

GHOST TOWN LIVING: PRESENTING THE PAST ON YOUTUBE

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Cerro Gordo is a privately-owned historic mining town in California, and the YouTube channel *Ghost Town Living*, with over 1.6 million followers, documents the current owner's goal of preserving and restoring the town for visitation. This thesis explores how Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living* can be understood together through the lenses of museology, digital anthropology, and archaeology. Based on a site visit, analysis of digital media, and interviews with staff and people connected to the site, I explore the intersection between heritage sites and social media, and more widely, changing perceptions of American heritage, including who has the right to shape those perceptions and who may lay claim to them.

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In loving memory of Janet Smith.  
To my family, for their unwavering support.

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I am grateful to all of the people who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Thank you for your time and extensive knowledge about Cerro Gordo and sharing your passion for the town with me. Figure 5 was provided by the Friends of Cerro Gordo and Figure 2 is credited to Google Maps. Thomas Gilmore took the photo of me shown in Figure 34. The remainder of images were photographed by me.

Thank you to the friends and colleagues - too numerous to name for fear of missing someone - who brainstormed with me, read my messy drafts, and saved me when I felt stuck. Most of all thank you for your commiseration, words of encouragement, and for always making me laugh, even when it felt like everything was falling apart.

Finally, I wish to highlight the endless love and support of family. I lack the words to express how grateful I am for everything you have given me that has allowed me to reach this point. A special shout-out to Tommy for accompanying me on my site visit, and for your excellent driving.

## FOREWORD

My interest in Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living* is grounded in my background as both an anthropologist and a museologist. I love museums but I am also well aware that they are ethically-fraught institutions for many reasons. This mindset similarly reflects my approach toward *Ghost Town Living* and Cerro Gordo. I do not mean to demonize either the channel or the caretakers of the town, but rather approach it with the same critical lens through which I view museums. Museums fulfill important missions of education and accessibility despite their problems, and I want to explore the potential *Ghost Town Living* has for similar impact, in addition to raising necessary ethical and professional concerns. From watching the channel, it appears that owner Brent Underwood is genuine in his love and concern for the preservation of Cerro Gordo. While good intentions do not absolve responsible stewardship of the past or erase mistakes, he is working with limited resources and seems to be open to learning and improving. This will be explored in Chapter Four. Considering the evolving nature of the town, we can only wait and see what impact the new ownership and *Ghost Town Living* will ultimately have on the town. While it is my hope that some of the concerns outlined here will be addressed, as a whole the town of Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living* represents a thought-provoking case study of the ways social media can influence public perception of history. With the continuous integration of social media into our lives, there are lessons professionals can learn about capturing the spark of public interest Underwood has managed to cultivate for *Ghost Town Living*



*Figure 1: Cerro Gordo. June 10th, 2023.*

## CHAPTER 1 - CLICK

*Click.* The bright white background of the YouTube landing page illuminates the screen. Colorful boxes of carefully curated content vie for attention. Hovering over each square reveals a silent pantomime of smiling faces, playing puppies, a gooey slice of pizza, or whatever else the YouTube algorithm has calculated as worthy of showcasing, enticing you to click again. One of the boxes features an overcast blue image of a scrubby landscape and dilapidated buildings, overset with uppercase white text reading “I bought a ghost town.” Navigating the cursor over the square, the image transitions to clips of snowcapped dirt ground, a wood panel building, and clouds rolling over a landscape. The video is titled “I Spent My Life Savings On An Abandoned Ghost Town [sic].” Small text underneath the title indicates the video was posted 3 years ago, and since posting the video has acquired 8.6 million views.

*Click.* "About four hours into the hike and I'm completely lost," a middle aged man with a trimmed red beard confesses, "my cellphone died. When the sun goes down, I'll have no idea where to go, but, I honestly don't know what to do." The shot is shaky and out of focus as he aims the camera at himself. Falling sleet creates a damp, muffled pattering sound as it pings off the camera and the man's winter apparel. Suddenly the image changes as music reminiscent of a Western begins to play. Panoramic shots of a building, a mountainous landscape, a town, a man in a headlamp, and a fire flash by — the text "Alone In My Ghost Town" squarely centered on the screen. The music stops and the same man from the opening footage walks back into screen, all hints of distress gone, "Good morning. I'm just waking up here at Cerro Gordo. . ."

This sequence starts the first video on the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel. This thesis explores how *Ghost Town Living* can be understood as a multifaceted case study that showcases the intersection between heritage sites and social media, and more widely, perceptions of American heritage, who has the right to shape those perceptions and who may lay claim to them. Questions I will examine include: What is the allure of *Ghost Town Living* and Cerro Gordo; that is, how can we account for its appeal not only for the town's caretakers, but also its visitors and channel viewers? How do social media architectures shape the dissemination of historical and/or archaeological content and conversely, how does the content and presentation of *Ghost Town Living* fit within that framework? What can we, within the fields of anthropology and museology, learn from the success of *Ghost Town Living*?

### *Background*

*Ghost Town Living* is the brainchild of Brent Underwood. He is one of the most recent owners and inhabitants of Cerro Gordo, a historic mining town nestled in the Inyo Mountains of California approximately 200 miles northeast of Los Angeles. During his introduction of Cerro Gordo in *Ghost Town Living's* first video, Underwood describes how

he, along with friend Jon Bier, pooled their funds to purchase the town with assistance from friends and investors.

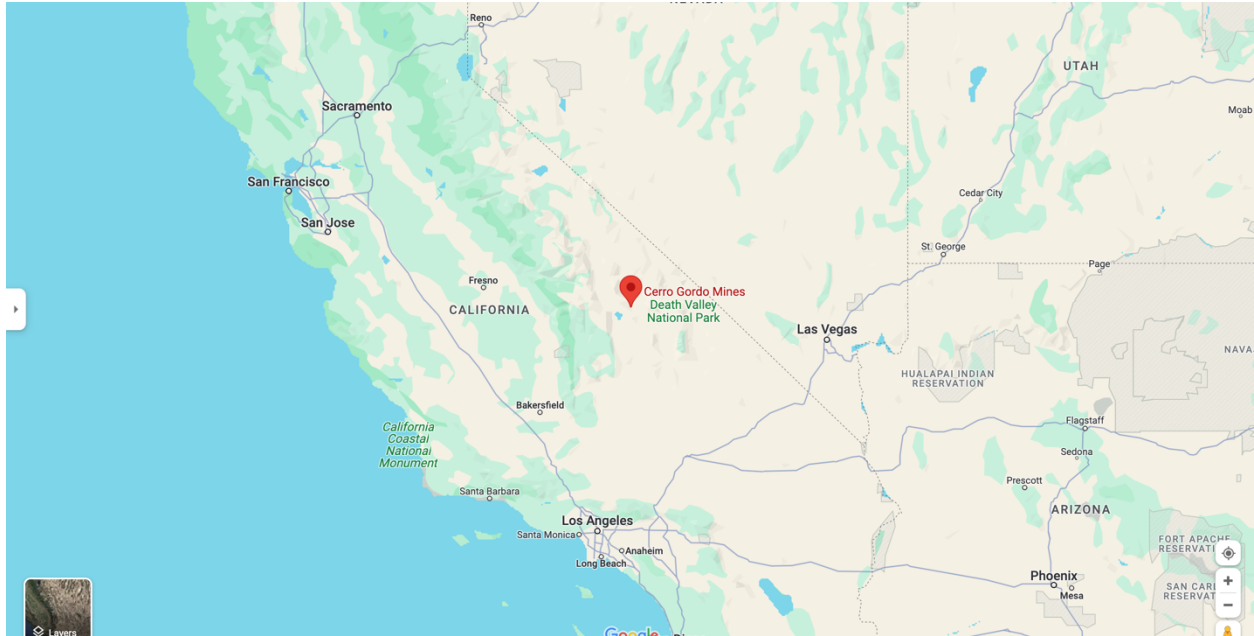


Figure 2: Cerro Gordo Mines, image from Google Maps, 2023.

The unique circumstances surrounding the town created a media buzz, with numerous outlets reporting on the \$1.4 million purchase of Cerro Gordo. According to a New York Times article featuring the sale of the town, the prior owners received many inquiries about the over 300 acres of land. Jake Rasmuson, the real estate agent handling the sale, disclosed that the prior owners had inherited the town from family and while they wished to part with ownership of the land, they hoped to see the legacy of preservation undertaken by the lineage of caretakers on the land continue (Gomez 2018). Underwood and Bier did not have the highest bid but were chosen for their vision and alignment with this sentiment, Rasmuson noting “Mr. Underwood’s plan was beneficial to the preservation and public use of the property” (Vera 2018). After hearing about the

available town from a friend, Underwood flew out to meet the owners and Rasmuson as he had been in the market for “opportunities for a place that could combine his passions of hospitality and history” (Gomez 2018).

As reported by a CNN article from the time, Underwood’s initial plans included renovating buildings to accommodate visitors to stay comfortably onsite at the property.

Underwood described their plans for the site as follows:

‘We’re looking to create a new destination. It isn’t often you’re able to have such a canvas to work with. We have over 300 acres and dozens of buildings,’ Underwood said. ‘We want to maintain the historic nature of the property while introducing amenities that will allow more people to enjoy the location.’ The long-term goals for Cerro Gordo are to bring ‘high level programming in forms of writing retreats, music events, dining experiences, photo shoots, theater, special events, and more.’ Underwood said he wants to create an experience that’s available nowhere else. ‘Cerro Gordo is a true piece of American history that is impossible to replicate,’ he said (Vera 2018).

Before owning a ghost town, Underwood had a variety of different careers including a brief stint as an investment banker, founding a hostel, and partnering in the marketing and creative consulting firm known as Brass Check. Underwood has stated in videos that in addition to living in and documenting Cerro Gordo, he also has a full-time job that he uses to help fund the renovation projects on the property — presumably his position at Brass Check. The Brass Check website describes the company as “a creative advisory firm that specializes in working with authors, media companies and startups” but provides little other information other than a contact page.

Underwood's experience working at a marketing firm likely has had an impact on *Ghost Town Living's* success. He is certainly no stranger to viral marketing strategies. In

2016 Underwood published *Putting My Foot Down: A Book Featuring My Foot*, an Amazon eBook featuring a photograph of his foot – only his foot. It became an instant best seller, or at least that's how it was defined in Amazon's algorithms. The book was intended as a stunt to make a point about the digital publishing industry. According to an interview with Underwood, he did it to showcase the meaninglessness of the "best-seller" label and call out marketing schemes that overcharge authors to achieve this distinction (Weller 2016). Although the original book got taken down after his stunt was reported in the news, he created a "real" follow-up publication featuring thirty photos of his feet and the "#1 Best Seller" title on the cover. Underwood is clearly clever and savvy about understanding and utilizing behind-the-scenes marketing strategies. This level of awareness and consideration likely translates into his approach to *Ghost Town Living*.

After purchasing the land in California, Underwood moved from Austin, Texas, to live in Cerro Gordo in early 2020. During this transition Underwood created the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel to document the property and his life living in the town. The channel quickly amassed a following and at the time of this writing, *Ghost Town Living* had acquired over 1.67 million subscribers in the three and a half years since its conception. The first video, "I Spent My Life Savings On An Abandoned Ghost Town"<sup>2</sup> has over 8.6 million views. To put those numbers into perspective, *Tasting History with Max Miller* is another YouTube channel that began in a similar timeframe with a similar subscriber count (and to some degree, a similar genre). Miller started his channel in

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<sup>2</sup> Accessed September 2023, <https://youtu.be/NZulDyerzrA?si=QWIWgy2fv9p4ih9S>

December 2019 and now has 1.94 million subscribers. His most viewed video has 3.5 million views. Content on YouTube, like many social media platforms, has a wide range of potential reach. Some posted content will only ever be seen by a handful of people, for example one statistic claimed 60 percent of YouTube videos never go past 1,000 views (Lange 2019:15), but there is also potential for content to reach “viral” status. The most viewed YouTube video thus far is “Baby Shark Dance” with a staggering 13 billion views. This scale makes quantifying popularity difficult, but videos on the YouTube trending page, where the platform curates videos rising in popularity, range in views from around 500 thousand upwards of several million.

Underwood uses longform videos, usually twenty minutes to an hour in length, to highlight various escapades at the site such as exploring abandoned mines shafts, rebuilding dilapidated structures, and collecting artifacts. While *Ghost Town Living* exists across multiple social media platforms, to simplify the scope of this project, with respect to its social media presence I will focus primarily on YouTube — the genesis of *Ghost Town Living* and the most popular online presence tied to the site.

The town of Cerro Gordo is integral to the inception and essence of the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel. To provide an overview of the town's history, I have compiled information from the National Parks Service, reports from news outlets, and various print publications<sup>3</sup>. Indigenous people lived in the region long before any mining operations took

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<sup>3</sup> The original Cerro Gordo Mines website which was used as a primary reference point was taken offline in early September 2023 due to issues surrounding ownership of the domain after the town switched caretakers. The Town Manager, Steven, indicated that they are still trying to get the website back up and

place. Owens Valley is located to the east of the Sierra Nevada and west of the Inyo Mountains, the mountain range where Cerro Gordo is located. According to *From This Mountain* (1975), pioneers to Owens Valley were not initially met with hostility from local tribes. After valuable ores were discovered in the region, settlements began to be developed along with rising conflict with the local Indigenous population.

Descendant communities are still living near Cerro Gordo. Fort Independence was designated as a reservation and is now a sovereign nation and inhabited by the federally-recognized tribe of Paiute Indians (“Fort Independence Indian Reservation” 2023). The complexities surrounding the removal of the Native people from the land and the subsequent diversity in national and racial identities of the miners who lived in Cerro Gordo is deserving of its own paper, and is beyond the scope to handle in depth here, but it is an important context to remember about the site, in relation to the discussion of how nostalgia has boosted *Ghost Town Living's* popularity.

There is ambiguity surrounding the full timeline and circumstances, but most sources cite 1865<sup>4</sup> as the year when a rich silver deposit was discovered in on the western ridge of the Inyo mountains by Pablo Flores along with other unnamed Mexican prospectors. Seeing potential in these deposits, the prospectors developed the area into a mining outpost known as Cerro Gordo, which translates to Fat Hill – presumably due to

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running. Previous versions of the website can still be viewed on the Wayback Machine internet archive. Another core source for this section is *From This Mountain – Cerro Gordo* written by Robert C. Likes and Glenn R. Day, which has been described “the bible of Cerro Gordo” (“Friends of Cerro Gordo”).

<sup>4</sup> For additional historic context, California was ceded to the United States by Mexico in 1848 and became the 31st state in 1850 (“California Admission Day, September 9, 1850”).

the rich silver deposits in the mountain. The names of the principal mines - San Felipe, San Francisco, San Lucas, Santa Maria and San Ignacio - also attest to the importance of Mexican miners to the establishment of Cerro Gordo (“A History of Mexican Americans in California: Historic Sites” 2004).

Cerro Gordo developed relatively slowly in comparison to other “boomtowns” of the time. Although silver mined from the site was high quality, the miners relied on their own labor to develop the mines as they lacked needed capital for rapid expansion. Other constraints also hindered the growth of the site such as “the ruggedness of the terrain, scarcity of water on the mountain top, and the location remote from any settlement with a large population” (Lakes and Day 1975:9). However, word spread about the silver, attracting new miners to the mountain. In 1866 Jose Ochoa developed the San Luca mine, extracting an estimated 1.5 tons of silver ore from the mine every 12 hours. Pack animals transported the ore to Silver Sprout Mill, located near Fort Independence. The shipments of ore yielded \$300 a ton, which may have caught the eye of successful merchant Victor Beaudry (Lakes and Day 1975:9).

