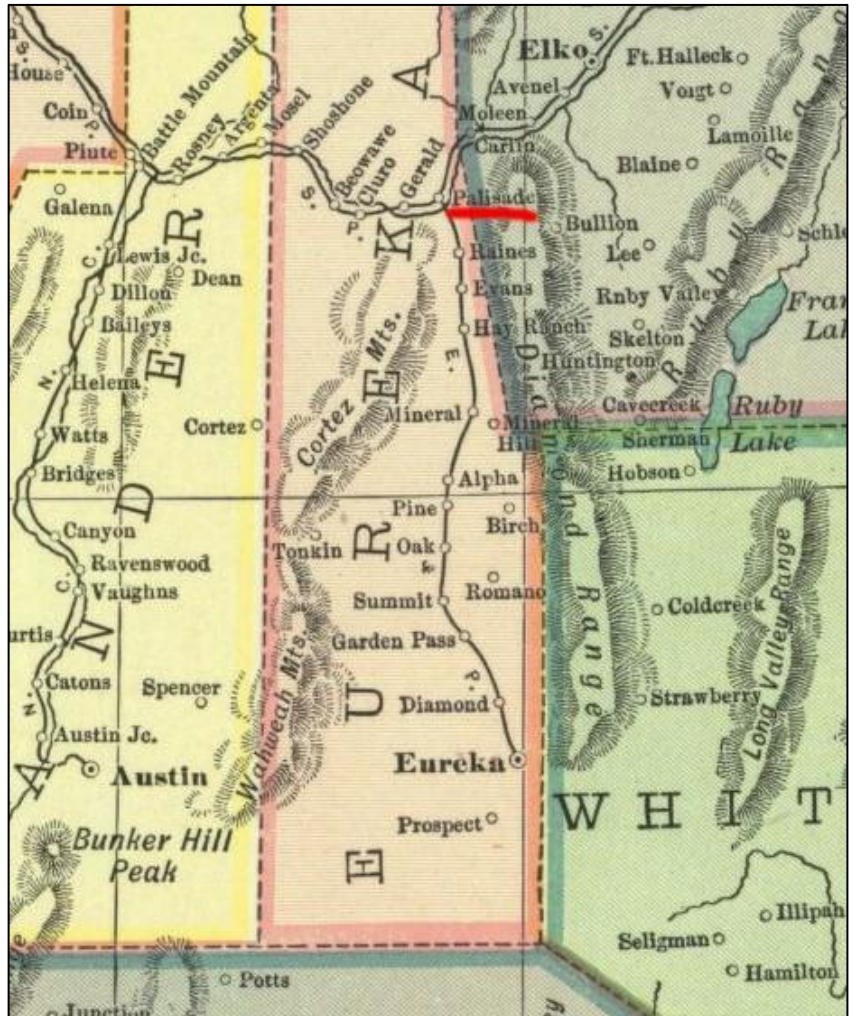


Palisade, Nevada – A Town with a Sense of Humor

By Patrick Crosby

Maybe it was something a train passenger said while stopped briefly in Palisade, and perhaps this nascent idea took shape in one of its many saloons. Easterners coming west on the (first) Transcontinental Railway in the early 1870's were looking for adventure in the Wild West but had seen mostly monotonous landscapes. As the train paused in Palisade for wood and water the passengers would step out to stretch when a fight would break out between two groups of thugs, shots fired and blood spilled. Horrified passengers scrambled back onto the train and sometimes as it pulled away a band of Shoshone Indians would stage an attack on the town. When the train was out of sight the dead and wounded arose, cleaned up the area, and went on about their daily lives – the bullets were blanks, the blood was from a local slaughterhouse, the Native Americans were friendly. These dramas went on for about three years and 1,000 performances with varied twists. Welcome to the Wild West!



1906 map with railroads

Palisade is located about 10 miles south of Carlin, NV. Although Interstate 80 goes through Carlin, it does not drop down to Palisade, leaving the town isolated on a short gravel road off the north/south Highway 278. The Humboldt River runs through town after it courses through the narrow Twelve Mile Canyon, with walls sometimes 1,000' high. This is called the Palisades of the Humboldt.

