup.

A town of 150 people and five bars! The only bar name I can recall was the Nite Cap, because it was the only one with a neon sign. When it was first erected it attracted a standing-room-only crowd, mostly outside so they could gawk at and cheer the lighted sign. This qualified as the event of the year in 1952.

My friend, Billy Benner, had an uncle who owned one of the bars. After basketball practice, he would let us sneak in (no minors allowed). He would mix a drink of grenadine syrup and 7-Up, and serve it to us at the bar. It was a big-time thrill to drink it, with elbows on the bar—even though the drink was called a "Shirley Temple."

Gerlach was the only town, and watering hole, within 80 miles of any direction you wanted to travel. And there were no paved roads and few road signs. This partly explains the weekend crush of people. The other was a "whorehouse," to use the vernacular of the time. It was on the northwestern edge of town and on the way to the spa. It was a dark, foreboding building about 100 yards off the road and well hidden behind clumps of brush and trees. It was the town's open secret. I think it was legal, but if it wasn't, Henry Hughes was not about to close it down.

As I would drive by with my parents, on the way to the pool and spa, all eyes were straight ahead, but I would strain to see what little I could out of the corner of my eye. By design or accident, the school—a handsome structure and a credit to the town—stood all the way across town from the whorehouse.

Gerlach and Empire were the stages on which many of the most memorable and fascinating characters of my life performed. I loved living there, but what I appreciated most were the people who made this godforsaken place livable and lovable.