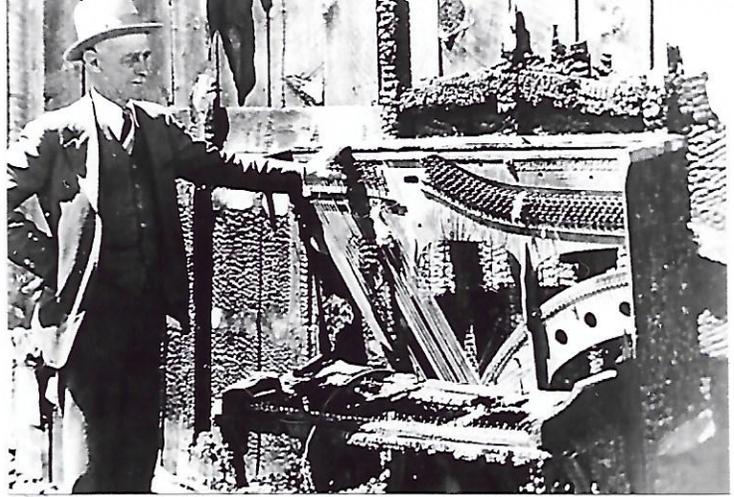


Mono County Historical Society

Bridgeport, California

2026 Newsletter

FIRE!

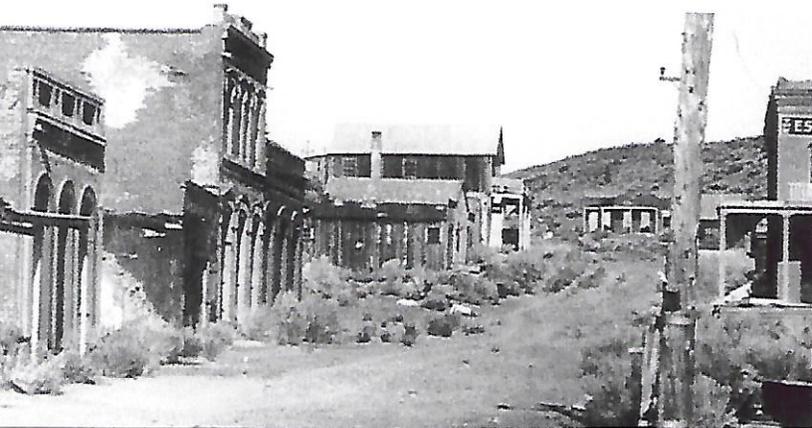


James Cain next to a piano from the 1932 Bodie fire.

The threat of fire in the Eastern Sierra was a major concern during the 1800s, especially before the introduction of electricity. Lighting for homes and businesses was supplied by oil lanterns or candles. Heat was provided by fireplaces and iron stoves, and food was prepared on woodburning kitchen stoves. Accidental fires occurred frequently, and the flames threatened to destroy entire towns. Water was necessary for firefighting, but it was not always available when needed. Wooden buildings were especially vulnerable because of the dry climate.

In 1857 gold was discovered by Mormon prospectors about seven miles south of current day Bridgeport at Brown's Creek, soon to be known as Dogtown. Other gold camps soon appeared at Monoville, Aurora and Bodie. The Bridgeport Valley was first known as Big Meadows when it was settled in 1859. It became a ranching and farming community and eventually served as a business hub for area mining. Since the gold camps were usually devoid of trees, lumber was usually ordered from sawmills in the Bridgeport area.

The Esmeralda Mining District was founded in Aurora in 1860 on the California-Nevada Territory border. When the California Legislature established Mono County in 1861, the town of Aurora was designated as the County Seat. The border was not clearly defined at the time and Nevada Territory felt Aurora was in their jurisdiction, so they assigned it as the seat for Esmeralda County. After Aurora's population peaked to about 5000 in 1863, a government survey determined that the town was actually about three miles inside the Nevada Territory, making it necessary to move the Mono County Seat to Bridgeport.



Aurora in the 1920s, looking east on Pine.