Although there were sceptics that a town would even be practical in this small, narrow location, Palisade became very important not because of its silver, but because the east/west railroad used standard gauge tracks.



The Central Pacific Railroad established a station at Palisade in 1868 during construction of the Transcontinental Railway. There were rich deposits of silver ore to the south, especially from the towns of

Mineral Hill, Eureka, and Hamilton. Remember, there was no Loneliest Road in America (Hwy. 50) running through Eureka. Around 1874 The Eureka & Palisade Railroad (later names: Eureka & Palisade Railway and Eureka Nevada Railway – all E&P) was built to bring bullion and ore from the southern mines to the main east/west line at Palisade.

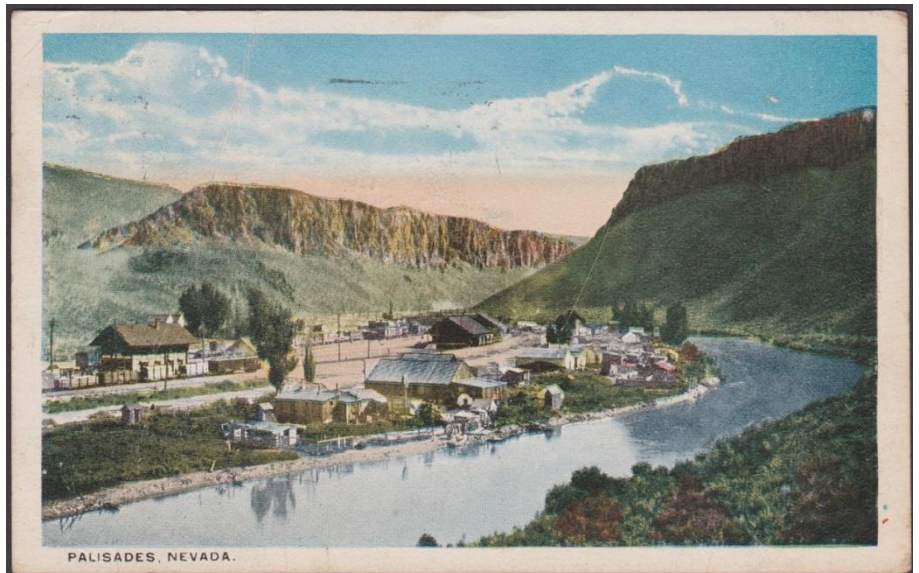
Before this time all the transporting was done by wagon and stage lines on an iffy road. But this 90-mile railroad had narrow gauge tracks which were 3' wide. All the bullion, ore, machinery, lumber, shingles, groceries, household niceties and other supplies had to be unloaded and then reloaded between the standard (4' 8.5") and narrow-gauge railroads in Palisade. Narrow gauge railroads were cheaper to build, outfit and maintain plus they were more suitable in difficult mountainous areas.

First and foremost, Palisade was a railroad town and had a population of about 300 at its peak.

By 1906 copper deposits were being actively worked in Palisade, "rivaling the great copper mines of Ely." Also, at this time the main east/west tracks were owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad (S.P.) which was in fierce competition with the Western Pacific Railway (W.P.) who was building a set of tracks parallel to the S.P.'s. Through the Twelve Mile Canyon S.P. was on one side of the Humboldt River and W.P. was on the other side. S.P. already had a tunnel built through a hill at Palisade, so W.P. went and built their own tunnel about 100' away.

The silver deposits played out in Palisade and later Eureka. As Palisade was withering away in 1910 a flood wiped out much of the town. The winter of 1909-1910 was one of the wettest on records with flooding occurring throughout the Rocky Mountains region and the Pacific Northwest (Idaho, Washington, Oregon and the British Northwest). All the railroads suffered heavy damage with services suspended. Southern Pacific was up and running in two weeks, but not E&P. There was at first a 30' washout in Alpha, with many more washouts to follow. At Hay Ranch the body of water was three miles wide. Rails along the way had been pushed out of line and level by the torrents.

