

# American Heritage

## Photographing Montana's Ghost Towns

**M**ontana's rich mining history dates back well over 100 years. In the year 1852, gold was first discovered southeast of Drummond, along Gold Creek, at a site that later became known as the Pioneer Mining District. But it wasn't until a decade later, in 1862, that a group of prospectors from Colorado discovered gold along Grasshopper Creek, at what was to become the Bannack Town Site, which fueled the Montana gold rush.

Millions of dollars in gold and other precious minerals were extracted in those early years, but as strikes played out and miners moved on to seek their riches elsewhere, whole communities were literally abandoned. Unfortunately, many of these sites, and their buildings, have been destroyed—either having succumbed to the ravages of time because of shoddy construction methods used to hastily erect buildings, due to subsequent mining or road building operations, or having been dismantled for firewood by loggers-on who continued to persevere (it does get mighty cold in them there mountains in the winter).

Fortunately for the photographer there are some ghost towns where buildings and even furnishings have been preserved for posterity. Bannack Town Site, Virginia City, Nevada City, and Garnet are among the most notable where outstanding photographic opportunities await.

### Bannack

In July of 1862, gold was discovered in the creek waters where Bannack stands. The strike marked the beginning for Bannack and provided the impetus



Photos © Rick Sheremeta

for Montana's statehood. News of the strike, at Grasshopper Creek, traveled fast and led to the greatest rush to the West since the California Gold Rush in 1848. Bannack quickly became known as the New Eldorado of the North and in two short years the camp became home to more than 10,000 residents—all manner of transient men came to claim their riches, including Civil War deserters, river pirates, professional gamblers, outlaws, and villains. Lawlessness became rampant—Bannack truly became the Old Wild West of western movie lore.

Bannack was abandoned in the 1940s and sat idle for many years. It is now being preserved as a Montana State Park and is slowly being restored with more



than 60 buildings still standing. The town site is open year-round with most all of its buildings to the public—there are however no interior furnishings except for the schoolhouse and Mason's Lodge.

Photographic opportunities abound everywhere—from the buildings, to wagons and mining implements, and even the old gallows. While the park is open all year, and can present a variety of seasonal photo opportunities, I find that late spring is a great time to visit. At that time of year days are long, and you can shoot unhindered by summer crowds.

Bannack State Park is located in southwestern Montana, approximately 24 miles southwest of Dillon. For



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more information and directions, visit [www.bannack.org](http://www.bannack.org).

### Virginia City

Perched along Alder Gulch, Virginia City got its start when gold was discovered in May of 1863. This was during a time that the nation was embroiled in the midst of the Civil

War and tensions between Union and Southern sympathizers quickly caused Virginia City to become one of the most lawless places of the American West.

In 1864 Congress created the new territory of Montana, separating it from the Idaho Territory. Bannack became its first capital; however, within a year, Virginia City had gained so much

influence as the territory's social center and transportation hub that the capital was moved there.

In its first three years alone Virginia City and nearby Nevada City were to become the sites of the richest placer gold strikes in the Rocky Mountains, yielding an estimated \$30 million worth of the precious metal. The boom in

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Virginia City was short lived. When gold was later discovered at Last Chance Gulch, in what is today's Helena, miners abandoned their claims and moved on. Though gold continued to be found in the area, by the early 1870s Virginia City's population had been reduced from some 10,000 to only a few hundred. By 1875, the territorial capital was moved to Helena, and Virginia City was on her way to becoming a ghost town.

More than 100 historic buildings

have been preserved in Virginia City, and today it is still an active community boasting a year-round population of some 150 residents that roughly doubles in the summer months. Today, the state owns about one-half of the historic structures in Virginia City and all of nearby Nevada City. The properties are managed by the Montana Heritage Commission. Many of the public historic buildings are complete with period furnishings, equipment, or dry goods

and provide plentiful photographic prospects, especially for close-up and detailed work. Other photo opportunities include street reenactments during the summer months.

Located along State Highway 287 between Ennis and Sheridan, Virginia City is open year-round. For further information, visit [www.virginiacitymt.com](http://www.virginiacitymt.com).

### Nevada City

The old mining camp of Nevada City also got its start when gold was discovered in Alder Gulch in 1863. Like many other gold mining boomtowns, Nevada City's population quickly peaked. But in only a few short years, the population of the mining camp had fallen to about 100 people, and by 1876, Nevada City had all but become a ghost town as miners moved on to new finds. Although small mining operations continued to work the original claims for several years thereafter, no large operations occurred again until 1899, when the Conrey Placer Mining Company started dredging the Gulch. By the time the dredges ceased operation in 1923, some 10 million additional dollars in gold had been recovered, but in their path most of Nevada City's buildings were destroyed. Further building destruction occurred when the highway was built through the area.

In the 1950s, Charles and Sue Bovey collected and displayed old Montana buildings at the Great Falls Fairgrounds in an exhibit called "Old Town." But in 1959, the Boveys were asked to remove the "Old Town" exhibit. The buildings were then dismantled and relocated to Nevada City. Here they were placed on sites where previous buildings once stood in an attempt to retain the town's original layout. Today, the town stands as an outdoor historical museum providing more than 100 historic buildings from various places around Montana, original Nevada City structures, and recreated buildings. Buildings are complete with furnishings and fixtures from those earlier times. There is also a reconstructed railway depot and engine house featuring a 1910 Baldwin steam locomotive that makes daily trips to and from Virginia City.