French Canadian Beaudry had experience as a merchant in San Francisco and as a prospector during the 1849 gold rush. During the Civil War Beaudry was a sutler, a civilian authorized to sell goods to the army. Beaudry’s friendship with officers now stationed in Fort Independence brought him to Owens Valley in 1865 to establish a store. The businessman saw potential in the quality silver being extracted from the mines in Cerro Gordo, so he established a store there in 1866 that would cater to and take

advantage of the influx of miners. Beaudry would sometimes square away debts from indebted miners by acquiring mining claims. One of these cases involved an over \$1500 overdue balance from J. Almada and Jose Ochoa, partners in the Union and San Lucas mines, some of the richest claims in Cerro Gordo. A judgment against them over their overdue balance resulted in Beaudry obtaining an interest in both mines and additional property in Cerro Gordo. Shortly after, Beaudry settled other debts in which he was awarded a store and interests in several other mines. He also established a slag furnace to process ore. This acquisition of interest in the Union mine and a smelter eventually developed into a partnership with Mortimer Belshaw, another powerful figure in Cerro Gordo's history.

After arriving in Cerro Gordo from San Francisco in 1868, the rich galena deposits caught Belshaw's attention. Galena is a silver-lead ore and during the smelting process the silver and lead are isolated. Belshaw, along with his business partner at the time, A. B. Elder, obtained an interest in the Union mine through a deal and began processing galena into silver. The same year the men began sending silver to Los Angeles and San Francisco by wagon for sale. Belshaw shrewdly leveraged this success into a partnership with the wealthy president of the California Paper Company, Egbert Judson. With Judson's financial backing, the three men formed the Union Mining Company. Recognizing the financial potential in Cerro Gordo's galena, Belshaw and Elder realized that controlling the movement of silver from Cerro Gordo would present a lucrative business opportunity (Likes and Day 1975: 12).

Cerro Gordo's mountainous location made the movement of materials to and from the town challenging. Yellow Grade Road, named after the yellow hue of the surrounding rock, was cut through the difficult terrain to provide wagon transport. This was the only road in and out of Cerro Gordo and Belshaw collected tolls on everything departing from or arriving into town – essentially controlling the flow of silver from the mines. In addition to tolling the road, Belshaw also built smelters near the mines which increased the rate of silver processing on the mountain. Due in part to Belshaw's enterprising activities, "the year 1868 was a great transition period for Cerro Gordo, and was followed by seven years of unequalled prosperity" (Lakes and Day 1975:15). The silver bullion produced at Cerro Gordo became integral to the growth of cities like Los Angeles and increased the acclaim of Cerro Gordo. Within one year, the population of Cerro Gordo grew to 1,500 and there were 700 mining claims within just one square mile.

Although Belshaw and Beaudry could initially be viewed as competitors, they united into a partnership which allowed Belshaw to control yet another large-scale smelting operation. The two men soon joined in another business venture to establish the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company, vastly increasing the amount of silver that could be exported from the mining town. Cerro Gordo soon became the largest silver and lead producer in California, but it would not be long before trouble arose for the mines. By 1877 a combination of shutdowns and setbacks in the mines, such as water supply shortages and a mine fire, as well as falling ore prices, led to a critical decline in mining activity in the town ("Cerro Gordo Mines"). Cerro Gordo was "almost a ghost town" by 1889 (Lakes and Day 1975:49).

Although a few tenacious men attempted to keep the mines running at Cerro Gordo in the following years, it was not until the discovery of zinc ore in the early 1900s that large scale mining operations returned to Cerro Gordo. A tram system equipped with large buckets was built to bypass the need to transport ore via road. Within a few years, Cerro Gordo was the largest producer of high-quality zinc carbonates in not only California, but the United States (Lakes and Day 1975:65). The town continued producing silver, lead, and zinc during this period, but it was becoming increasingly evident that productive veins of ore were dwindling. Without discoveries of new ore deposits, production slowly declined, and mining operations had completely ceased by the 1960s.

Since then, Cerro Gordo has been privately owned by a series of caretakers. Wally Wilson and his wife Barbara were approached in 1949 to take over ownership of Cerro Gordo. After Wally's passing, Barbara eventually remarried Jack Smith ("The Friends of Cerro Gordo"). Over the years Smith's niece Jody Steward periodically joined the couple in Cerro Gordo to assist with upkeep. In the 1980s, Steward eventually acquired full ownership of Cerro Gordo after a series of investments in the town. She and her husband Mike Patterson lived in the town until Jody's passing in 2001, preserving the town with an approach they called "restorative reuse," a concept I will touch on in chapter four (Vargo 2021: xiii). Most recently, Cerro Gordo was purchased by Brent Underwood and Jon Bier. Underwood now has full ownership of the site and resides in the town along with the town manager and a volunteer. Over a dozen buildings still stand, including the buildings used as housing for the caretakers and a general store which is being used as a museum.

## *Defining Cerro Gordo*

Cerro Gordo, and its virtual representation through *Ghost Town Living*, exists in a nebulous state. It is simultaneously private property, a tourist destination, an internet sensation, and a historic mining town. Cerro Gordo is not a museum in the traditional sense, nor would it conform to the standards outlined in the International Council of Museum's (ICOM) definition of a museum, which includes the following characteristics:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing. (“Museum Definition” 2023)

For the purposes of this thesis, the ICOM definition will serve as the defining authority when I use the term museum as it is generally considered to be industry standard.<sup>5</sup>

If Cerro Gordo cannot be defined as a museum, what term best functionally describes the town for the purposes of this project? Due to its uniquely situated position, deciding how to refer to and frame Cerro Gordo required deconstructing each element tied to its identity. The facets of Cerro Gordo’s physical location and internet presence will be examined in more depth in later chapters but ultimately, I settled on the term *heritage site* to describe the town holistically. This use of *heritage site* is loosely based on the United

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<sup>5</sup> <sup>4</sup> The ICOM definition is frequently debated as it does not encompass all aspects of how museums are colloquially understood and stirs up contention over the societal purpose of museums (Etges and Dean 2022). The inclusion of the not-for-profit modifier is also contentious in the United States - a concept that will be explored more in depth in later chapters.

Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of cultural heritage:

Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance. It includes tangible heritage (movable, immobile and underwater), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) embedded into cultural, and natural heritage artefacts, sites or monuments. The definition excludes ICH related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebration etc. It covers industrial heritage and cave paintings. (“Cultural Heritage” 2023)

I utilize the term heritage site to broadly describe locations imbued with cultural significance, in this case the abandoned mining town of Cerro Gordo. While Cerro Gordo may not comprehensively fit within the confines of the definition of a museum, many characteristics of Cerro Gordo overlap with key elements of a museum and museology provides a contextual framework for examining key aspects of my discussion of Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living*. Throughout this thesis, topics related to the ethics surrounding ownership and representations of the past, democratization of information versus professional oversight, and the impact of social media on these issues will be examined. Museology's applicability extends to sites such as Cerro Gordo, although I will also address its limitations when attempting to understand the appeal and structure of *Ghost Town Living*.

### *Theory and Approach*

To approach these topics, I build on the discourse within “new museology” to construct a framework for examining *Ghost Town Living*. Institutions like museums are inherently

imbued with cultural and structural power which can be understood through the work of scholars like Tony Bennett and Peter Vargo. As a heritage site, Cerro Gordo, and its online presence, are also subject to these power structures. Secondly, *Ghost Town Living* cannot be separated from the confines and stipulations, both evident and obscure, of YouTube as a platform, which will be covered in the next section.

New museology reflects the shifting viewpoints in the discipline of museology and takes a critical look at the past, present, and future role of museums. It is neither a monolithic nor a static theoretical structure; rather, new museology represents a broader conversation critically examining the social and political roles of museums. Peter Vargo's edited volume, *The New Museology*, serves as a core text on new museology for this thesis. As Vargo notes, "museums are of course far more than just places of study, or education, or entertainment. The very act of collecting has a political or ideological or aesthetic dimension which cannot be overlooked . . . what makes certain objects, rather than others, 'worth' preserving for posterity?" (1989:2). Cerro Gordo is like a museum collection in a sense – it is a collection of buildings and objects the town's caretakers deem worthy of preservation. Much like Vargo describes collections in a museum, how and why Cerro Gordo is being preserved and presented for viewing is inherently entangled with an ideological reality – be it consciously or unconsciously.

As noted by Handler and Gable (1997), a perfect replica of the past is not a feasible nor a realistic expectation. History itself is an imperfect way of understanding the past as it relies on subjective accounts and interpretations. Bias is inevitable, particularly

as we account for the impact of power structures that have often relegated the authority to record history to a small self-selected population. Handler and Gable go so far as to state that *mimetic realism*, a term that refers to realist or objectivist approaches, "destroys history. To teach the public that the work of Colonial Williamsburg is to reconstruct the past as it really was erases all the interpretive work that goes into the museum's history" and "destroys the utility of history as a vehicle for social criticism" (1997:224). The historic record is an incomplete picture, and every time period is subject to irreplicable circumstantial and cultural forces that could never be fully recreated and experienced in the future. Rather, history is an "interpretation of the past how we understand it now" and interpretive choices are "a product of the present, not of the past" (Handler and Gable 1997: 223).

To situate this case study within a broader framework, it is useful to consider Tony Bennett's *exhibitionary complex*. Drawing on Foucault's theories on the relationship between knowledge and power, Bennett describes how institutions uphold and disseminate ideological keystones; "museums, galleries, and, more intermittently, exhibitions played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilizing agencies" (Bennett 1995: 66). This is to say that museums, and museum-like spaces, are pedagogical institutions integral to instilling nationalism and "providing new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of the working classes" (Bennett 1995: 73). Opposed to the Foucauldian discussions of penal systems, museums work in public spaces to achieve the "winning [of] hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies" (62) to promote

culture and model behavior. As a heritage site, Bennett's exhibitionary complex can also be used to examine the historic and contemporary power structures within Cerro Gordo and the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel.

Handler and Gable's ethnography on Colonial Williamsburg, a well-known living history museum in Virginia, uses Tony Bennet's exhibitionary complex to assert that "cultural institutions like fairs, expositions, amusement parks, and department stores, all those museumlike sites against which the museum must define itself - museums place far too much emphasis on their possession of the 'really real.' Museums, it is assumed, amass real things, authentic objects; and their didactic, political and moral work, as well as their cultural prestige, stem from the display of those items." (Handler & Gable 1997: 222). The *really real* is a term originally coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 118). Handler and Gable use the term to refer to how the authenticity of objects boosts their esteem and the viewers' perceived connection to the past, a claim I will develop further in regard to Cerro Gordo in Chapter Four. Chapter Three will discuss how the really real applies to digital platforms.

Although tourism has an impact on the future plans for Cerro Gordo, the emphasis on the really real differentiates Cerro Gordo from Western themed locations such as Old Tucson, Dollywood, or Knott's Berry Farm. While Old Tucson could be seen as historic and authentic in connection to the history of Western movies, it is not authentic or "real" in regard to an actual town. *Ghost Town Living* capitalizes on the notion of the really real to imbue Cerro Gordo with the cultural prestige of a heritage site. This emphasis is

showcased throughout *Ghost Town Living* videos. Frequently the authenticity of artifacts found at the site or buildings in the town are highlighted to accentuate the experiential qualities of interacting with these objects and stress the importance of preserving Cerro Gordo. This concept is explored further in Chapter Two.

Colin Sorensen's chapter in *The New Museology* describes the similarities between theme parks and museums, going as far as to classify some locations as historic theme parks. One type of historic theme park "has been evolved from a 'real' place, where sufficient historic buildings and natural or man-made features survive 'on site' to allow, with some not always judicious restoration and doctoring, for their original appearance and associations to be revived and interpreted to the visitor" (Sorensen 1989: 62).

Sorensen notes that Colonial Williamsburg is also an example of a historic theme park.

The analogy between theme parks and museums helps to explain why places like Colonial Williamsburg exist and can perhaps even be applied to the popularity of *Ghost Town Living*. Traditionally there has been a divide between the grand pristine halls of a museum that Bennett describes as centers of education and the entertainment sector. However, it has become increasingly evident that spectacle draws visitors and there is a desire on the part of the public to feel transported into another time through immersive experiences.

This is in some ways analogous to the pull of the algorithm on YouTube – sensationalism increases viewership. *Ghost Town Living* is situated between these forces. The channel uses Cerro Gordo to create exciting and immersive experiences online, cyclically drawing visitors to Cerro Gordo which in turn is influenced by a desire on the part of those audiences to have the same experiences at the town.

Considering the history of Cerro Gordo, its appeal – both in person and online, can also be connected to a larger discussion about the history of the Old West and our connection to this history as Americans. In many ways the West has become a mythical time period wrapped up in collective nostalgia and synonymous with traits tied to one version of American identity, often associated with individualism and self-sufficiency. Chapter Two will unpack this phenomenon and the inherent politics of museumlike spaces through the lens of scholars like Timothy Luke.

### *YouTube*

The information presented in *Ghost Town Living* and underlying reasons for *Ghost Town Living's* popularity will be explored more extensively in later chapters, but this section will briefly touch on key points relating to the impact of social media on the presentation of Cerro Gordo.

Ghost Town Living cannot be understood without examining the context of YouTube as a platform. If the internet serves as the architecture of interconnected networks that facilitates virtual communications, social media sites are microcosms of user connection and community. These websites encourage users to create and share information and establish social networks based on this content development. The vast and ever-changing nature of the internet is more than can be comprehensively evaluated in

this paper, so YouTube as a social media platform will be the focus of this scholarly discussion.

YouTube is primarily a video-sharing platform where users can upload or view short and longform videos. A log-in is required to post videos and access the full functionality of the site such as the "like" and "comment" interaction features, but no log-in is necessary to view much of YouTube's content. The accounts that post videos are known as channels. Accessing the site requires a device and means to connect to the internet, but once this barrier to entry has been surmounted YouTube is free to use. Users can choose to pay for premium features and content, but the majority of revenue for YouTube is generated through advertisements. Youtubers, the people who produce videos for the site, can monetize of their channels by growing their following and subsequently earn revenue through YouTube's Partner Program ("YouTube Partner Programme Overview and Eligibility").

Delving deeply into the complexities of YouTube's algorithms is beyond the scope for this thesis, but it is worth mentioning the role algorithms play in the popularity and dissemination of content like the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel. Algorithms are the coded formulas that underpin the user experience on sites like YouTube. These algorithms determine what content is promoted to users based on predictions from previous user patterns of interactions (Kim 2017), although the complex interworking's of these system are often central to speculation and guesswork – even to those that create them.

Like many social media platforms, YouTube attempts to offer a personalized experience that tailors content to the viewer's perceived interests, thereby increasing watch time and subsequent revenue. The 2022 YouTube Culture and Trends report states that 78% of people agree that they use YouTube because it serves them with content that is personally relevant to them.

Youtubers are certainly not oblivious to the power of algorithms. Morgan Forbush's research on Youtubers highlights the cat and mouse game content creators are forced to play to keep up with algorithmic changes and unravel secrets to push out their videos to new audiences since "YouTube does not directly tell creators how their videos get found. YouTube has developed several systems like discovery and search that show videos to viewers based on viewers' preferences instead of pulling information from tags, location, etc." (Forbush 2022:66). Given these changes, video titles and thumbnails are among the few ways Youtubers can exert some agency in driving traffic to their content.

YouTube caters to a wide variety of niche hobbies and interests through the use of these mysterious algorithms. 65% of Gen Z who use YouTube agree that content that's personally relevant to them is more important than content that lots of other people talk about and 55% of the same demographic agree that they watch content no one they know personally is interested in ("YouTube Culture & Trends Report 2022"). Since YouTube is creating internal communities to share in these more niche interests, it circumvents the need for the topic to be popular in users "real life" social circles. Viewing *Ghost Town Living* through this lens, it appears that Underwood has successfully grown the channel

by reaching viewers interested in the content of *Ghost Town Living* and creating an invested community.