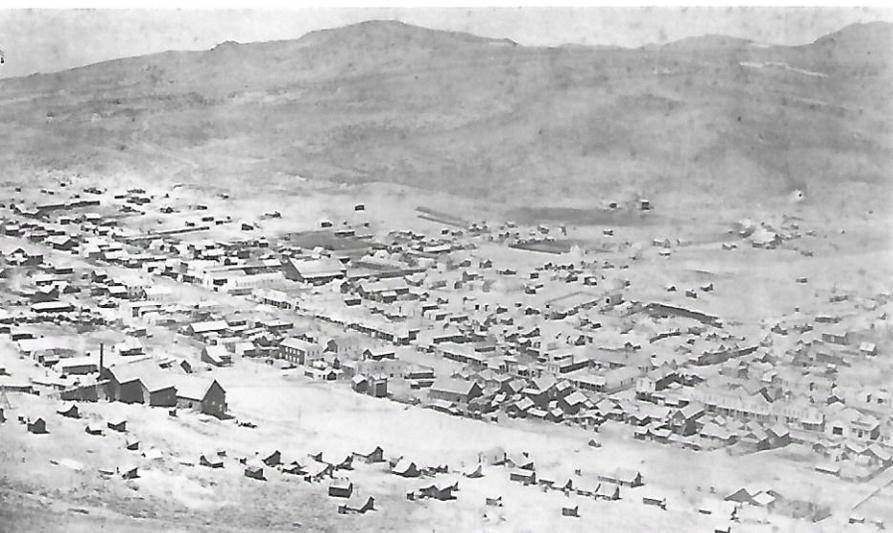
To battle the constant threat of fire, many buildings in Aurora were made of bricks that were supplied by the four brickyards. Even so, the town was almost destroyed in 1866 by suspected arson fire in an unoccupied home. High winds spread the blaze that burned both sides of Antelope Street. In 1873 eleven buildings burned at Pine and Antelope Streets. The Exchange Hotel, once the Esmeralda County Courthouse was later destroyed by fire, possibly deliberately set.

In 1879 the town of Lundy was built five miles west of the Mono Basin to accommodate the promising Homer Mining District. Even though the town was built next to Lundy Lake, it had no fire department or water hydrants. In 1880 the Lakeview Hotel was destroyed by fire, but the blaze did not spread and the hotel was rebuilt. Fires in 1883 & 1884 spared the town, but Lundy ran out of luck in 1887 when a suspicious fire in the May Lundy Hotel started about midnight. The hotel and 25 additional commercial buildings in Lower Town burned. The businesses were not rebuilt, but Lundy survived until 1915.



What was left of Lundy in 1900.

Bodie was the largest and most prosperous of the Mono County mining districts. Gold was discovered in the area during the summer of 1859 by Monoville miners W.S. Bodey and E.S. "Black" Taylor. In March of 1860 Bodey and Taylor were caught in a blinding snowstorm as they were returning from Monoville to their cabin. Bodey was unable to make it and froze to death. By 1879-1880 the nearby gold camp became Bodie and peaked with a population of about 10,000. Bodie sat at an elevation of 8,369 feet and was virtually treeless, so lumber was provided by outside sawmills. Mining activity usually ceased during the harsh winters.



Bodie in 1880.

To prepare for fire, a volunteer bucket company was formed in 1877 and a town well was dug, but it was obvious by 1878 that this was not sufficient to protect the growing population and to provide them drinking water. In 1878 prominent citizens formed the Bodie Water Company and a 250,000-gallon capacity reservoir was built. Pipe was laid three feet below the surface and water was supplied to the eight large hydrants by a series of pumps and two carts, topped off by 1000 feet of hose.

The first big Bodie fire was on King Street in Chinatown in February 1878.

It destroyed Sam Chung's restaurant, bakery and lodging house. Several of the adjacent buildings were torn down by firefighters to prevent the blaze from spreading to the rest of the town.