This is undoubtedly my favorite



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## Photo Tips For Ghost Towns

The best times to shoot, as with most outdoor photography, are early morning and early evening because of the quality of available light.

The shoulder seasons, of late spring and early fall, can be better to visit if you want to have the place all to yourself. This allows one to move about freely to compose images from different vantage points without having to deal with a lot of other people moving in and out of your frame of view. Winter can also provide some unique opportunities—snow and ice will embody and exaggerate a sense of starkness in your images; however, make sure you're well prepared before venturing out as travel restrictions may prove to be a grave detriment in some of these relatively isolated areas.

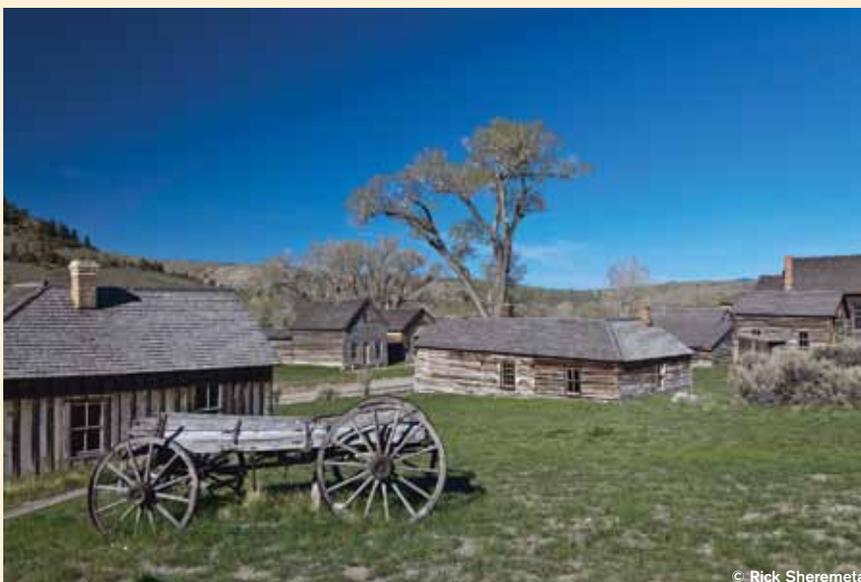
For outdoor shots I always use a circular polarizer to keep down natural glare, darken skies, and add drama to cloud formations. If the sky is overly bright, I'll also use a neutral density filter (Singh-Ray Galen Rowell 2 and 3 stop graduated) to bring the sky's tonality in-line with that of a darker foreground.

I use a sturdy tripod, especially when I'm doing detailed or close-up work, and it is an absolute must when shooting in low light or indoors.

On windy days I experiment with varied shutter speeds to either freeze motion with a fast shutter speed or to emphasize a blurred effect using a slow shutter speed. Where dust, weeds, curtains, etc. are blowing around the blurred motion resulting from a slow shutter speed can add some neat "ghostly" effects to an image emphasizing that feeling of desolation.

Availability of adequate natural light can pose a challenge inside some of these old buildings—there are generally few or small windows, and as a result lighting can be very uneven, with harsh bright areas and deep dark shadows. Under conditions like these, I'll either take multiple exposures, one for highlights and another for shadows, and then merge them in Photoshop, or I'll expose for the highlights and use fill flash to bring out detail in shadow areas.

Respect the property that you're on, being especially mindful not to trespass on private land without permission. Leave things as you found them, along with a good impression on the local folks so that future photographers to come will be as equally welcome.



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“ghost town” to photograph. Every building is complete with period furnishings and memorabilia, plus other historical artifacts for yet more creative photo possibilities.

Nevada City is owned by the State of Montana, and is operated by the Montana Heritage Commission. It is open year-round and is located along State Highway 287 between Ennis and Sheridan, just 1.5 miles west of Virginia City. A nominal admission fee is charged to enter the grounds. Although

personal photography is permitted, there are certain restrictions relating to photography for professional purposes. For further information, visit [www.montanaheritagecommission.mt.gov](http://www.montanaheritagecommission.mt.gov).

### Garnet

Established in 1895, most of the gold in Garnet ran out within 20 years and most of the mines were abandoned. By the onset of World War II, Garnet was essentially all but abandoned by its remaining residents to become a ghost

town. Many of Garnet’s commercial establishments were destroyed in a 1912 fire that raged through the town and were never rebuilt. At present, some 30 buildings remain, including several miners’ cabins in various states of decay. The general store, saloon, and the remains of the J.K. Wells Hotel have been preserved and are complete with furnishings.

Garnet is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Garnet Preservation Association. It is open year-round, although the road is closed to wheeled vehicles and accessible only by snowmobile or cross-country skis from January 1st through April 30th. Cabins are available for rent and there is a Visitor Center located on site.

Photographic opportunities include not only the buildings, but also interior furnishings and vintage mining equipment.

Garnet is located some 35 miles northeast of Missoula. For more information and directions, visit [www.garnetghosttown.net](http://www.garnetghosttown.net). ■

*Rick Sheremeta is a freelance photographer who resides in Montana. To see more of his work or learn about his workshops, visit [www.alpenglowproductions.com](http://www.alpenglowproductions.com).*



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