Patricia Lange delves into the concept of community on YouTube as one facet of her book, *Thanks For Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube*. She notes that the term community is difficult to define and analyze, particularly in the digital realm. Historically the concept of online communities was not always comfortably accepted but,

Approaching the subject from an anthropological perspective, Verd Amit argues that more recent studies of contemporary communities show that they are 'situationally limited,' 'ephemeral,' and 'episodic,' yet community relationships 'nonetheless facilitate the development of a much appreciated sense of belonging.' It is arguably the case that '*all communities are virtual communities*' (emphasis original) if the term 'virtual communities' connotes people who mutually identify with particular interests rather than being physically co-located. The term 'virtual' is often used to refer to mediated, 'dispersed' interaction but is (mis)interpreted to mean not quite 'real' (Lange 2019: 153).

Lange asserts that community can be understood as processual rather than categorical (255). Communities on YouTube are amorphous, growing and changing over time, overlapping or discrete from other shared interests.

One of the key aspects of *Ghost Town Living* is the channel's connection to Cerro Gordo. While *Ghost Town Living* exists in a virtual realm, it was created with the intention of being tied to a physical location. Lange notes that "emplacement dynamics have been studied in diverse ways (sometimes without necessarily referencing this term) in anthropological and ethnographic research. Researchers found that internet activity

may influence perceptions of locational culture and interaction" (1997: 75 - 76). The impact of *Ghost Town Living* on perceptions of Cerro Gordo will be explored more in depth in Chapter Three.

### *Methodology*

In addition to a literature review, research for this project consisted of three core sections: a site visit, interviews, and reviewing digital content. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Institutional Review Board granted my protocol Exempt Status in early June 2023. The bulk of the research was conducted during the summer and early fall of 2023.

Since YouTube served as the genesis for this thesis, it was utilized as a key platform for data collection. As of November 2023, the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel hosts 86 videos and counting. Underwood's second YouTube channel, *Ghost Town Two*, has an additional 67 supplementary videos with extra content. These videos are all under fifteen minutes in length, with many just a few minutes long. Within the timeframe of research and writing this thesis, as many of the *Ghost Town Living* videos were viewed as possible. Specific videos and content or quotes from videos will be referenced periodically throughout this thesis. While I aim to include a consideration of YouTube's impact as a platform on Cerro Gordo, a full exploration of this dimension would require additional research on YouTube viewers of the channel and other

stakeholders, which was beyond the scope of this project, although it would be worth engaging in such a follow-up study.

In June 2023 I made a trip to visit Cerro Gordo. While there, I documented my experience from the dual lens of a visitor and emerging anthropologist. The ethnography in Chapter Four provides a detailed account and analysis of the site visit to Cerro Gordo. Since the visual documentation of Cerro Gordo is a key aspect of *Ghost Town Living*, I also took numerous photographs which are presented at the end of this thesis.

Interviews serve as a supplementary source of data. Three different interviews protocols were created for this thesis: one protocol for visitors, one protocol for volunteers, and one for principals of the site. The initial plan was to interview a handful of visitors and a handful of volunteers in addition to the site principals. While all three types of interviews were approved by the Institutional Review Board, unexpected circumstances reduced the number of interviews that were able to be completed during the timeline of this project. In total, five people were interviewed and I communicated via email with several additional people in a less formal capacity. Due to the limited number of interviews collected, interview data will be utilized to support the holistic analysis rather than to draw comprehensive conclusions based on interview content trends.

A few interviewees were initially recruited in person during my visit to Cerro Gordo and later contacted over email. The Cerro Gordo Town Manager, Steven, also graciously forwarded my interview request to other town volunteers via email and the Cerro Gordo volunteer Facebook group chat. The majority of interviews were conducted

virtually over Zoom and lasted for approximately an hour each. Every respondent was given the choice to remain anonymous or choose how they were referred to in this thesis. A comprehensive list of questions for each type of interview can be found in Appendix A.

One of the challenges of researching any ongoing phenomenon is the reality that it will continue to change and evolve over time. Not only is Cerro Gordo as a physical location experiencing constant change, but its documentation through *Ghost Town Living* is also ongoing. Throughout the project, a new video was posted every few weeks – a pattern that will likely continue into the foreseeable future. A compounding consideration is that YouTube as a platform is not static. Lange notes the difficulty of studying temporalities on YouTube because the site can drastically shift over time to incorporate different constraints and features (2019: 272). The data I am working with represents a snapshot of *Ghost Town Living* and Cerro Gordo from initial postings on the YouTube channel in early 2020 until fall 2023 when the bulk of the writing for this thesis took place.

### *Summary of Upcoming Chapters*

While this chapter served as an introduction to *Ghost Town Living*, Cerro Gordo, and the theoretical and methodological framework for analysis within this thesis as a whole, Chapter Two will offer a broader discussion surrounding human attachment to historic places. It will situate Cerro Gordo in the context of American ghost towns and compare Cerro Gordo to the varied approaches in preservation and presentation seen in other ghost

towns. It will also explore the topic of ownership of the past using museology and archaeology.

Chapter Three delves into the impact of social media on dissemination of information. Building on discussions in prior chapters, it will explore the balance between the democratization of information versus the risk of misinformation in digital spaces. This chapter will also address functional aspects of YouTube as a social media platform. Using content from the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel, this chapter will take a closer look at what types of content are prevalent on the channel and how the portrayal of Cerro Gordo is impacted by *Ghost Town Living*. While Chapter Three addresses potential concerns about social media as a media dissemination tool for historic content, it also touches on benefits such as accessibility.

The focus for Chapter Four centers on the site visit to Cerro Gordo. A portion of the chapter consists of ethnographic research. Utilizing my own experience visiting the town of Cerro Gordo, Chapter Four will also serve as a comparison to experiencing Cerro Gordo through the lens of *Ghost Town Living*.

Finally, this project concludes with an overview of findings and reflections. While some limitations will be discussed in relevant chapters, it will expand on restraints to the scope of this thesis and potential avenues for future research.

## CHAPTER 2 – GHOST TOWNS AND THE MYTHIC WEST

Ghost towns can be understood as population centers that have experienced notable decline or total abandonment over time. Within the United States, there are thousands of ghost towns. Geotab, a telematics company, collated a list of over 3,800 ghost towns in the United States. Geotab's *Ghost Towns of America* website describes ghost towns as "once thriving communities that have dwindled over the decades. Some vanished entirely or were absorbed into newer settlements, but many of these towns still stand, at least in part, allowing us glimpses of what these now-abandoned places once were." Presumably this project was designed as a demonstration of Geotab's software, but it also showcases the notable number of ghost towns in America. To put that in perspective, the 2020 US Census counted approximately 19,500 incorporated places (where people are actively living) in the United States and 76% of these places house fewer than 5,000 people. California alone has over 346 ghost towns by Geotab's calculation. Many of these towns have been converted into historic sites or tourist attractions, while others have been left to decay.

This chapter will examine several ghost towns located in the United States to explore different approaches to preservation and visitation at each location. Although ghost towns are found globally, within the United States they are often wrapped up in the mythos of the American frontier. This chapter addresses the *mythic West* and more broadly frames a larger discussion about ownership of the past. A note on terminology, I will be using the terms *American West*, *American Frontier*, and *Old West*

interchangeably to refer to this time period of rapid western expansion in the United States.

### *The Notion of Abandonment*

Although commonly referred to as "abandoned" or a "ghost town", increasingly Cerro Gordo is neither of these things - in many ways Cerro Gordo is resisting the notion of abandonment. The town may have been abandoned by the miners who once lived and worked there, but Cerro Gordo has seen a fluid influx of visitors in recent years in addition to the handful of fulltime caretakers who reside there. The once bustling mining community of Cerro Gordo is long gone, so perhaps in that way it is a ghost town - a mere memory of its former self - but the revitalization processes and popularity influx in Cerro Gordo have outgrown its abandoned title. Underwood is capitalizing on the town's legacy as a ghost town while simultaneously resisting abandonment by preventing the physical decay of the town through preservation and rebuilding of the town's structures.

Ghost towns do not exist in static states of abandonment, nor does every ghost town fall uniformly into a definition of abandonment. Interestingly, the Wikipedia page on California ghost towns lists five classification categories for ghost town status: barren site, neglected site, abandoned site, semi abandoned site, and historic community<sup>6</sup>. While

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<sup>6</sup> These definitions are taken from the "List of ghost towns in California" Wikipedia page. No additional citations are given for them, I am assuming they are credited to unnamed page author(s). While a more complete citation is preferred over a Wikipedia page, I found them to be a valuable way of expressing a range for site degradation.

the webpage is incomplete and only a portion of the towns listed have a status noted, this system outlines a way to classify the degree of degradation at ghost towns. Some of the terminology is clunky and may not reflect the terms a professional archaeologist would choose, but for lack of a better system I am utilizing this classification for demonstrative purposes.

Barren sites are the most extreme classification, denoting sites destroyed or otherwise no longer in existence or accessible. Neglected sites are ruins with only rubble and roofless structures remaining. Abandoned sites have standing structures, although those buildings have been abandoned. The only population there is a caretaker. In contrast, semi abandoned sites have many abandoned buildings but host a small population of residents. The final classification, historic community, describes a place that still hosts a busy community but has a significantly smaller population size than during its “boom years”. By these definitions, Cerro Gordo is growing out of an abandoned classification status. While it seems unlikely that Cerro Gordo would ever reach the population level needed to be a historic community, as more people move in to live and work at the town it would be more accurately described as semi-abandoned.

Contemporarily, Cerro Gordo is also in an interesting position because the resistance to abandonment observed there is different from the resistance and plight of rural America highlighted in ethnographies such as Sherman's (2009) *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*, Steward's (1996) *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* and Lyson and

Falk's (1993) *Forgotten Places: Uneven Development in Rural America*. These ethnographies focus on poverty-stricken towns attempting to hold on to their ways of life amid crumbling economic perspectives.

Characterized by the slow decline or stagnation of their economies, poverty, and lack of opportunities for social mobility, the people who live in these communities face marginalization from both within the complex social stratifications of their own communities and American society as a whole, which has been quick to label these folks as burdensome, uneducated, and backwards. As Falk and Lyson put it, "placed within a broader theoretical context, the dismissed conditions found in many rural regions today can be seen as part and parcel of a historical process of uneven development in the United States" (Lyson and Falk 1993:2). This is further compounded by moral judgements surrounding issues of addiction, family ideals/ values, and welfare recipient status. Hard work and self-sufficiency were repeatedly touted in these scholars' interviews as personal responsibilities, while economic or social crises, such as losing a family farm to foreclosure or receiving food stamps, were often seen as a personal failing rather than a symptom of the larger social and economic circumstances of the area.

These findings are in some ways analogous with the miners who lived in Cerro Gordo – blue collar workers teetering on the brink of success or disaster, their fate tethered to the socio-economic reality of the towns in which they lived. Although their prosperity was reliant on the finite resources from the mines, they lived by a pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality. Mining was a dangerous, difficult trade and Cerro

Gordo's mountainous location further compounded the miner's challenges, including the fact that all materials and water needed to be brought in by pack animals (Likes and Day 1975: 21). Yet the miners, and some of their families, endured the difficult circumstances in the hopes of making their fortune. Even as silver prices plummeted in the 1900s, a handful of miners persisted with Thomas Boland who leased the Union mine and was convinced that Cerro Gordo could once again be a productive mining town (Likes and Day 1975: 55). These sentiments are also a reflection of American values, which will be discussed in length later in this chapter.

### *Funding*

While issues of funding and private versus public ownership status are not the core focus of my research, they are issues inseparable from a discussion on ghost towns. Decisions about the town such as approaches to preservation and visitation guidelines are directly impacted by which entities have ownership of the town and how things are being paid for.

Commercialization and capitalism are intertwined with both the past and present of ghost towns like Cerro Gordo. The town was established by prospectors to produce capital and eventually functioned to increase the wealth of the business' owners like Mortimer Belshaw, until mining opportunities subsided. Now Cerro Gordo is uniquely situated both due to its location and ownership status. For example, while the town is privately owned, a county road runs through the town. Even if the owners wanted to close it off, it would still need to be accessible to the public to some degree. Due to lack of access to financial

records, I do not have a comprehensive breakdown of Cerro Gordo's funding sources, but I will touch on a few notable ones I am aware of. Funding is a necessity, but I broach this topic to identify a possible area of concern; that the pursuit of funding has the potential to overshadow decisions that would otherwise be made in the best interest of the site, such as a focus on revenue over preservation or public access.

Since the town's heyday, caretakers of Cerro Gordo have been saddled with the financial burden of keeping up the large property and its aging buildings. One person I interviewed for this project described Cerro Gordo as a "money pit." Purchasing Cerro Gordo required substantial outright investment and financial means, as displayed by the town's \$1.4 million price tag. The upkeep of the town alone requires substantial funding, so it is not surprising that various means of commercializing the site are being undertaken. Funding is a perpetual issue for historic sites in the United States – it is not a challenge unique to Cerro Gordo. Historic sites and museums frequently boast gift shops, ticketed attractions, and corporate sponsorships as a way to keep the lights on. Financing is further complicated by private versus nonprofit status. Private property is usually not eligible for the same types of governmental support as state-run historic sites for example, so they rely more heavily on funding from external sources.

In the case of Cerro Gordo, *Ghost Town Living* can be seen as one avenue for pursuing revenue through a variety of means. Creators can monetize their content on YouTube as well as engage in brand deals with companies to promote products on their channel. To be eligible for YouTube's monetization program, the YouTube Partner Program, creators must meet a series of benchmarks such as obtaining at least 1,000

subscribers with 4,000 public watch hours over the past 12 months (“YouTube Partner Program Overview & Eligibility” 2023). After applying and being approved for the YouTube Partner Program, the channel’s videos are enrolled into Google’s AdSense program that works with companies to promote targeted advertisements on the site. It is through this advertisement revenue that creators are paid. YouTube has a few additional monetization options such as membership programs for viewers, but *Ghost Town Living* does not appear to be involved in those at this point.

Another common way for creators to make money on YouTube is to sign a brand deal known as a sponsorship. This is a contract between a YouTuber and a company that outlines stipulations on creating a paid advertisement for a company or product. For example, videos on the *Ghost Town Living* channel are frequently sponsored by a brand of electrolyte beverage powder called LMNT. Recently a video was sponsored by the online counseling platform Better Help, a frequent sponsor of many YouTubers. The funding avenues on YouTube are pertinent because they influence the way content is presented on *Ghost Town Living*. The influence of YouTube’s functionality as a platform on creator behavior will be expanded more thoroughly in Chapter Three, but monetization is one driving factor for that behavior. When clicks equal views and those views translate into money, it is unsurprising that YouTubers engage in behavior that increases viewership of their content.

*Ghost Town Living* also functions to boost visitation to Cerro Gordo and donations for the town through exposure on social media. In early *Ghost Town Living* videos, fans

would send items to a P.O. box to help Underwood and the town. In person visitation currently does not appear to provide a substantial source of revenue, but there is a sort of improvised gift shop set up in the Cerro Gordo Museum that sells branded Cerro Gordo merchandise as well as an online merchandise store. Donations seem to provide a larger financial revenue than visitation at this point.