In the Fall of 1878, a 120-gallon water cylinder fire extinguisher on a carriage was ordered from San Francisco complete with a 200-foot hose. A new engine house with a fire bell was built by the newly formed Babcock Engine Company. In 1879 the Hook and Ladder Company was formed. By February of 1880 Bodie had four fire companies staffed with volunteers, but due to jurisdictional conflicts, a single Bodie Fire Department was organized in May of 1880. The town was divided into districts and alarm whistles were installed.

Between 1879 & 1880 fires of suspicious origin were set in different parts of town but were usually discovered in time and extinguished. The 601 Vigilante Committee was organized when rough elements threatened to burn down the town if peace officers harassed them. Hard justice and hangings took care of the problem.

The new fire apparatus acquired in 1878 served the town for a while but as early as 1880 management of the water system was being neglected. Reservoir water was being drained dry by the Standard-Bulwer Mill and as a result, much of the town's drinking water had to be supplied by the owners of private springs. Pipe was laid from Rough Creek on Potato Peak to supply additional water to the town but there was one major problem that doomed the project. Much of the pipe used was made of wood.

In July of 1884 a drunk fell through the window of Stewart & Brother's Drug Store and overturned a burning coal oil lamp. Water was slow in reaching the hydrants, giving the fire time to spread to the Champion Hotel and other buildings. Until water filled the hoses it was feared that the entire west side of Main Street was a lost cause. During the mining decline of the 1880s individual businesses and cabins were destroyed by fire. In 1888 the Bodie House Hotel burned to the ground.

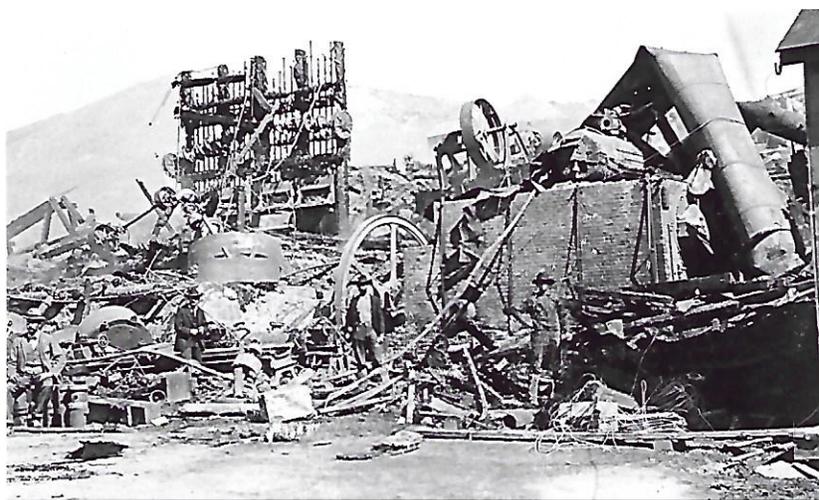
In July of 1892 a fire started at two in the morning in Mrs. Perry's Restaurant on the west side of Main Street which spread to adjoining buildings. Hoses were attached to hydrants but there was no water because a valve at the Standard Mill had been turned off. By the time water finally arrived most of Main Street had burned.

The fire consumed stores, restaurants and lodging houses on both sides of Main Street but did not spread to the residential section. At the south end of town, the flames were stopped at the block where the Miners' Union Hall is located. To the north the flames were held back at the Bodie Bank. Merchants later moved old buildings from back lots to Main Street to set up shop again.

On October 5, 1898 the Standard Stamp Mill burned down. Construction of a replacement mill began within a month and by April 1899 a new and improved mill was in operation.

In November 1920 a kitchen fire started in a house up the hill near the Catholic Church. It spread to another house and burned both homes. Heavy snow prevented firefighters from reaching the buildings in time, but they were able to save the church.

On June 23, 1932, a fire more devastating than that of 1892 was started by a young boy playing with matches in a building behind the Old Sawdust Corner Saloon. It spread rapidly until both sides of the street were burning. Hoses were attached to hydrants but due to poor maintenance the nozzles were clogged with rocks and dirt, rendering them useless.



The aftermath of the Standard Mill fire.