Then in Palisade the only telegraph line went down and they and the other towns along the E & P were isolated from the rest of the world. As reported in *The Eureka Sentinel* (March 12, 1910) the flood raised Palisade homes and businesses off their foundations one by one, sending them down the flooded river, followed by the entire redlight district.



**Former Palisade town site. (Car trip photo in 2021.)
Compare the town site to post card photo above this one.**

As the buildings smashed against a steel railroad bridge over the river “...they crumbled like a card house”. Seven Southern Pacific trains were stuck in Palisade, so “Crap games and roulette enjoyed a boom so long as the colored brethren (Southern Pacific dining car cooks, porters and waiters) were in the town. White men also were not averse to taking a whirl at the games.” The S.P. emergency “wrecking crew” was based in Palisade and went to break up the debris and ice buildups at the bridge and to salvage goods. They saved a keg of claret wine and a half barrel of whiskey which were spirited away. Later, given the choice of returning the goods or spending the night in a box car (an improvised jail), they returned the goods.

In 1911 Southern Pacific built new shop buildings and a roundhouse in Carlin, further lessening the importance of Palisade. The E&P was abandoned in 1938 and the Palisade post office, opened in 1870, closed in 1961. The Post Office Department sometimes used the E&P for mail transport along their route, but other times Star Routes, which used private contractors, were established. The *Daily Bulletin of the Post Office Department* of April 27, 1885, includes Star Service established for the Paradise to Eureka route, “Contractor not to be allowed more than 14 hours running time each way [that’s 90 miles each way], and not to be allowed to carry mail on the railway.”

The picture postcard (on the right) dated September 22, 1905, has a Palisade, NV, handstamp which is a type 2 Doane cancel with a “5” in its killer bars. The card is noted as received in Chicago, IL, on September 25th with an International machine circle date stamp. Later that morning an American machine Chicago, IL, Hyde Park Station Received cancel was applied. The view side (not shown) has a scene on the S.P.’s line at their Big Tree Station near Santa Cruz, CA.

The postal card (Sc. UX18, UPSS S22) on the right, is a Wells Fargo and Co. Express correspondence from October 18, 1907, canceled using the same Palisade Doane canceller.



On the back of the card Wells Fargo dates the item on October 16th with a purple handstamp at Eureka, NV. They state that a catalog sent by Montgomery Ward on September 11th has not been delivered since they can't find the addressee in Hamilton, NV, who has made "No Response to Postal." They want to know what to do with the catalog. Although Eureka had a post office, the card was carried to Palisade before being posted.

During the spring of 2021, Covid was temporarily waning, so my wife and I made a trip to Elko, NV, mainly to visit Palisade 32 miles away. In Elko I noticed multiple tour buses constantly coming and going. So I asked a waitress if all the buses were for gamblers. "Oh, you're not from here," she said, "These buses take workers out to distant gold mines where they stay a week or two before being brought back to Elko." So mining is still very much alive.

Palisade has its cemetery on a hill overlooking the town site. A few dilapidated coal and ore bunkers along with miners' shacks are built into a hillside. Someone appears to be still living in an old house on a large, well-situated site.

When arriving at Palisade I immediately decided we needed to inspect along a narrow dirt road leading to the railroad tunnels. But there were sections of deep mud that my car swayed through, then we encountered raised railroad tracks. "Do I stop in the mud and hopefully proceed? Or do I dart over the raised tracks and try to find a dry spot to turn around." I darted, and now I understand why roads should not cross railroad tracks near a tunnel exit. Later a train came cruising through the other tunnel. I read that the dirt road continues alongside one pair of tracks through the Palisades of the Twelve Mile Canyon – maybe next time.

References:

- Richard Moreno Roadside History of Nevada (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Co. 2006).
- Robert Greenwood Nevada Post Card Album (Reno, NV: Fred Holabird Americana 1998) [I used his comments, not his great postcard views]
- Rand McNally and Co. Pictorial Atlas of the World (New York: C.S. Hammond and Co. 1906) [found at Historical Map Archive, albamamaps.ua.edu].
- Ray Dunakin, Ghost Towns, Mines, and More!, raydunakin.com.
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- postalhistory.com, U.S. Post Offices.

Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal stationery, stamps, and postcards with an emphasis on postal history.