While Cerro Gordo is technically privately owned, the town is associated with a nonprofit organization called The Friends of Cerro Gordo. The Friends of Cerro Gordo informational pamphlet describe the organization as follows:

Cerro Gordo's historical consultant and a recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation founded in 2012 to aid in the support, restoration, and public enjoyment of Cerro Gordo, Inyo Country, California, U.S.A. We work behind the scenes to assist Brent Underwood with background research and raise public awareness of Cerro Gordo on social medial platforms and with the news media. In addition to Brent's YouTube videos, we have provided research and production assistance to *Ghost Adventures*, *Mysteries Decoded*, *Dinner Impossible*, *Legendary Locations*, *Buzfeed* [sic], *Vice News*, the *Los Angeles Times* and many independent researchers. The Friends of Cerro Gordo directly supports Cerro Gordo through the acquisition and acceptance of grants, direct donations, and the management of a *GoFundMe* campaign for restoration of the American Hotel. Many of our directors have been associated with Cerro Gordo for more than 30 years and all are volunteers. We have funded, wholly or in part, the American Hotel architectural design plans, the 40,000 gallon water tank and sprinkler system design, and construction labor and materials including concrete blocks, lumber, hardware and steel beams. Liability insurance for Cerro Gordo's volunteers is provided through FOCG sponsorship. We recently designed and published a new brochure to help visitors better navigate and understand Cerro Gordo history and topography. *Cerro Gordo – A Ghost Town Caught Between Centuries* and *Images of America – Cerro Gordo* are also part of our research and publication efforts. Last year, we acquired the last remaining copies of the original book on Cerro Gordo, *From this Mountain*. All of these are available for sale in the Museum [sic] (*Friends of Cerro Gordo*).

As a 501(c)3, Friends of Cerro Gordo has the capacity to apply for grants and funding through different avenues such as organizing a GoFundMe fundraiser for rebuilding the American Hotel, a large historic building in the town that burned down in 2020. FOCG is registered to California Attorney General's Registry of Charities, making donations to the fundraiser tax deductible. Although the lofty goal for the fundraiser is \$500,000, three thousand donations have reached an impressive \$120,800 towards the rebuild.

FOCG is run by Cecile and Roger Vargo. The Vargos were friends of the town's prior caretakers so, as Cecile puts it, they "came with the sale" when Underwood purchased the town. They continue to collaborate with Underwood to assist with fundraising, run the Friends of Cerro Gordo Facebook page, and act as "historical researchers." Roger describes their role as follows: "We have an extensive archive of both photography and general text research that we do and many times Brent will typically email us, sometimes he'll call or text us once a week or so if he needs a question answer. That will usually show up in a video." Cecile and Roger Vargo have each written a book about Cerro Gordo, which provides some of the references I have included for this thesis (Vargo and Vargo 2012; Vargo 2021). Other ghost towns such as Bodie, CA are also affiliated with nonprofit organizations. The Bodie Foundation describes their organization as a "501(c)3 non-profit corporation dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and public enjoyment of Bodie State Historic Park, Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve, and Grover Hot Springs State Park" ("Bodie Foundation" 2023). They collect donations to fund various projects, such as stabilizing buildings. Geographer Dydia DeLyser has

written extensively about Bodie and the way ghost towns impact American culture, a concept I will be exploring more extensively in the next section (DeLyser 1999).

### *Ghost Town Comparison*

Considering the vast number of ghost towns in the United States, it is not surprising that there are wide ranging approaches to preservation, tourism, and access at different sites. To approach this topic, I will be discussing two other abandoned California mining towns contemporary with Cerro Gordo's heyday to act as foils to each other and as a comparison point for Cerro Gordo. Bodie, California, and Calico, California are examples of two contrasting paths to preservation and visitation for ghost towns.

Bodie is located several hours north of Cerro Gordo. After gold was discovered in the hills north of Mono Lake by W.S. Bodey in 1859, a mill was established there, and the town's population swelled to 10,000 people in just 20 years. Similarly, to Cerro Gordo, after this period of success the town's population rapidly declined until mining operations ceased in 1942. Only 5% of the town's 2,000 buildings still stand, in part due to large fires in 1892 and 1932 ("Bodie State Historic Park").

Bodie was designated a State Historic Park in 1962. While the site lacks commercial facilities such as a restaurant, there are bathrooms and a museum. Although only a portion of the town remains, many building interiors still have surviving artifacts. The site is being preserved in a state of "arrested decay" ("Bodie State Historic Park"). They are endeavoring to leave as much of the town as possible in the same state it was in

when it was acquired. For example, the website states that the interiors of buildings are left stocked with the original goods. Scholarship and interviews about the site indicate that arrested decay does not mean that all changes to the town have ceased, or the town is fully left to degrade - hence the use of “arrested” decay. As described by one interviewee who previously worked at Bodie, maintenance crews were on site to fix issues around the town, “[the maintenance crews were] mainly doing the historic preservation work . . . their job was to work on these different projects to keep the buildings from collapsing in the coming winter” as well as general upkeep to things like the water systems and volunteer housing. Since the town is open for public visitation, many of these repairs are likely intended for both stabilization of the site and public safety. Their goal was to “keep the integrity of the buildings intact” while attempting to maintain a state of arrested decay so they would “keep the crooked buildings crooked and things like that.”

The California Department of Parks and Recreation website on Bodie is clear that nothing may be collected or removed from the park as Bodie is a fully protected historic site and metal detectors are also explicitly not allowed. There is an entire section of the page titled “Help Save Bodie!” outlining rules and regulations for the site. In addition to addressing the illegal nature of artifact removal, the page also attempts to make a persuasive case for why these rules are enforced.

Cerro Gordo has a 4.5 star rating on TripAdvisor, but multiple reviews used Bodie as a comparison point. One critical review from 2019 noted that “the [Cerro Gordo] caretaker said everything was authentic, it wasn’t . . . The road was scary . . . the effort

was not worth it. We were very disappointed. BTW...Loved Bodie!” Another reviewer expressed disappointment after driving to the town in 2021 to find it was closed to visitors for filming, “We saw the Bodie Ghost Town the day before. That CA state park is outstanding!” A more positive review mentioned that Cerro Gordo was a “smaller scale version of Bodie without the crowds” (Tripadvisor). Bodie seems to be a well-known ghost town and destination, potentially due to its status as a state park.

Calico, California is south of Cerro Gordo, located off Interstate 15 on the route between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Calico mirrors the story of Cerro Gordo as it too was established in the 1880s as a silver mining town. Within only fifteen years Calico was abandoned due to the declining value of silver. The Calico Ghost Town Regional Park website does not detail what happened to the town in the following years, but Calico was eventually purchased in the 1950s by Walter Knotts, creator of the Knott’s Berry Farm amusement park. Knotts restored all but five of the town’s remaining buildings to look like they did in the 1880s (“Calico Ghost Town Regional Park”). In 1962 the town was registered as California’s 782th state historic landmark (“CHL No. 782 Calico – San Bernadino”) and in 2005 then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed Calico to be “California’s Silver Rush Ghost Town” (“Calico Ghost Town Regional Park”). Currently Calico is part of the San Bernadino Regional Park System.

Calico boasts a variety of activities, attractions, and amenities. In addition to a visitor center and museum, there are at least nine shops selling fudge, candles, hot dogs, souvenirs and more. Visitors can take a ride on a train, pan for gold, and even visit an

optical illusion attraction called the “mystery shack.” Some areas of the town are air conditioned and there are standard bathrooms available to visitors. Guests can choose to camp or stay in one of the town’s bunkhouses or cabins for an extended stay. While the website does not provide the same warnings regarding vandalism as Bodie, it does note that portions of the site are not ADA accessible due to the “historic nature” of the town and that the mines themselves are dangerous and strictly off limits.

While I unfortunately did not have the opportunity to visit Bodie and Calico myself, several of the people I interviewed have been to one or both sites. Aimee, who spent three years interning and working at Bodie years ago, spoke warmly of the site. She described a thriving community of volunteers and workers who worked collaboratively to maintain and interpret the site. She noted that at least one person had a clearly defined job as an interpreter who was supported by other folks on site to provide tours and answer questions. Remarking on Calico, Roger Vargo describes it as “incredibly touristy, and we find it really gross” in contrast, “Cerro Gordo has the Western authenticity. There aren’t people selling you cheap crap.”

Bodie was featured in a video on *Ghost Town Living* from August 2021 titled “Bodie CA: A Ghost Town Frozen in Time.” Underwood visited Bodie and spoke with some of the folks helping with its preservation, noting that “there is a lot to learn” from Bodie. The folks at Bodie approach preservation as a way to maintain the site as a time capsule, only stepping in to make necessary structural repairs. While the site encourages and receives significant visitation, it sets clear boundaries with guests about conduct and

only provides basic amenities needed for visitation such as a parking lot and bathrooms. Bodie's website frames the town as an outdoor museum meant to be viewed but not disturbed.

In contrast, Calico and Cerro Gordo both seem to take a hands-on approach to restoring the site and visitor involvement. Most of Calico has seen significant restoration and transformation. There appears to be little concern for using or presenting the buildings as they were in the 1800s outside of theming and the town has been developed for a tourist experience with modern amenities. Cerro Gordo falls somewhere in the middle of these approaches. While some of the buildings have been left in the state they were in when Underwood acquired the property, other buildings are undergoing transformations.

When looking into the original plans for the site after being purchased by Underwood and John Bier, an article from 2018 stated that "some plans include creating a music studio within the bunkhouse for musicians and building an observation desk in the town" (Gomez 2018) while another interview with Bier notes they "will likely turn the place into a retreat center for conferences, workshop events and film shoots. They will also keep Cerro Gordo open for public tours 'for the time being,' . . . They are still developing their final vision for the old town" (Clifford 2018). Now in 2023, some of those plans are coming to fruition. In October a video titled "Building A Recording Studio In A Ghost Town (Part 1: Wood)" was posted to *Ghost Town Living*. The video description notes that this is a project Underwood has wanted to do for the last five years which aligns with his prior interviews.

Even though some of the original plans for Cerro Gordo are underway, the prior plans still seem more commercial than what has been portrayed in *Ghost Town Living* up to this point. It appears there has been a shift in priorities, at least based on what was stated in previous videos, regarding the preservation of the town and attracting tourists to Cerro Gordo for its own unique attributes rather than turning it into some other kind of attraction.

The prior owners, Jody Steward Patterson and her husband are credited as using the "restorative reuse" approach to preservation (Vargo 2021: xiii). The Vargos, who were friends with the Pattersons, state that their goal for restorative reuse was to "restore an existing building and return it to use." Some projects undertaken by the Pattersons were converting a mechanic's garage from the zinc era at Cerro Gordo into a chapel and theatre. Underwood has taken a similar approach to restoring Cerro Gordo by restoring buildings in the town while simultaneously transforming some for new uses, such as the recording studio.

What makes Cerro Gordo unique in contrast to Bodie, Calico and other ghost towns is *Ghost Town Living's* successful online presence and engagement. Bodie and Calico both appear to draw significant crowds, which in part is likely due to their more accessible locations and associations with park systems, but neither have the large online presence or fanbase of Cerro Gordo.

*American Nostalgia: The Myth of the Old West*

In order to unpack the allure of *Ghost Town Living*, cultural imagination and nostalgia are core to understanding one of its primary facets: the draw of the American West. After delving into prior research on nostalgia, I have found it to be a term loaded with varied and complex meaning. Understanding nostalgia is a full research topic in its own right, so I have drawn from scholarship on the topic to frame its meaning and application in the context of this thesis. Nostalgia is a powerful force. YouTube reported that “82% of Gen Z have used YouTube to watch content in order to feel nostalgic” (“YouTube Culture & Trends Report 2022”).

While nostalgia is in some ways synonymous with place, Sociologist Janelle Wilson argues that the experience of nostalgia has become intertwined with time and identity:

Collective nostalgia can serve the purpose of forging a national identity, expressing patriotism. It might also reflect the selective remembering and selective forgetting that occur at the collective level. Even those of us who have not experienced a particular decade (e.g., the fabulous 1950s or the turbulent 1960s), may find ourselves looking back to those years with a fondness; we fool ourselves into thinking that events of those times affect our own personal biography in a very direct way (Wilson 31).

This notion of national identity and selective remembering is particularly pertinent to describing the appeal of the Old West. The United States has existed as a nation for less than 300 years. The American West, 1865 – 1900 (“The American West, 1865 – 1900”), had a substantial impact on shaping aspects of America’s national identity. While

it is easy to reminisce over the adventurous and exciting portrayals of the frontier, at the core of the myth lie the brutal realities that allowed for western expansion.

The West is inseparable from Manifest Destiny, the pervasive idea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that settler expansion across the western United States was not only inevitable but sanctioned by God. This term has often become synonymous with Andrew Jackson, who served as America's seventh president from 1829-1837. He is now best known for signing the Indian Removal Act, a policy which resulted in the Trail of Tears. While western expansion had been underway for decades, Jackson further popularized the tenets of Manifest Destiny (Ward 1962: 136-137) and his policies paved the way for settlers to move to newly ceded lands.

The Frontier has in many ways been synonymous with values such as "youthfulness, manliness, closeness to nature, simplicity, space... freedom" (Miriani 1989:196). It is imbued with the essence of the *American spirit*, a mindset focused on ingenuity, self-reliance, rugged individualism, and tenacity. This belief can be demonstrated in the works contemporary historians such Frederick Jackson Turner, best known for his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". Turner postulates that not only has the western expansion impacted American history, but "the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (Turner 1893:29).

Beyond the historic impacts of the American West, popular media portrayals have painted the Old West with the romantic idealism associated with the frontiersman, settler, and cowboy. Hollywood is largely responsible for creating and disseminating what have

become pervasive depictions of the American West and Westerns have been a popular film genre for decades.

The Eastern Sierra, Owens Valley, and the Alabama hills, located a short distance away from Cerro Gordo, have all been popular filming locations for Westerns. Prominent Western film actors such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Gene Autry have all starred in movies filmed in the region. This area of California has become synonymous with the visual embodiment of the West. The Museum of Western Film History which documents the history and displays memorabilia related to the American western film genre is located in nearby Lone Pine, CA (“History of the Museum” 2023). I visited this museum during my trip to Cerro Gordo, further cementing the regional and topical connections I could see between Cerro Gordo and the appeals of the American West as a genre.

*Ghost Town Living* can be seen as perpetuating the ideals portrayed in Westerns. Underwood in that sense can be seen as both an everyman and unsung hero of Cerro Gordo, battling the unpredictable weather and persevering through difficult circumstances to save the town<sup>7</sup>. He has hand-built animal enclosures, renovated buildings by cutting his own wood, mined ore from the mines, and given up creature comforts to live at Cerro Gordo. These statements are not meant to mitigate the real difficulties of living at Cerro

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<sup>7</sup> Some examples are the videos: “Realities of Winter In A Ghost Town” and “Tragedy Strikes in the Ghost Town of Cerro Gordo.”

Gordo, but the circumstances draw parallels to the hardworking cowboy frontman key to every Western.

To describe the phenomenon surrounding the idealization and celebration of the American West I am using the term *mythic West* as this is the terminology is used by scholars like DeLyser. Although rooted in actual events and historical records, perceptions of the frontier are also heavily influenced by folklore, nationalism, and idealism. DeLyser notes that “the mythic West is a shifting construct: sometimes located in space, at other times only in the mind; and each generation has made its own contributions to the myth” (1999:610) and political scientist Timothy Luke describes how “this mythic vision of the Old West now is both America's inheritance from the past and birthright for the future” (Luke 2002:11).

Luke's discussion of the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles serves as an example of how the mythic frontier exists simultaneously with the real history of the West and is often used interchangeably. The Autry Museum was founded in 1988 by Western film actor and musician Gene Autry to memorialize the West (Luke 2002:9). Luke argues that Autry's prowess in the Western film industry is what many Americans think of when conjuring images of the real American West, a feeling that is perpetuated in the museum. He critiques choices such as displaying real artifacts alongside Hollywood Western memorabilia and the language used in the museum brochure that leans into the myths maintained by television and movies. Luke describes the museum as a “not really 'history' but rather essentially this more unique product of a 'heritage' that

comes together at the intersection of 'the historic West' and 'the fictional West'" (Luke 2002:11)<sup>8</sup>.