The fire continued north, sparing the Miners' Union Hall block on the south end. It took out everything in its path including the Bodie Bank, leaving only the vault standing. Once the fire was under control, a few buildings were moved from the back streets to resume business but the 1932 fire was the beginning of the end for Bodie.



Main Street Bodie on fire.

In 1935 Jack Rosecrans and Henry Klipstein leased property from the J.S. Cain Company on which they built the Roseklip Company Mill to work low-grade ores. It did well until World War II restrictions forced operations to shut down. The mill started up again in 1946, but soon after opening it suddenly burned to the ground, causing the Roseklip Mill to close for good.

Sierra Mines secured a lease from the J.S. Cain Company in 1946 to work the mines, but as they reconditioned the Standard Mill to resume operations, it was damaged by fire. In 1954 the Standard cyanide plant burned down and ended further mining in Bodie.

The mining districts at Monoville, Masonic and the Patterson District in the Sweetwater Mountains were spared from major fires. The town of Bridgeport was also able to escape devastating fires, but it did experience some problems over the years.



Bridgeport, looking west in the 1880s. On the right is the Allen House Hotel. To the left of that is the Bump Market and the Sierra Cash Grocery, Partially hiding the courthouse is the Loose Parlor Saloon. On the far left is the Hays Brothers Store.

Bridgeport survived a potential disaster in 1891 when Chinese businessman Al Quong Tai was charged with the murder of a Walker Lake Paiute Indian. Tensions were high when 75 armed Natives arrived and threatened to burn the town if Tai was not turned over to them. After Tai was released due to insufficient evidence he was taken into custody by the Indians, who carried out their own justice.

In 1881 the two-story Loose Parlor Saloon was moved from the east side of town near the East Walker Bridge to the corner of Main and Sinclair Streets, where Rhino's Bar & Grill is located now. Benjamin Simmons, one of the original bartenders, bought the business and renamed it the Simmons Saloon. It was a good business until it burned down in 1908, cause unknown.

The Allen House Hotel on the north side of Main Street was built in 1877 by the contractors of the Leavitt House (now the Bridgeport Inn). The Allen House was sold in the late 1890s and became the Rickey House. Beginning in 1897 it was the Brandon House. It burned down between 1918 & 1920, but the fire did not spread. The fire was suspected to have been deliberately set.

Fire prevention for the Mono County Courthouse was an important consideration from the beginning. After construction was finished in 1881, a 3000-gallon water tank was installed on the roof, feeding the innovative built-in faucets and hydrants. The Board of Supervisors made a point of maintaining firefighting equipment inside the courthouse, a practice that continues to this day.

In 1960 County Clerk George Delury Jr was working alone in his office when an oil-burning stove exploded. Delury was able to extinguish the blaze and save the structure. In the early 2000s a fire was discovered in the courthouse late one afternoon. The Bridgeport Volunteer Fire Department just happened to be meeting across the street at the time and was able to respond in time to put it out.

The Sierra Cash Grocery, the two-story Bryant store, was built between 1866-1868 and served the community for almost a hundred years. An electrical fire on Thanksgiving in 1962 destroyed the building. The blaze was contained but the store was a total loss. The family replaced it with the Jolly Kone.

One Bridgeport fire had a happy ending. The old Country Kitchen restaurant at the corner of Hays and Main Streets was a popular greasy spoon that was closed in 1986 to make way for a new facility, the Hays Street Café. The old building was control-burned by the Volunteer Fire Department for training purposes without incident. The Hays Street Café served breakfast and lunch for many years. It is now occupied by the Chiles y Milagros Mexican Restaurant.



