

Sutro's Still Survives ...from tunnel to tenacious tenant

by E. Gorton Covington

About one hundred years ago a man with a dream emerged from the twisting depth of Six Mile Canyon, stood with his back to the Carson River and looked back at a barren hillside that lay between him and Virginia City. His name was Adolph Sutro and he had a dream of conquest - conquest of an engineering problem that baffled experts.

The problem was how to drain the boiling waters from the shafts and tunnels, - hundreds of miles of borings in the mineral-laden veins known throughout the world as the Comstock Lode. In his mind Sutro had carried the answer, but to get others to see it and to invest money in it - was another matter. A visionary, a dreamer, they called him. But Sutro persisted.

Finally in 1869 sufficient capital was forthcoming to start, and the tunnel was begun. Nine years later it was finished and from it emerged water,

waste rock, and ore, from many mines that interlaced the Comstock Lode. But in not too many years, the water began to flood into the working BELOW the level of the Sutro tunnel and the ore above petered out and the five million dollars the tunnel cost and the millions that came from the Comstock became a common denominator - a LOST CAUSE. The bubble burst, the hevday was over.

For years the tunnel lay neglected, caved in and abandoned; the stamp mill lay neglected and its machinery rusted and its building weathered. The rains and snows fill on less and less of man's work and the town of Sutro, which spread out on the sage-covered flats below the tunnel mouth, seemed virtually to melt into the rocky earth and disappear. Finally, only the cluster of buildings at the tunnel entrance and the white-fronted tunnel itself with its



THE BEARDED FACE of Robin Larson shows the same rugged determination and tenacity that marked the face of the man who conceived and built the tunnel. Both Larson and Sutro are of the same breed of men - rugged individualists who know a goal and overcome all obstacles to gain it.

deteriorating facade - remained as mute testimony that Adolph Sutro had ever lived. Vandals stripped the town of all that remained; and made great incursions into the tunnel complex itself until finally the citizens stirred at the desecration of what was an historic site, well worth preserving, made a gesture toward turning the tunnel entrance and surrounding buildings into a state park or historic monument. This was around 1962.

A staunch supporter of the move to make the tunnel site a state park was Robin Larson of Berkeley, Calif., a writer-artist-photographer, who has a deep-seated concern for the preservation of anything with historical value and particularly such things as belong to the heritage of a people. He has also an abiding love for Nevada, for the outdoors, for nature in all her moods - and for the Sutro Tunnel site.

Such was his faith that eventually restoration of the site would come that he moved into one of the houses near the tunnel mouth and began cleaning up the area. He had then no electricity or heat, but this proved no deterrent to Robin Larson. He had the persistency of another Adolph Sutro - and still has.

For Robin Larson is still there. Caretaker for the site, he is still cleaning it up a little at a time. He first re-roofed the storehouse and stocked its cubbyholes and shelves with a collection of historic relics and memo-