While there is plenty of “real” history about Cerro Gordo, there is also the mythos surrounding Cerro Gordo which feels more akin to the blending of fact, fiction, and heritage that Luke describes. *Ghost Town Living* may provide history for the site, but it also leans into the adventure, danger, and story to make more entertaining content. For example, Underwood regularly explores Cerro Gordo’s mines. In a Halloween special from 2020 titled “Ghost Hunting In A Ghost Town (Cerro Gordo)”<sup>9</sup> Underwood describes unexplainable experiences he has had in the town and discusses the tragic accidents and murders that occurred historically in Cerro Gordo, subsequently spending the night in the mine looking for ghosts.

Although Luke’s discussion was in the context of museums, the same concepts can be applied to social media: "historical displays, then, do operate as power plays in which plays for power circulate with the movement of viewers through their curated spaces. Seeing historical objects, witnessing historic performances, encountering interpretations of history are all behaviors that can alter people's attitudes in relation to certain political values associated with particular cultural things" (Luke 2002: 3). YouTube functions like a museum in the sense that both are curated spaces presenting content to be witnessed and consumed. Returning to Bennett’s exhibitionary complex, *Ghost Town Living* is a

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<sup>8</sup> From reviewing the Autry's website, it seems they have made strides to perhaps provide a more inclusive and balanced perspective since Luke's critique in 2002 but I have not visited myself to confirm.

<sup>9</sup> Accessed November 2023: <https://youtu.be/K4zNRwpQIKM?si=c0cS-UYB6F26qncW>

curated display of history online which is inherently imbued with power from that display – a concept that will be developed further in Chapter Three. Therein lies my greatest concern with *Ghost Town Living*. With over a million people watching, Underwood has the power to alter perceptions and attitudes associated with Cerro Gordo, and perhaps even more widely – perceptions surrounding ghost towns and the Old West more generally. This power, which is especially potent in objects and spaces regarded as "authentic", can certainly be used to positive ends; however, it can, even if unwittingly, have negative repercussions.

#### *Ownership of the Past and Archaeology at Cerro Gordo*

Ownership of the past is a prickly topic. Even within the realms of museology and anthropology there are contentious debates about who is allowed to lay claim to cultural patrimony and who gets to decide where and how it is displayed. The Elgin Marbles, also known as the Parthenon Sculptures, are one infamous example of this tension. These ancient Greek sculptures were taken from the Parthenon and other structures by Scottish nobleman Lord Elgin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He eventually sold the sculptures to the British Museum, where they now reside. Over the past 40 years there have been several requests from the Greek government to return the Marbles to Greece. Greece sees Lord Elgin's acquisition as looting and feels they are entitled to the return of their cultural property. The argument from the UK's perspective is that the sculptures were legally acquired from the government (while Greece was under Ottoman control) and returning them would set

a precedent that would undermine the status of artifacts in museums all over the world. A less compelling argument now that there is a modern museum at the site in Greece has been that the British Museum is in a better position to protect, display and care for the sculptures.

Although Cerro Gordo is not navigating the international displacement of artifacts like the circumstances surrounding the Elgin Marbles, the site does bring up several concerns that relate to ownership of the past. One of the larger issues surrounding ownership of the past relates to its commodification, the idea that the past is a resource that can be exploited. While the archaeological record is continually created, artifacts are a finite and nonrenewable resource. The remainder of this chapter will discuss concerns related to archaeological and museological best practices regarding issues surrounding artifact collection and sale.

To begin, I will briefly touch on the issue of legality before delving into ethics, a core focus in new museology and anthropology. Legality and ethics are intertwined, but the burden of upholding legal requirements and the ramifications for not upholding those requirements are weighted differently than purely ethical obligations. From a legal perspective, the owner(s) of Cerro Gordo are not subject to the same legal constraints as a museum, or even stewards of public lands. Cerro Gordo is legally purchased private property and therefore any artifacts, structures, or other cultural heritage fall under the owner's jurisdiction to do with as they see fit. From an ethical standpoint, however, Cerro Gordo as presented on *Ghost Town Living* opens a conversation about the delicate balance

of ethical considerations at the heart of running a heritage site, especially one with a large public audience.

One of the concerns at Cerro Gordo from an archaeological standpoint is the approach to artifact collection demonstrated on *Ghost Town Living*. There are numerous surface finds at Cerro Gordo due to the number of objects discarded by miners, such as bottles, tobacco tins, etc. Artifact collection is frequently incorporated into videos and Underwood films himself collecting artifacts on hikes or mine explorations to bring back to town.

Considering that Cerro Gordo is private property, legally speaking Underwood has legal right to take and do whatever he pleases with artifacts found on his property. However, both the act of taking artifacts without proper documentation and showcasing that behavior on a large public platform create ethical dilemmas from an archaeological perspective. For one, important archaeological context is being lost that could provide additional information about the history of Cerro Gordo – information that also seems to be desired by the town’s caretakers. Perhaps more concerning is the potential for viewers to mimic this behavior in other places. In contexts other than private land, the removal of artifacts from a site is considered looting. This behavior by visitors is why locations like Bodie have such strong warnings on their website to dissuade people from engaging in theft and vandalism.

Similarly, in December 2021 a video was posted to *Ghost Town Living* called "Metal Detecting An Abandoned Ghost Town (With 50 People!)<sup>10</sup>." While metal detectors are sometimes used for archaeological purposes, issues can arise when metal detectors are used as a hobby. When metal detecting is presented without nuance and clear ethical procedural guidelines on such a popular channel, it has the potential to promote damaging behaviors. Judging by the comments on the video, people seem thrilled at the idea of collecting artifacts with metal detectors but from an archaeological standpoint, this is not ethical or proper procedure for artifact collection. The video states that the artifacts were collected to preserve Cerro Gordo's history, but they are really only preserving a portion of its history by retrieving the objects without context. Most people probably would not consider the possible negative implications of haphazardly collecting artifacts, and Underwood presumably did have good intentions in getting community members involved in an activity at Cerro Gordo. While it was wonderful to see so many people of different ages volunteer and be invested in the history of Cerro Gordo, this opportunity could alternatively serve as an avenue for professionally guided artifact collection and expand the educational outreach of the location.

Another ethically contentious situation at Cerro Gordo is presented by the selective sale of artifacts. Tragedy struck Cerro Gordo on June 15th, 2020 when the American Hotel burned to the ground, likely due to faulty electrical wiring and newspaper insulated walls ("Cerro Gordo General Store" 2021). This was a devastating blow to the site as

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<sup>10</sup> Accessed September 2023: <https://youtu.be/O9Ba75OMwC4?si=eUi3nBd2C7pRlgEr>

both the structure and its contents were irrevocably destroyed. One of the few things that survived the fire were the nails used in the construction of the hotel. To raise funds to rebuild the American Hotel, the recovered nails were listed on the online Cerro Gordo merchandise store for a suggested donation ranging from ten to a hundred dollars. The website stated, "now you can own a piece of American History and help us rebuild the hotel for generations to come" ("Cerro Gordo General Store" 2021). Listed as "Original Square Nail From American Hotel (1871)", each order included a nail and information card stamped with the American Hotel logo. They completely sold out<sup>11</sup>.

In general, the sale of artifacts is considered to be problematic as it contributes to the creation of a desirable market for cultural and heritage objects. The demand for artifacts contributes to looting which results in both the destruction of original context and the removal of heritage from descendant populations and the public as a whole. While this instance is more complicated and would not be considered looting, it does shine a light on the complex issue of artifact sales. If left alone, the nails would have become part of the archaeological record but since the American Hotel is being rebuilt, the artifacts would not have been left in situ but discarded with the dirt dug for the foundation. However, selling artifacts from the property may unwittingly drive a market for artifacts from the site (especially as Cerro Gordo grows in popularity) and increase instances of theft on their property and the surrounding local areas. *Ghost Town Living* could also cease the

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<sup>11</sup> The "antiques section" has since been removed from the Cerro Gordo Store website altogether and this listing page was taken down.

practice of using artifacts as giveaways to subscribers on their channel for the same reasons.

In addition to this thesis, anthropologists have been in contact with Cerro Gordo a few times over the years. *Images of America: Cerro Gordo* features a picture of an older man and woman reviewing the contents of a binder, a dozen white bankers boxes stacked on the ground in front of them. The caption reads “archaeologists from Antelope Valley College in Lancaster, California, worked with Mike Patterson to catalog and box digs found on his property. Most of the items were from the site of the original Mexican *vasos*, or furnaces, which smelted the silver and lead ore in the early days” (Vargo and Vargo 2012:118). Although I do not have the full details of this visit or its aftermath, this image demonstrates the precedent of collaboration with archaeologists at Cerro Gordo prior to Underwood’s acquisition of the town.

In 2022 archaeologist Joshua Emmitt published an article titled “YouTube as Historic Process: The Transfiguration of the Cerro Gordo Mines through Ghost Town Living.” In his discussion on *Ghost Town Living*, Emmitt states, “archaeologists will likely cringe at some of the methods used in the videos, which have included metal detectors, mechanical diggers, and dynamite . . . Although the resultant videos have a ‘wow’ factor that suits the YouTube medium, one can question whether these methods were strictly necessary” but also notes the positives and potential of *Ghost Town Living*. I will touch on some of Emmitt’s other points in later chapters, but he ultimately determines that “long-term interest by individuals such as Underwood – perhaps advised by archaeologists, historians, and conservators – can do more for the public image of

archaeology than archaeologists themselves can, in what may be a mutually beneficial relationship.” Underwood saw the paper and invited Emmitt to chat, featuring the interaction on *Ghost Town Living*, perhaps a bit ironically on an episode titled “We Found A Secret Silver Stash While Metal Detecting!” Underwood fully acknowledged in the video that he is not an archaeologist but was excited to learn more about ways to improve from the discipline.

## CHAPTER 3 - YOUTUBE

Although museology has begun to explore the implications of how the internet is shaping the future of information sharing in the discipline, such as how "the increased availability of the Internet has affected museums in a number of ways, from largely replacing written texts as the primary source of information to enabling even small, remote museums to communicate with a worldwide audience" (Simmons 2016: 214), the discipline could expand the discourse surrounding the internet's impact on democratizing information<sup>12</sup>, for better and worse. The concepts of democratizing information and community engagement have become increasingly popular topics in new museology: "we look at the museum as sharing power with its visitors and stakeholders, but also negotiating professionalism and the role of the museum in a modern society" (Runnel 2014:9). These conversations have spawned concepts such as participatory museums (Simon 2010), and will continue to evolve with the changing digital landscape. *Ghost Town Living* can be situated within this broader discourse.

YouTube, and social media platforms as a whole, have been criticized for a number of issues, including: fostering echo chambers (Brown et al. 2022), spreading misinformation (Hussein et al. 2020), and incentivizing sensationalism to the point of encouraging poor behavior. In the case of *Ghost Town Living*, a concern is the potential for propagating revisionist history and questionable anthropological practices – even unintentionally. One criticism of the way heritage is represented online notes, "social

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<sup>12</sup> I use the term *democratizing information* to describe a shift in power that allows a wider sector of the public to engage in the acquisition and dissemination of information.

media applications do potentially more harm than good - by allowing archaeology and the future of collective cultural heritage to be swept away by naïve initiatives without strategic oversight" (De Gruyter Open 2015). This chapter outlines the functional impacts of YouTube as a platform, the allure of *Ghost Town Living*, and the benefits and pitfalls of how Cerro Gordo is presented on YouTube.

### *YouTube as a Platform*

To better understand *Ghost Town Living*, I will first return to examining YouTube as a platform. YouTube is the second most popular social media network globally, in terms of monthly active users (Dixon 2023), and is the second most visited website after Google, with over 34 billion monthly visitors (Neufeld 2021). The platform's popularity allows content to reach thousands, even millions, of viewers with relative ease, a nearly incomprehensible audience compared to analog forms of media dissemination such as newspapers.

YouTube is notable not only for its popularity, but its emphasis on long-form video content, in contrast to many other social media sites that primarily utilize images, video clips, or text posts. Long-form videos allow creators<sup>13</sup> to include substantially more content than can be contained within a photo or text post, but long-form content also requires a higher level of investment from the viewer due to the time it takes to watch the

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<sup>13</sup> A note on terminology, the terms "content creator" and "YouTuber" will be used interchangeably to describe the people who make and post content on YouTube.

video. This time commitment is further invested into a channel when a viewer subscribes to the channel. By subscribing, the viewer is signing up to regularly be notified on their YouTube feed when content from that YouTuber is posted, presumably indicating a higher level of interest in that channel, although as Lange points out, “watching videos regularly involves a more intensive level of commitment than just clicking a Subscribe button” (2019:15).

Content creators, and by extension, advertisers, use metrics such as subscriber count, views, and engagement to gauge success and popularity on the platform. For instance, “media specialists estimate that a healthy viewer-to-subscriber ratio is usually from 10 to 14 percent for those who wish to commercialize their YouTube account” (Lange 2019:15). Some channel analytics are viewable by the public, but YouTubers can view additional metrics about their audience such as detailed breakdowns of demographic data, watch times, and more. Views are generally considered to be the most important metric for content creators as views correlate to audience size and translate to monetary gain (Forbush 2022:67). A variety of factors, including the elusive YouTube algorithm, impact the number of views a particular video may receive and the subsequent subscriptions the channel may gain.

While fully unpacking the complexities of the YouTube algorithm is beyond the scope of this project, it is a useful jumping-off point to explore some of the factors that impact YouTube views and the perceived popularity of channels. Recommendations from personal contacts are one way viewers may learn about *Ghost Town Living*, but the

YouTube algorithm plays a powerful role in disseminating content to new potential viewers. The algorithm showcases videos from a channel to a particular subset of YouTube users who in turn follow through in watching that video, possibly also participating in other engagement activities such as commenting or subscribing to the channel. Content creators are cognizant of this reality; drawing on the work of Gillespie (2017), Forbush has argued that “the way that [viewership] data is shown and processed through the platform (YouTube shows highly viewed videos more than less viewed videos) is internalized by people on the platform who then make themselves algorithmically recognizable. It is this process that shows how the material agency and structure of YouTube reconfigures the creator” (2022:67). I will discuss ways that *Ghost Town Living* can be seen as interacting with the algorithm in the following section.

Producing content that is seen as authentic and intimate is another important consideration for channels like *Ghost Town Living*. How do viewers come to see the content on a channel as representing something real, rather than fictional (in the sense of scripted or contrived)? A number of scholars in media anthropology have sought to identify the different ways in which media – in content, production, and infrastructure – contribute to the production of this sense of authentic representation – what Geertz called the “really real” (Geertz 1973:112). As Larkin demonstrated in his discussion of Nigerian cinema houses (Larkin 2002), the experience of media across all of these dimensions supports the production of the “aura of utter actuality” (Geertz 1973:112) that actors take for granted as the basis for their social action. As the media anthropologist Thomas Malaby has put it: “the infrastructures of mediated environments can become naturalized

for their users, just as more familiar infrastructures, such as road systems, do” (2022:105).