The Country Kitchen, making way for progress in early 1986.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION & PHOTOS

Mono County Museum files - Bridgeport Chronicle Union newspapers

Mono Diggings, Frank Wedertz - Bodie 1859-1900, Frank Wedertz - Historic Bridgeport, Sara Wedertz Jenkins .
The Story of Early Mono County, Ella M. Cain - Aurora Nevada 1860-1960, Clifford Alpheus Shaw
Aurora, Nevada's Ghost City of the Dawn, Robert Stewart - Lundy, Alan Patera - The Story of Bodie, Ella M. Cain
Bodie 1859-1962, Terri Lynn Geissing - Big Bad Bodie, James Watson/Doug Brodie

PASSINGS

HUGH W. SMYTH
1928 - 2025

Smitty was born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut in 1928, son of a craftsman and shipbuilder. Smitty grew up in Massachusetts and Connecticut and was a Golden Gloves boxer. After his graduation from high school Smitty joined the Marines just before the end of World War II. In 1948 he was the All-Navy Middleweight Eastern Division Boxing Champion and competed in a national competition in San Diego.

Smitty trained as a certified diesel mechanic and worked at his father's shipyard, and then spent a few years with the Cummins Corporation in south Florida. In 1952 he crossed the country on his motorcycle and worked for North American Aviation in El Segundo. He also trained as a plumber and with a partner, opened a string of laundromats. Smitty loved to hike, hunt and fish, which brought him to Bridgeport, where he launched a construction and plumbing business. He built homes and became the local plumber who knew the location of every pipe in and under every building in Bridgeport.

Smitty was a confirmed bachelor until he met schoolteacher Donna Cederburg. When she slipped on some ice, Smitty helped her up and that was it. They tied the knot in 1970 and were happily married for 54 years. Smitty was in his early 40s when he boxed his last bout, but he worked out regularly with a heavy bag and speed bag in his garage until he turned 80.

When Smitty slowed down (he refused to say he retired), he turned his energy to his massive garden. Though they had no children of their own, Smitty and Donna loved kids and supported school programs and sports. Smitty was a unique man with a strong work ethic, fairness and community spirit. He was 96.

EDITH IRENE CRAWFORD
1938 - 2025

Edith was a Native Paiute Indian, a lifelong resident of Bridgeport. Born to Irene James and Albert Thomas, she lived a life grounded in family, tradition and quiet strength. She was a direct descendant of Captain Jim (Wunadzo), a respected Paiute leader and one of the last traditional Paiute Captains. She was also the great-granddaughter of noted Paiute Basketmaker Sarah Dick Gracian.

Edith was a proud member of the Bridgeport Indian Colony and a beloved mother, grandmother, great grandmother, sister and friend. She had a deep love for the outdoors and felt most at peace surrounded by the mountains, rivers and wide-open skies of her homeland. Her connection to the land was a constant source of joy and reflection in her life.

Edith was preceded in death by her husband, Maurice Crawford and is survived by her children David Rambeau, Kenneth Champion, Thomas Crawford, Debra Ybarra, John Crawford and Sarrie Neri. She will be deeply missed and forever remembered by her family and community. She was 87.

MONO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Mono County Historical Society and the Mono County Museum are funded by admissions, donations, memberships and sales. The Mono County Tourism & Film Commission has been supporting MCHS for eleven years by reimbursing calendar production. In 2025 they also reimbursed the production of Bridgeport Walking Tour pamphlets and Newsletter books. The Museum Curator and the MCHS Board of Trustees are volunteers. The Museum Docent is the only paid employee.

In 2026 the museum will be open May 22-September 30, Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-4pm. Admissions: Adults/\$3.00, Seniors 55+/\$2.00, Children 6-17/\$1.00. Children under six are free. The Museum Docent is Pam Haas-Duhart. Museum telephone: 760-932-5281. MCHS website: www.monocomuseum.org

The MCHS Board of Trustees consists of President/Curator Kent Stoddard, Vice President Pam Haas-Duhart, Treasurer Janelle Mills, Secretary Sharon Stoddard, and Nonofficer Voting Trustees Lynda Bryant Pemberton, Mary Lent and Jeff Simensen.

Patron and Life Memberships are valid for life. All other memberships are renewable each year effective January 1. MCHS is a registered nonprofit organization per Section 501c3 of the Internal Revenue Code and a public charity per Section 509a2, Federal Tax ID number 77-0191728. Memberships and donations are tax deductible.

MEMBERSHIPS AND DONATIONS

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