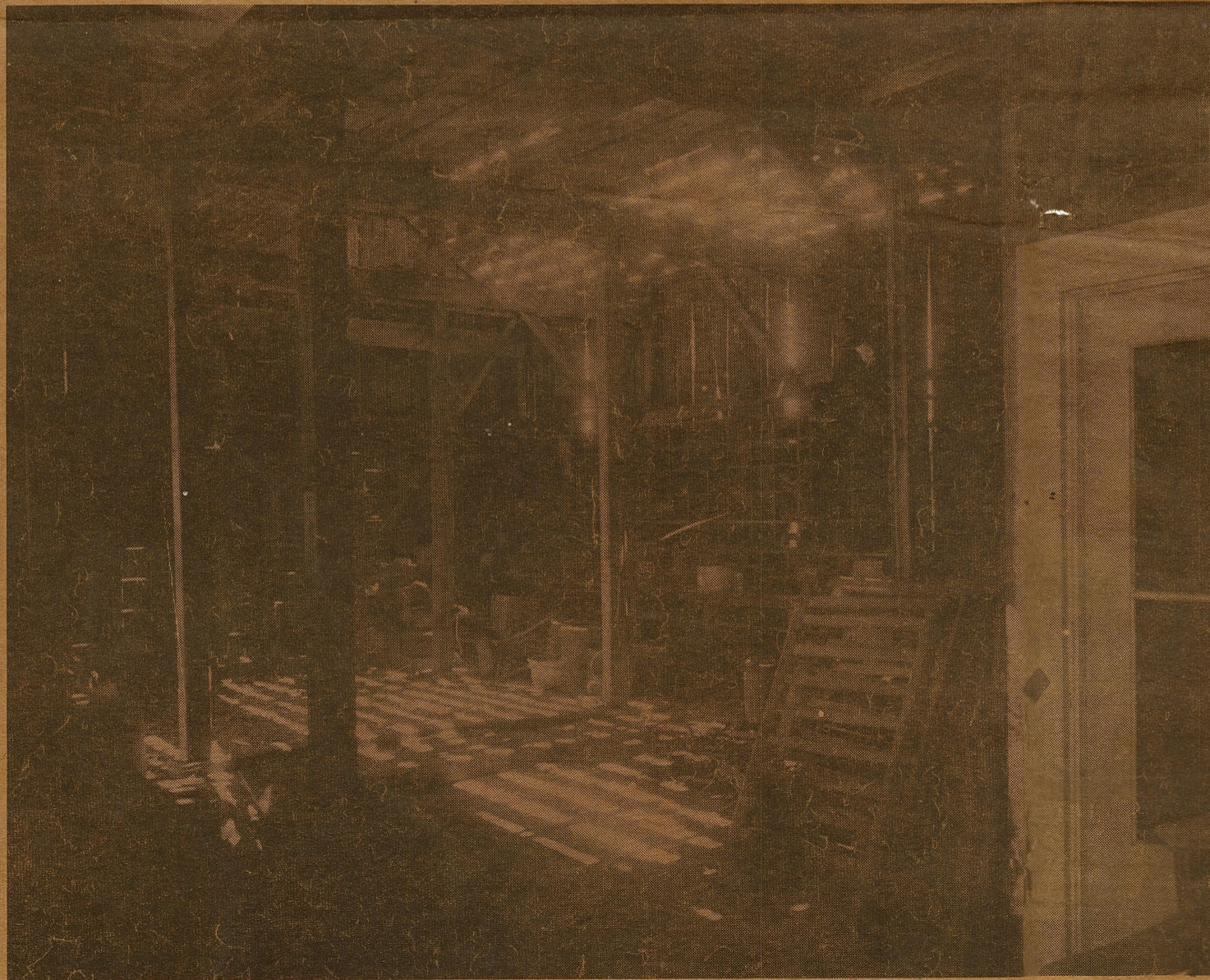
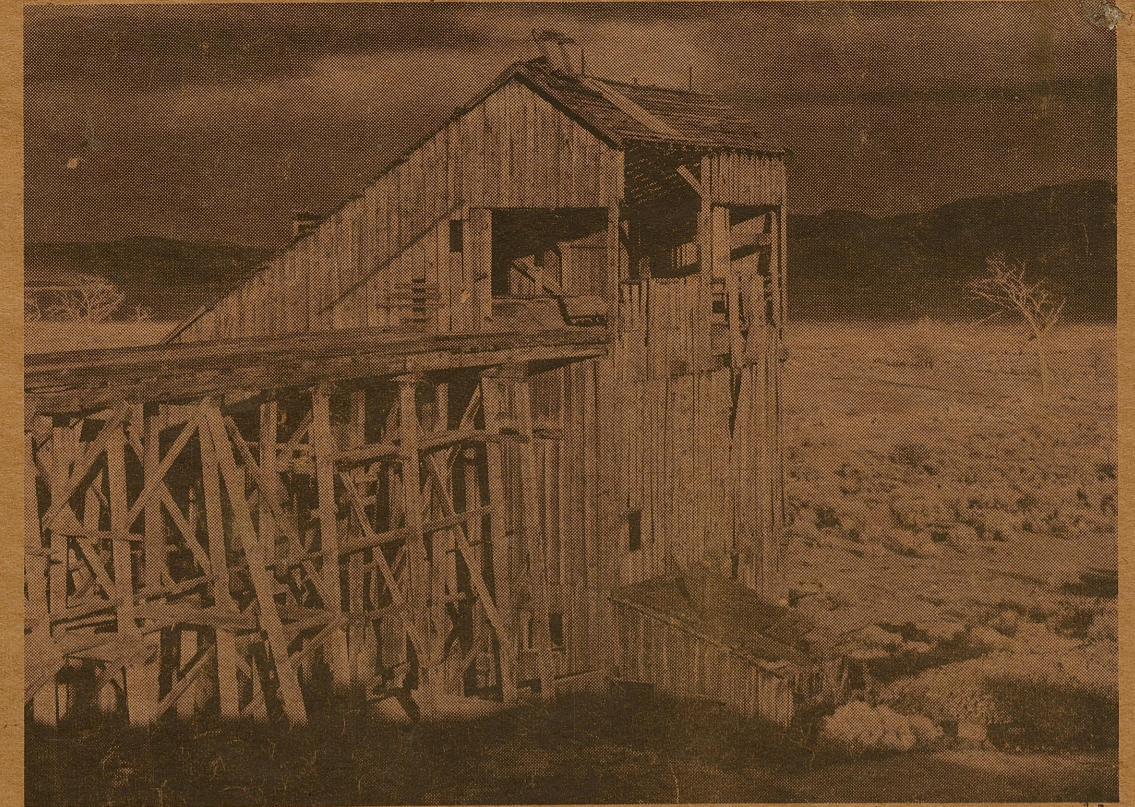
rabilla of the Sutro site and other spots in Nevada.