Within the context of digital platforms, Malaby has extended this discussion by drawing on Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter’s concept of *remediation*: “the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another” (1999:59); “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (1999: 273). An important component of effective claims about the really real in digital media, Thomas Malaby argues, is the remediation of other media forms of production and infrastructure (Malaby 2022). Such remediations, as Grusin and Bolter first recognized, may be deployed to call attention to themselves or, by contrast, to disguise their use. Grusin and Bolter put forth “hypermediacy” to signal the former, while Malaby suggests “hypomediacy” as its counterpart: “if ‘hypermediacy’ is ‘a style of remediation whose goal is to remind the [user] of the medium..., then here we would offer the term ‘hypomediacy’ to pair with it, meaning the style of remediation whose goal is to conceal the medium from the user” (Malaby 2022: 110). He goes on to suggest that, of the two, hypomediacy appears to be bound up more closely with how the real or natural become produced through user experience, exploring how in digital games and game-like contexts, explicit game elements (rules, spinners, dice) become handled behind the scenes – that is, tacitly – by the code – allowing those platforms to present an experience that mirrors more closely the infrastructure-saturated everyday, in all of its complex contingency. In the case of *Ghost Town Living*, Underwood is engaged in hypomediacy most evidently through the remediation of production techniques drawn from film and television media, but the

platform itself is also involved in hypomediation as it directs users through and across its content.

### *Production and Content*

As a video streaming platform, production quality is directly related to the perceived authority and appeal of a channel. Unlike many newer Youtubers whose channels showcase a gradual progression of improvement in video quality, the image and sound quality of *Ghost Town Living* has been consistently good from the start of the channel and has only continued to improve. Underwood regularly utilizes drone footage, Go-Pros, and other equipment to capture unique perspectives of the property and his experiences. The production quality gives the channel a very polished, almost documentary-like quality. In a way this professional slickness contrasts with the do-it-yourself, rugged demeanor Underwood portrays of the town and his experiences living there.

It also is successful in drawing the viewer into the mythos of Cerro Gordo. It is almost as if you, the viewer, are joining Underwood on his investigations of the picturesque landscapes and eerie mineshafts through first-person videography.

Underwood is the charismatic focal point of the channel, portraying the rugged and hardworking embodiment of the moral legacy of the town. Pictures of him in the town bear a striking resemblance to the miners photographed there decades before. As he takes the viewer along on his adventures in the town, you feel like you are there with him,

joining in on the adventures and rooting for the shared success of the town as well as its owner.

As discussed in Chapter Two, people have a fascination with abandoned places like ghost towns. A phenomenon that is similar in some ways to Cerro Gordo in *Ghost Town Living* is Urban Exploring. Urban Exploring (Urbex) can be understood as the exploration of forgotten and abandoned places, usually with a focus on man-made structures.

YouTube hosts extensive communities dedicated to exploring abandoned locations. For example, *The Proper People* is a similarly sized YouTube channel to *Ghost Town Living*.

Documentation through video and photography is an important aspect of Urbex and the sense of adventure, even danger, present in the content is part of the genre's appeal.

These traits are mirrored in *Ghost Town Living* and are one element of the channel's allure. This sensationalism is also something *Ghost Town Living* has been criticized for by some of the people I interviewed.

*Ghost Town Living* showcases a wide variety of content and activities, including Underwood's forays into the mines of Cerro Gordo. While Underwood's exploration of abandoned mineshafts is certainly dangerous and perhaps ill advised, it is captivating and exciting<sup>14</sup>. During explorations, Underwood straps a GoPro to his chest which creates a first-person point of view for the watcher. It has a similar appeal to found footage horror

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<sup>14</sup> To his credit, in an early mining exploration video Underwood prefaced that exploring mines is dangerous and should not be attempted by viewers (“Exploring the Most Dangerous Mine at Cerro Gordo (For the Last Time)”). [https://youtu.be/eGgMfDTcum8?si=BT3h-FV\\_ciFmQt94](https://youtu.be/eGgMfDTcum8?si=BT3h-FV_ciFmQt94)

movies or documentaries on thrilling sports; you are taken along for the ride and experience a sense of danger through the camerawork.

While some of the people I interviewed were fans of the channel and praised the visitation it brought to the town, others were more critical of the way Cerro Gordo is being represented on *Ghost Town Living*. One person described that “what I see is someone who, you know, granted is having a fun time and is doing good things for the town and is like trying to improve them, but I also see someone who is playing a game of algorithms and trying to get the likes and the subscribes and whatever else and know you, gaining their financial base through that.” This interviewee acknowledged that that is in some ways “how the game works these days” but felt it cheapened the experience because the “community that you’re creating with a fan base that’s just in it to see what crazy thing you do next.” This person was concerned that the clickbait and sensationalism made it feel like the channel was more focused on Underwood “and the cool things he can do, and it’s less about engaging in the history of the town.”

This is an example of how the infrastructure of YouTube is inseparable from its content. While YouTubers are not privy to the full functionality of the YouTube algorithm, they are certainly aware of it and have developed ways to work within the system. As Forbush notes, “a creator has some control over search and discovery algorithms, but it is limited to having a good title and thumbnail. Search and discovery algorithms take videos and present them to viewers as recommendations or search results based primarily on title, thumbnail, and sometimes description” (2022: 66). The first portion of this section touched on how the type of content plays a role in capturing

interest, but so does the presentation of that content in the thumbnail and title of a video. This limited amount of information is how a potential viewer makes the decision on whether to click on the video, so content creators must instantly capture their attention. The four Ghost Town Living videos with the most views are “I Spent My Life Savings On An Abandoned Ghost Town,” “A Grueling Hike Into ‘The Most Remote Ghost Town In America’”, “Turning 100 Pounds of Silver Ore Into A Ring!” and “A Year Living In An Abandoned Ghost Town.” The first thumbnail is a photo of the town superimposed with the words “I Bought a Ghost Town,” two thumbnails showcase Underwood outside of historic buildings, and the final thumbnail highlights a smiling Underwood holding a large chunk of ore in one hand and a ring in the other.

In the description of the first video on *Ghost Town Living*, "I Spent My Life Savings On An Abandoned Ghost Town", Underwood states that "the type of things that might lead you here are interests in ghost towns, abandoned mining towns, abandoned cities, California history, the zombie apocalypse, ghost stories, scary stories, nature, death valley, lone pine CA, mines, exploring, overnight challenges, exploration, urban exploration and yes theory." This statement is riddled with buzzwords and speaks to a level of awareness about the power of algorithms, perhaps even a calculated effort to drive the algorithm to promote the channel to particular individuals – those who would be interested in these topics.

### *Digital Preservation and Accessibility*

The act of creating videos and posting them to the *Ghost Town Living* YouTube channel serves as a form of digital preservation of Cerro Gordo as a heritage site through video documentation. Emmitt asserts that “perhaps one of the most valuable contributions to documenting the history of the town are the videos themselves” (2022) Videography, photography, and other digitization methods have become increasingly valuable assets for preserving the past. In the anthropology realm, databases, collections digitization, digital museums, and other internet-based assets are expanding the virtual access of cultural heritage.

One example in the nonprofit realm is CyArk. Their website states that "CyArk strives to connect new audiences to heritage through digital documentation and the creation of place-based web, mobile and immersive experiences that inspire reflection, conversation and imagination." A core goal for their program is to reach new audiences and create more equitable access to cultural heritage by reducing geographic and physical barriers.

Similarly to CyArk, one of the benefits YouTube can provide is access to a heritage site. Since aspects of Cerro Gordo can be experienced online, it provides increased access to the site to a wider audience than would have the means to visit in-person. People who do not have the ability to easily visit can still experience aspects of Cerro Gordo through *Ghost Town Living*. In addition to cost and other prohibiting factors, Cerro Gordo's location within the Inyo Mountains increases difficulty for visitation. Although volunteers

at the site remarked that they had even seen cars like Toyota Priuses make it up the road to reach Cerro Gordo, the trek ideally requires a vehicle with enough power and ground clearance to make it up the steep eight-mile gravel and dirt road.

Town Manager Steven explained that the road up to Cerro Gordo is owned by the county, which further complicates access. As a county road, the majority of care and maintenance is technically within the hands of the county. However, since it is not a major thoroughfare, it is not a priority for the county to fix it when damaged. In the past few years, major weather events have “washed out” the road and made it largely impassable. There is an understanding between the town and the county that since the county is unable to fix the road in a timely manner, the folks at Cerro Gordo can grade the road themselves. The county does seem to step in to grade the road appropriately once a year. However, in order to make major improvements to the road there would need to be a conversation with the county. The county has little incentive to improve the road “unless Cerro Gordo is like some huge like enterprise that like pulls in a bunch of money for the county” and Cerro Gordo lacks the funding to undertake such a large project themselves even if they were to be granted approval to upgrade the road. With this discussion in mind, it is unlikely that access up to Cerro Gordo will improve anytime in the near future.

Steven also mentioned that the team at Cerro Gordo are working on increasing amenities for visitors at the site which will hopefully alleviate some of the in-person visitation needs. In the rebuild of the American Hotel there are plans for a restaurant in addition to overnight accommodations. A large hurdle the town faces is finding a reliable

water supply. Currently much of the water is transported from a nearby town 1000 gallons at a time, which Steven acknowledges is not sustainable for a running hotel. Even though this is a historic town, upgrading anything at Cerro Gordo require compliance with various codes and regulations. Underwood has been in communication with a county inspector as they rebuild the hotel to ensure it is built safely and up to modern standards.

Another accessibility consideration for Cerro Gordo is the terrain. The rough terrain within and surrounding the town is not accessible for people with mobility constraints. There are many steep hills, unstable ground conditions, and narrow spaces to navigate. Considering that the town was built for mining in the mid-1800s, disability accessibility - or general safety for that matter - was not of much consideration. The high elevation also causes some people to experience altitude sickness. While improvements could be made to ease some of the accessibility constraints in the town, *Ghost Town Living* also provides an alternative way to experience Cerro Gordo without physically visiting the site.

## CHAPTER 4 - VISITING CERRO GORDO

Stepping out of our rented SUV to survey the landscape of Cerro Gordo for the first time, I felt a shivering sensation of déjà vu as the drizzling rain formed into pea-sized pellets of hail that bounced off our faces. Much like the first video on the *Ghost Town Living* channel, my own introduction to the physical manifestation of Cerro Gordo was met with a dramatic entrance – sans the thematic music. In June of 2023 I embarked on a trip to visit the genesis of this project: Cerro Gordo, California. What was initially intended to be a straightforward field visit developed into an unexpected adventure and resulted in a much deeper understanding of the present realities facing Cerro Gordo and the people who live and work in the town.

From Milwaukee the trek to Cerro Gordo was going to require a multi-step travel plan. My significant other, Tommy, graciously agreed to act as my quasi-research assistant, or perhaps more accurately, chauffeur and emotional support for this journey. The closest direct flight to Cerro Gordo from Milwaukee would take us to the Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas, Nevada. The initial itinerary I planned would allocate the first day of the trip, Saturday, as a travel day. Upon arrival in Las Vegas, we were going to pick up the rental car and then make the over four-and-a-half-hour drive to Lone Pine, where we were staying for the first leg of the trip. The next day, Sunday, would focus on the site visit with an extra day built in in case we needed to make another trip up to Cerro Gordo. Unfortunately, the weather had other plans.

With the clock counting down on our flight to Las Vegas, it was becoming increasingly evident that the forecast on Sunday called for thunderstorms. Considering the mountainous location of the town, severe weather could make the road to Cerro Gordo treacherous, or even impassable. Previous severe weather events had washed out the roads for weeks – a circumstance that would render the trip a loss. Saturday could be my only chance to make it up to Cerro Gordo, so we pivoted plans and were in for a long day. Rather than visiting Cerro Gordo on Sunday as planned, we would need to fly into Vegas, drive to California, and make our way up to Cerro Gordo all on Saturday.

After a sleepless night and less than comfortable early morning flight, we picked up our rental SUV at the airport for the next leg of the journey and were on our way to Cerro Gordo. Printed paper maps outlining our route in hand, we would make our way through Nevada before cutting through Death Valley State Park to reach Cerro Gordo. As soon as we drove out of the rental lot it was apparent how different the landscape was from the flat fields and humidity of the Midwest. The entire trip was centered in the Mojave Desert and as the long expanses of Nevada highway bled into Death Valley National Park, the rock formations and sand dunes took my breath away. I felt like a

visitor to a movie set or an alien planet – it was apparent why this region has become famous as a film set backdrop.



*Figure 3: On the road to Cerro Gordo.*

Reflecting on this portion of the journey, I felt a disconcerting sinking feeling in my stomach every time our cell signal dropped – especially as we trekked through long hot stretches of road and steep mountainous terrain. Although I am old enough to remember a time without the luxury of GPS, internet and cellular connection have become a comfortable reality and safety net. It is difficult to imagine a time where people made this journey without even a map’s assistance or neatly maintained asphalt roads, yet for decades people regularly traveled to and from mining towns like Cerro Gordo.

After hours of driving, Cerro Gordo was now less than 20 miles away. Despite checking the weather earlier that morning, the sky was slowly being consumed by gray clouds. Continuing down the road, we reached a sign warning, “road closed – flooding.” We turned down a side road to reevaluate the situation. Double checking the GPS route, the blocked road was the only thoroughfare to reach Cerro Gordo. We had come too far to turn back so we decided to take the risk and maneuvered the SUV around the sign. Thankfully there was no flooding in sight and we eventually made it to the turn that would lead us up to Cerro Gordo.

Greeted by the Cerro Gordo sign, I felt a tingling sense of anticipation – we had almost made it. However, it was unclear whether the town was open for visitation as the handmade “open” sign sat askew below the town sign. In the distance a caravan of jeeps was trekking towards us, two or three already stopped a few meters away from the sign. Tommy pulled the SUV up near the sign. We debated a few moments before I hopped out onto the gravel road. The man sitting inside his jeep chatting with a colleague was probably confused why a small woman in a burnt orange jacket was hurrying towards him. I cautiously waved at him through his open window, shouting over, “Is the town open?” The wind must have whipped away my words, as a confused “huh” greeted me in response. Closing the distance between us I repeated myself, this time receiving a reassuring “Yeah, the town’s open.” I thanked the man, rushing back to Tommy to deliver the good news – the town was open, and we could continue our journey up.

The next hurdle of the trip was to trek up the infamous Yellow Grade Road. In a deceptively short eight miles, the road climbs from 3,600 ft to 8,500 ft in elevation (Varney 1990: 14). In 1978 Cerro Gordo was described as “a town that has to be reached via one of the most torturous roads leading to a western mining camp” (Miller 1978:33). This reputation has persisted, as 12 years later it was described as “negotiable, but not for the faint of heart” (Varney 1990: 14). Underwood has also been open about the difficulties the road to the town presents in many of his videos. The best example of this is “Solving a Massive Water Problem at the Ghost Town” where Underwood, with the assistance of some friends and fellow content creators, took a 40,000-gallon water tank up to Cerro Gordo on a military truck – a feat that required substantial planning, skill, and probably a good bit of luck.

As my experience will hopefully illustrate, video footage does not do justice to the reality of the challenges the Yellow Grade Road presents. Cameras tend to have a smoothing effect on the landscape. While beautiful, drone shots do not fully encapsulate the steep hills and narrow passages necessary to traverse up the road. We were about to take on this road in a rented SUV, a choice I would not advise. Tommy graciously agreed to be the driver for this trip, a decision I am forever thankful for as I do not think either of us were fully prepared for the drive we were about to take, nor for the level of skill that was going to be needed to make it there safely.

The first leg of the road was a deceptively gentle incline on an unpaved gravel road. From this initial viewpoint, I momentarily scoffed at the reports of difficult terrain. While I could see the growing hills in the distance, the road looked like it would cut through and we would be there shortly. However, the convoy of jeeps, a vehicle optimized for rugged terrain and off-roading, should have served as an ominous warning of the road to come because soon enough the road would begin to wind into steep rocky hills.