To this collection he eventually added an ice chest and refrigerator and a small stock of potables and added a sign outside the door which said "Saloon" - and became a business man to add a source of income since the state paid him no salary. His cleaning up of the bottles, cans and general litter which blanketed the area has been a slow and non-paying process through the years. The small income from his rustic bar helps pay his way and today, the site begins to look less abandoned and neglected.

It's off the main line of traffic but there is a sign just north of Dayton and a dirt road leading to the tunnel area and over it a few people drift in each day - tourists and local residents alike. And those who can, return often because Robin Larson has the type of personality to attract people back - and it is not the site alone which draws visitors.

Larson works at the clean-up and preservation of the site, does some writing, sketching, and some photography - and waits. He has crawled far back into the caved-in tunnel which is pretty eerie - and dangerous - for a man alone - and waits. He adds to his collection of relics from time to time - and waits.

Some day, he says, Sutro Tunnel will become a state park, an historic shrine, to commemorate the tenacity of the man who built it. And when that day comes, another man of tenacious spirit will probably be in a large sense responsible - a man named Robin Larson.



LIGHTS AND SHADOWS reveal what the inside of the Sutro storehouse was like when Robin Larson first walked in. Sunlight laid a chiaroscuro across the rough plank floor and dappled the pigeonholes on one

wall where nuts and bolts and other hardware once reposed awaiting use as the seven-mile-long tunnel was being bored beneath the Comstock.



TOP - The Sutro stamp mill which reduced the ore coming from the tunnel during construction years. Larson took this photo and the one below it with infra-red film. He claims that the stamp mill could be restored - if ever again ore came from the Comstock. CENTER - A rustic entrance - sun-and-wind-worn planks, wearing the patina of age and exposure, mark the entrance to the "saloon". BELOW - Still rough and ready - the storehouse, now roofed, is a combination museum of the Sutro epic and Nevada's pioneer mining days, and a bar where Larson can whip up a potable for a thirsty visitor. Conversation pieces abound and each has a history - if you're curious Robin Larson can give you information along with refreshment.