*Figure 4: The Yellow Grade Road.*

Within a few minutes, red ridges engulfed our vehicle on either side as we wound our way into the start of the mountain. The path became narrower, at points the rocky faces flanking each side of the road. The incline was also increasing, but not in the smooth

leveled increases of a paved highway but rather in craggy hills and dips and tight turns. The grey sky had finally opened up and it was starting to drizzle, turning the gravelly road into slick mud. Halfway up we passed an older couple leaning over the open hood of their vehicle. They had clearly broken down on their way up the road. Lacking any tools in our rental to assist, I waved at them and made a note to stop if they were still there on our way back down.

One particularly harrowing section required making it over a steep hill in a narrow passageway. Deep treads in the dirt showed the effort of numerous vehicles to overcome the ascent. Tommy pressed down on the gas, the SUV tires squelching in the rain. The initial push wasn't enough, and we slowly rolled backwards as the risk of getting stuck felt more and more possible. The tension in the vehicle was palpable. With another push forward, we finally cleared the incline and made it to the other side.

Another notable feature of the road, or perhaps lack of feature, is the absence of guard rails. This is not uncommon for less traversed roads in the West, but as a Midwesterner accustomed to flat expanses of corn and soybean fields, it was a disconcerting discovery. One of the later stretches of the Yellow Grade Road hugs a cliff side. The knuckles on my fist were white as I tightly clenched the door pull of the SUV and I dared not take more than a glance over the edge as the queasy knots in my stomach tightened and constricted.

Finally, the town appeared in the distance, framed by a gray mountain ridge. A handful of buildings dotted the scrubby brushland. I spied a few house-like buildings, a

metal-sided building, and a church. The fresh wood of the American Hotel rebuild stood out from the rest of the town, as did the bright orange excavator beside it. Tommy pulled the SUV into a gravel area designated as a mini parking lot. My legs felt like jelly as I stepped out into the crisp mountain air. I wrapped my coat tighter around me, pulling up the hood to stave off the rain. Staked in the ground on the side of the craggy incline leading towards the nearest buildings was a wood sign with white hand painted letters that direct us to “check in at flag”. Trudging up the hill we got the first feel of the high elevation and steep ground. Closing the distance towards the American flag, two men stepped out onto a fenced porch to greet us together with a large friendly dog. As we made our introductions, pellets of hail begin raining from the sky - just like in the first *Ghost Town Living* video.



Figure 5: Cerro Gordo buildings, photo courtesy of the Friends of Cerro Gordo.

Directly across from the porch I stood on, which I soon learned was the Cerro Gordo General Store (better known as the Cerro Gordo Museum) was the Belshaw house.

Standing on the porch of this house eating a banana was a tall thin man with unmistakable red hair and beard; Brent Underwood. I couldn't help but find the situation both ridiculous and comical. Here I was, standing sleep deprived and shaken up from the journey, across from the man at heart of the town I had traveled 2000 miles to visit.

Tommy and I were soon ushered inside the open door to get out of the increasingly aggressive barrage of hail, and I got my first glimpse of the Cerro Gordo Museum, a frequent backdrop in *Ghost Town Living*. To the right of the door an L-Shaped counter displays two vintage cash registers along with various other items – a visitor book with a rusty hook for a paper weight, a plastic stand of brochures about the town, an old glass



Figure 6: Cash registers and various items in the Cerro Gordo Museum.

bottle, a box of LMNT drink powders, a 3D typographic map and a few other miscellaneous items. Another counter on this side of the room is covered in a display of Cerro Gordo merchandise – hats, pins, and patches. T-shirts and sweatshirts in various colors are displayed hanging from the wall.

The back wall is dominated by two huge sets of bellows blocking the wallpaper - subtle stripes and clumps of pastel flowers on a cream background. Pushed against the wall below is a waist-high narrow wooden cabinet cluttered with antique household items. Pots and pans, a candelabra, unidentifiable rusty metal chunks. An old-fashioned metal heater sits in front. The ground is covered in a thick layer of greyish-brown dust.

Farther to the left sits a large open trunk. The wall on this side of the room is inset farther than the rest of the wall and has several built-in shelves. An impressive collection of glass bottles adorns the top shelf, the shelves below collecting piles of miscellaneous clutter. The main source of lighting for this section of the room is a window on the left wall. Large shelves and another countertop stretch from next to the window to the



Figure 7: Ghost Town Living backdrop in the Cerro Gordo Museum.

opposite wall, displaying a variety of antiques and found objects. I don't realize it until passing by again later, but these shelves have served as a backdrop for many *Ghost Town Living* videos. My attention is grabbed by a large, framed photo propped up on a chair. The image depicts a military truck hauling a massive cylindrical tank – the town's new 40,000-gallon water tank – up a steep incline, followed in suit by several other vehicles.



Figure 8: Photo in the Cerro Gordo Museum.

Myself, Tommy, and the Town Manager Steven crowd around the open door to watch the hail fall. A volunteer who lives in the town steps out to pick a few pieces up,

laughing and remarking about the unusual timing as Underwood walks over - hail bouncing off his baseball cap. He warmly greets us and welcomes us to the town. I nervously joke about making a grand entrance and our surprise about being greeted with a hailstorm in June when we arrived. The consensus of the three men who lived there was that this was just another day in Cerro Gordo. While it was an especially exciting phenomenon, it was not unexpected - the weather on the mountain was unpredictable and changed quickly.

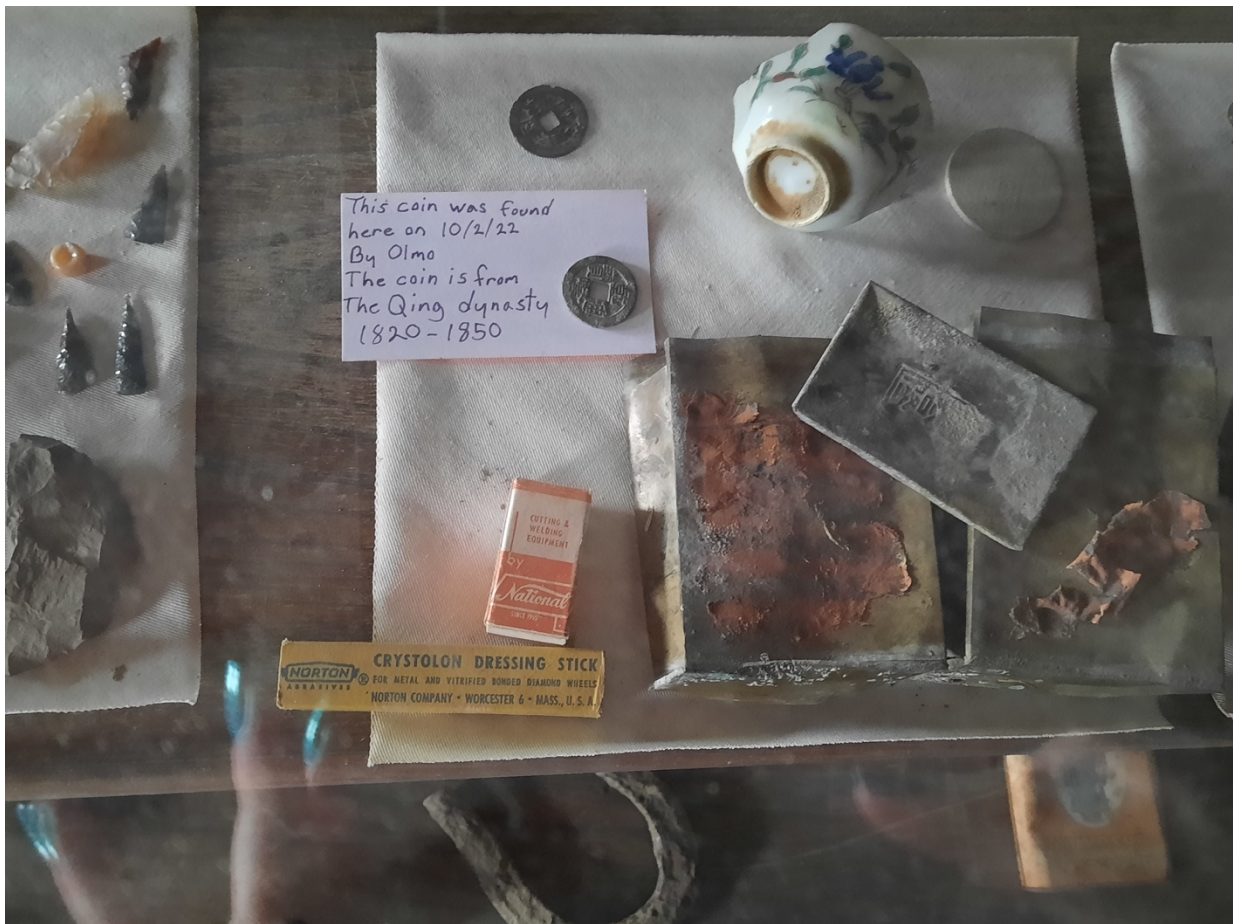


*Figure 9: Powder boxes and dynamite room doors.*

After making small talk, Underwood offered to show us around the museum.

The front room of the museum opens on to another room at the back of the building. Stepping across the threshold, to my right is a pile of wooden debris including powder boxes and wooden doors off their hinges leaning against the wall. They are plastered with warnings like “DANGER” and “high explosives,” a call back to their original purpose – closing off rooms that housed hazardous mining materials. A quick second glance confirms the powder boxes are empty. Housed in this room are several glass

display cases. The group of us trickles in and I slowly walk through, trying to take in the whole space. Underwood sheepishly wipes some of the dust off the top of a glass cabinet so we can get a better look inside. A few smaller artifacts are laid out on cream-colored squares, perhaps made of muslin. One square is dotted with projectile points and other lithics. The square beside it has a variety of objects, including a coin sitting on a handwritten note that reads “this coin was found here on 10/2/22 by Olmo the coin is from the Quing dynasty 1820 – 1850.” It is one of the only artifacts I have seen in the museum with an object label or written interpretation<sup>15</sup>.



*Figure 10: Coins and other objects found at Cerro Gordo.*

<sup>15</sup> I take up a critical discussion of the museum and site practices observed during this brief visit in the following section of this chapter.

Paper documents are laid out on the top of the adjoining case – maps, a photo, and a tattered, yellowing piece of paper titled, “NOTICE OF LOCATION”. The shelves below hold various mining tools like sledgehammers and pickaxe heads. This room is also illuminated by the natural light from the two windows, which at this point is somewhat dim due to the passing storm. A miniature diorama, presumably of a mining claim, and a glass display case full of shell casings and three guns, line the adjacent wall. The top of this case has a small shelving display lined with two dozen rocks on mounts, a few with small labels denoting the variety of minerals. The rest of the case-top is scattered with more paper maps, shell casings lined up in rows, a pipe, and a heavily worn object made of either cloth or leather. Behind the case on the wall are a cluster of four shadowboxes displaying more objects and a trio of hand painted snapshots of Cerro Gordo, two featuring the town’s church. Dozens of moths cling to the inside panes of each window in the building.

After touring the museum, we’re encouraged to explore the rest of Cerro Gordo on our own. As quickly as the storm came, it passed. The only evidence that it had even rained was the wet ground and pellets of melting hail. The gravel shifted under my shoes as I climbed the path up to more buildings. Something immediately striking to a visitor are the piles of objects strewn around throughout the town, which I had never noticed before while watching *Ghost Town Living*. Although fresh and breezy, the air felt thin. I found myself winded from the high altitude trekking up the steep hill to the top point of the town.

As outlined in the town's informational pamphlet, Cerro Gordo is made up of eleven core buildings and a few notable historic sites. A handful of the buildings are open to the public, with the remainder closed off to serve as private residences or for safety and preservation reasons. While a few buildings are contemporary to Cerro Gordo's heyday in the late 1800s, several others such as the Museum, Gordon House, Chapel, and Bunk house date to Cerro Gordo's "Zinc Era" in the early 1900s ("Welcome to Cerro Gordo"). The rebuild of the American Hotel is underway on the original site of the American Hotel, which was built in 1871 and unfortunately burned to the ground in 2020.

The next buildings we approach are the assay office and the "cribs" which served as a brothel in the town's heyday. The cribs are one of the more dilapidated structures we saw in the town. Looking into one room, light filters in through missing slats in the walls and the floorboards are loose. Two rusty metal bedframes are the main furniture in the room and a strange assortment of items – a red wig, a Hawaiian shirt, a pillow, miscellaneous clothing – are strewn haphazardly around the space. In contrast, the assay office appears neat and in good condition. Sections of gray aged wood contrast with areas of red hued wood, alluding to possible renovations in recent years. The Cerro Gordo town pamphlet notes that the building served as an office but is currently designed to be a replica assay office<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> An assay office tests the purity of precious metals.



*Figure 11: The Cribs.*

Heading back outside, a metal plated outhouse across the way serves as one of the few public bathroom options in town. The other side of town has a variety of other buildings such as the Belshaw House, Gorden House, and Hunter House. These buildings are used as private residences and other purposes so we can only view them from the outside. This portion of town is also where most of the animals reside. Early videos on *Ghost Town Living* featured Underwood putting together the animal enclosure and pen, a ramshackle amalgamation of metal siding and wood, and bringing in the animals. Goats, chickens, and alpacas scamper about the enclosures. I recognize a few of them from features on the channel, Tofu the goat even has her own Instagram page.

The last area of the town to view hosts the Bunkhouse and Chapel. In the past the Bunkhouse housed miners, but it now serves as housing for town volunteers, so we only viewed it from a distance. The Chapel, however, is open to enter. The building once functioned as a mechanics garage but was converted into a chapel and makeshift theater. Rows of orange seats sit opposite a large hanging screen. A stained-glass window depicting Jesus and another figure adorns the wall directly above the screen.

Approximately half an hour into our visit, we had watched as a pickup truck pulling a camper rolled into the small parking lot. I was shocked that they were able to maneuver the camper up the road and excited to speak with more visitors. However, the new arrivals turned out to be personal friends of Underwood, so we gave them space to catch up while we explored the rest of the town. An added benefit of their arrival was that later in the afternoon, Underwood offered to let us tag along with them to see the Hoist House and library – areas usually closed off to public visitation.

The Hoist House and library are located above the main section of the town on a hill. The library was formerly a dynamite vault. Underwood featured the renovation in a video called “Turning An Abandoned Mine Into A Library!!” The dynamite had been removed well before Underwood took over the town, and now the space features a chair, chandelier, and shelves housing over 70 books sent in by viewers. The floor was built out of lumber scavenged from the mine. The bookshelves were also created with this wood and pipes found on another part of the property.

The Hoist House sits directly above the Union Mine and houses the equipment used to enter the mineshaft. Over twenty-six miles of tunnels crisscross below Cerro Gordo (“Welcome to Cerro Gordo”). The Hoist House itself is a large building made up of a mishmash of metal siding. Inside it is reminiscent of a maintenance shed but the space is dominated by the large circular hoist apparatus and cage. The hoist takes a team of people to operate and safely lower the cage down into the mines. Looking down into the dark hole beneath the cage fills me with a vague sense of unease.

After our behind-the-scenes tour of the Hoist House, we headed back to the museum to wrap up the visit. We had been there several hours and did not want to intrude, so we thanked everyone and said our goodbyes before hopping back into the SUV once again. The drive down was thankfully easier than the drive up. With the rain cleared and quickly drying, the road was far less slippery and our SUV didn’t need to strain to make it over as many hills on the descent. The last thing we passed on our way out was a sign that reads “Thank you for respecting our old town [cerrogordomines.com](http://cerrogordomines.com).”



*Figure 12: Cerro Gordo exit sign.*

## *Visitation*

Since Cerro Gordo is open to the public, visitor interaction has an impact on the day-to-day operations and development of the site. Although I pursued several avenues to obtain visitor interviews, unfortunately they were not able to be arranged in the timeframe for this project. However, I was able to obtain input from several other people who have worked or volunteered at Cerro Gordo about their experiences with visitors to supplement my own experience visiting Cerro Gordo.

After speaking with a few people with experience at Cerro Gordo over the past few decades, it has become clear that in prior years Cerro Gordo functioned more as an open secret than a tourist destination. While the occasional curious passerby would stop by the town, it was more common to be an invite-only destination. This contrasts with present-day Cerro Gordo where visitation to the town is publicly encouraged. Considering the popularity of *Ghost Town Living*, I was particularly curious what impact these folks saw on visitation from the YouTube channel.

The discrete nature of Cerro Gordo was an intentional choice which has shifted under the new ownership. Roger Vargo weighed in, saying "under Brent, Cerro Gordo has blossomed. Previously Cerro Gordo kind of flew under the radar". He went on to comment on how previous owners may have wanted to keep a low profile to avoid some the issues Underwood now faces. Roger, who sometimes town-sits Cerro Gordo, also noted that under prior ownership the town would get very few weekday visitors and under a dozen on the weekends, "and now we'll get 50 a day, a hundred a day. On a weekend we'll get a

lot.” From Steven’s perspective as Town Manager, approximately 50-60% of people who visit know about Cerro Gordo through *Ghost Town Living*: “they’ve been following the channel and that’s how they heard about the town in the first place.” The remaining visitors fall into two categories, people who simply saw Cerro Gordo on a map and wanted to check it out, and people local to the area who heard about Cerro Gordo through word of mouth but may be unfamiliar with *Ghost Town Living*: “there’s people who come up here and they’re like, yeah, I was here about six years ago. I knew the old caretaker and stuff.” From these comments, it appears that *Ghost Town Living* is having a notable impact on visitation and on the experience people have at the site, Roger adds that “we’ll get a fair number of people that maybe they’re ‘oh this the general store? Where is the mine? Oh, it’s up there. And they are able to associate what they see in the virtual world with what exists in the real world and draw whatever comparisons they can.”

An interesting side effect of *Ghost Town Living* has been an increase in visitation not only to see the town, but to visit Underwood: “[visitors] all want to meet the man ‘we want to see Brent’”. As Cecile noted, some of the visitors make the pilgrimage to Cerro Gordo not to experience the town, “they just want to meet the man himself!” As the core spokesperson for *Ghost Town Living*, Underwood has a sort of celebrity status in the context of the town. This is a common phenomenon for YouTube. Viewers are not watching exclusively for the topical content in a video, but also for the personality of the people who create and are featured on the channel. YouTube in particular fuels parasocial relationships, the one-sided bond a viewer may feel towards someone they do not actually know. Parasocial relationships have been documented within the realms of television and

more recently, on social media platforms (Kurtin et al. 2018). I mention parasocial relationships to help contextualize one of the ways the popularity of *Ghost Town Living* could be translating into in-person visitation.

### *A Tale of Two Cerro Gordos*

One of the unique ways my visit to Cerro Gordo was contextualized was through my experience as a viewer of *Ghost Town Living*. By the time of my trip in June, I had been regularly watching the channel for over two years. This set the stage for a sense of familiarity during my visit, but also revealed the many ways that my experiences diverged under the different contexts for the same town. The remainder of this chapter will discuss some of the similarities and differences I noticed between *Ghost Town Living* and seeing Cerro Gordo in person. I acknowledge that my experience was also intrinsically influenced by my training as an anthropologist and museologist, so I will also touch on a few observations within those realms.

One of the first differences I noticed between Cerro Gordo on YouTube and Cerro Gordo in-person was my perception of scale and location. In person, Cerro Gordo felt significantly smaller than I expected it to be from seeing it online. In my mind I had an expansive map with different buildings dotted across miles but in reality, we could lap the whole town in under an hour. In comparison to my University campus, Cerro Gordo felt small and quaint. The buildings themselves also felt much smaller than I expected. In

hindsight, it makes sense that buildings built over 100 years ago would be small as they were constructed by hand and materials would have been limited, but the way I experienced them online made them seem much grander in scale. Interestingly, there was one exception that felt even larger in person than I could have imagined – the 40,000-gallon water tank. It did appear massive in the video, but in person I was awestruck. It did not seem feasible to get something that large up the road after just experiencing the drive for myself, yet somehow they managed.

Although Cerro Gordo is portrayed as rugged on *Ghost Town Living*, the overall state of the town was more cluttered and disorderly than anticipated. Miscellaneous materials and artifacts are strewn around the town in piles. The Cerro Gordo Museum's current state is more reminiscent of a storage room than a museum although it has come a long way since Underwood first acquired the space. The General Store in fact had previously been used for storage, which Underwood described as being full “floor to ceiling” (6 Months Alone in a Ghost Town)<sup>17</sup>. Most of the artifacts are now in display cases or on shelves, but there are very few labels, signage, or information about the objects. There also appear to be issues with the structure that pose a risk to the artifacts. During our tour of the museum Steven mentioned a leak in the roof that had almost allowed water to seep into the museum space, specifically on a large antique camera that had thankfully been moved in time.

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<sup>17</sup> Accessed November 2023. <https://youtu.be/r9PPgAvXkEY?si=4BJHfL65VoBPbF7>

Life at Cerro Gordo felt significantly more lonely and remote in *Ghost Town Living* than it felt experiencing the town in person. I was not the only one to notice this, as one person I interviewed noted that “Brent does a good job in his videos of sort of like making it look like he’s the only one in town or making it look like he’s kind of living here alone.” This individual expressed that they were surprised to find a whole crew of people in addition to Underwood when visiting the town. When I asked this person why they felt Underwood made that decision, the response was that “there’s this idea – this like romanticism about the American West and about being a strong, independent, Wildman forging your own way through the West . . . by yourself, it’s an individualistic journey. I think that idea, for some reason, appeals to a lot of people” so he’s leaning into it.

It does in some ways seem like newer videos lean into the growing community at Cerro Gordo more than the earlier videos. Numerous people live, work, and volunteer at Cerro Gordo and these folks sometimes make appearances on the channel. One of the people I interviewed for this project was Cerro Gordo’s new Town Manager Steven, who was hired in February 2023. Steven, who had previously volunteered at Cerro Gordo, now lives at Cerro Gordo full time and assists Underwood with a wide range of tasks for the care and upkeep of the town. He feeds the animals, watches over the town, talks with visitors, sells merchandise, and picks up supplies like lumber and water in nearby towns. Steven is also in charge of coordinating Cerro Gordo’s volunteers, moderating the town’s email, and maintaining the town’s community spaces. People like Steven are integral to the upkeep and growth of Cerro Gordo.

In my own reflection on the popularity of Cerro Gordo, one of my gut reactions was to consider that timing may have played a role in the popularity of *Ghost Town Living*, or at least its rapid growth. The COVID-19 pandemic created rippling disruptions and unexpected impacts in many ways, including on our media consumption habits. *Ghost Town Living* was created just as stay-home-orders were being implemented to curve the spread of the virus. It turns out that I was not the only one with this theory. When I asked Steven his thoughts on the popularity of *Ghost Town Living*, he responded that he thinks:

It has a lot to do with the pandemic, that helped a lot with him. For a lot of people being locked inside this sort of indoor environment, being able to like go on YouTube and watch this guy who's also socially isolated but doing it in this magnificent sort of cinematic setting. I think that really appealed to a lot of people during the pandemic because they could live vicariously through him. He does a really good job of showing great cinematic shots of the place, but also talking about what he does and how he feels about it in a very romantic way. The way that he sums up his videos and the music that he plays, especially at the endings when he's got his cool drone shot at sunset, he's buzzing on his dirt bike down the road, and he's talking about, you know, 'this past month, I've really been thinking about how nature is quiet' or something like that, you know? So I think that a lot of people wanted some of that, they wanted to feel some of that.

Steven found the channel this way, as did I. Tommy found the channel while surfing YouTube's "for you" page and we were immediately drawn in by the adventure. I was living vicariously through the screen since I had no other way to do so. YouTube's own data has found similar parallels, 90% of Gen Z have watched a video that helped them feel like they were in a different place ("YouTube Culture & Trends Report 2022").

## CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to examine Cerro Gordo as a heritage site through the lenses of anthropology and museology in order to touch on issues surrounding ethical ownership and representations of the past, the allure of Ghost Towns and the mythic West, and issues surrounding the democratization of information versus professional oversight in both physical and digital landscapes. The aim of this project was to begin a conversation about the intersection of these discourses using *Ghost Town Living* as a case study to frame pathways of research beyond the scope of this project.

Ghost towns fascinate us because they represent a lingering glimpse of a once-bustling population center, a proverbial ghost of the many lives once intertwined with that physical space. In the case of abandoned mining towns like Cerro Gordo, they are also manifestations of our national identity. Through romanticized depictions in pop culture, the American West has become synonymous with a mythical representation of American values. Ghost towns represent the ways people in the present think about the past as much as they represent an actual past. As outlined by Bennett and Luke, historic displays are inherently imbued with power. Cerro Gordo's representation both online and in-person has the power to shape perceptions of not only the town, but of the West and ownership of the past more broadly.

Throughout this thesis I have followed a thread connected to the importance of authenticity and the concept of the really real for understanding Cerro Gordo. As one interviewee put it, "Cerro Gordo gives visitors an opportunity to experience a real ghost

town”. The perceived authenticity of the town increases the connection visitors feel to the past and history of the site. As a whole, the ownership and representation of heritage is a complex topic that can be approached in various ways. In the case of Cerro Gordo, past and prior owners have undertaken a restorative approach to breathe new life and use into the structures of the town. Underwood has further opened public access to the town and introduced a new way of preserving Cerro Gordo through its documentation on *Ghost Town Living*.

There are many ghost towns people could visit to experience an “authentic” ghost town, but Cerro Gordo’s online presence in *Ghost Town Living* adds another dimension to the experience and perceptions of authenticity at Cerro Gordo. From an accessibility standpoint, *Ghost Town Living* provides a far-reaching opportunity to engage with Cerro Gordo through viewer access on YouTube. However, the architecture of the platform is inseparable from the content. The YouTube algorithm and basic functionality of the platform directly impact who finds out about Cerro Gordo and how Cerro Gordo is experienced online. Content creators navigate these hidden frameworks through the use of content, production, and presentation to boost their standing on YouTube, and in turn, increase their monetization potential. These are important considerations as they can be used to understand why *Ghost Town Living* leans into the more sensational aspects of Cerro Gordo and in some ways, the allure and growing popularity of the channel.

Reflecting on the site, it is clear that the people closest to Cerro Gordo are deeply invested in its past and future. This is reflected in the time, money, and work invested in the site and the passionate way they speak about the town. This passion has been

extended to the growing online community of viewers rooting for the success of the town. To briefly touch on my own ruminations for this thesis, the genesis of this project was a seed of curiosity that took hold, which despite any setbacks I am glad was able to come to fruition. This project started as a paper for an archaeology course several years ago which I later presented at the Anthropology Student Union Research Colloquium in the spring of 2022. Initially I was concerned the concept for the project would be too ambitious, but the enthusiasm and inquisitiveness of my peers and professors about the site inspired me to continue exploring Cerro Gordo. I imagine this sense of curiosity and push through adversity is a common thread for many of the people invested in Cerro Gordo. While this project did provide constructive criticism and critical discussion about Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living*, it also revealed its strengths and potential.

When considering the broader implications of this project, it is worth noting that social media platforms like YouTube have become increasingly integrated into everyday life. A Pew Research Center survey from 2021 found that 72% of American adults use social media of some variety, a number that climbs to 84% for the 18-29 age bracket (Auxier and Anderson 2021). While several major social media platforms have seen usage fluctuate significantly, YouTube's viewership has been comparatively stable, and steadily growing (Degenhard 2023). The success of channels like *Ghost Town Living* indicates that people, millions of people, are invested in history. The question for our discipline is the following: How do anthropologists learn from this success and harness social media within the professional realm?

Success can be defined by a variety of metrics, but I use the term "success" here primarily in relation to popularity and investment. Quantifying success on YouTube versus success within the realms of a heritage site may differ, but the aspect I am most interested in is the creation of an engaged community. As a comparison point, the *Smithsonian Channel*, which is notably a collaboration between the Smithsonian and Showtime Networks, has more subscribers than *Ghost Town Living* but the videos receive significantly less views. This may indicate that while the Smithsonian has widespread name recognition, they are not as successful at building an invested community online or capitalizing on YouTube's algorithm to reach viewers - even while backed by a major media corporation. If museums hope to engage with and educate the public, how do they grow and sustain the kind of online audience seen in *Ghost Town Living*?

Looking forward, this case study highlights an opportunity for constructive engagement with sites like Cerro Gordo by anthropologists and museum professionals. For channels already invested in disseminating content like *Ghost Town Living*, collaboration with professionals would both strengthen content accuracy and help these channels act as positive role models for interacting with anthropological materials. Within the museum realm, many museums are embracing various social media platforms to increase engagement with their visitors and capture new audiences. Anthropologists are presented with a similar opportunity to use platforms like YouTube to educate and interact with the public. From an accessibility standpoint, social media are more easily accessible to the majority of adults than many traditional avenues of academic literature. Most academic papers are hidden behind paywalls and are not written to be easily consumed by a lay

audience. By building an audience on social media, professionals have an opportunity to bridge a communication gap between the discipline and the public.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

As with many research projects, time was a limiting factor in the scope and scale of this thesis. The core goal for this project was to build a framework for understanding the complex and multifaceted factors at play at Cerro Gordo and its online presentation on *Ghost Town Living* while recognizing that a six-month timeframe for in-depth research, data collection, and writing would constrain which avenues could be fully developed and answered. There are many things I wished to include that had to be cut in the interests of clarity and time. Within this section I will describe some of the functional limitations that led to the final outcomes presented in this thesis and suggest some avenues for future research.

Although I would have liked to have made multiple site visits to Cerro Gordo, cost was a prohibitive factor. The trip I took to Cerro Gordo was self-funded, meaning it was only feasible to go once in a limited timeframe to collect data. This constraint also directly impacted the kinds of data I was able to collect. While I had initially planned to interview visitors while at Cerro Gordo, no other visitors arrived during the several hours we were exploring the town and inclement weather prevented additional visits up to the town prior to flying home. Expanded visitor data would be an area to develop for future research to

provide a more in-depth exploration into the motivations and factors driving in-person visitation to Cerro Gordo and similar sites.

Interviews are a challenge to navigate as a primary data collection tool since they hinge on the availability and willingness of participants. For instance, while I did meet Underwood during my visit to Cerro Gordo and later connected over email, we unfortunately were not able to find time for a formalized interview prior to this project's deadline. Various research avenues such as a more comprehensive review of funding sources could be undertaken with more information from Underwood. It should also be acknowledged that Underwood has written a book called "Ghost Town Living" which is releasing in March 2024, approximately five months after the writing of this thesis.

Another issue is the classificatory language that anthropology and museum studies should use for these discussions. A site like Cerro Gordo exists in overlapping spaces which made pinning down terminology to refer to the town a challenge. I ultimately settled on the term heritage site for the sake of convenience, but additional exploration of terminology would be a fruitful exercise for future studies. Similarly, it would be useful to develop a standardized archaeological classification system to describe the degradation of ghost towns and similar sites.

In chapter four I broached the topic of archaeological and museological concerns, but was not able to not fully expand on solutions to these issues. Ideally, this topic would be best undertaken collaboratively with the caretakers of Cerro Gordo to understand the functional constraints they face to triage issues and find feasible short-term and long-term

solutions for these ongoing challenges. Several of the issues I observed are similar to those facing many museums – a lack of time, resources, and in this case, a lack of formalized training on collections management practices. Concerns such as stabilizing light, humidity, and other environmental factors that lead to object degradation are simultaneously some of the most difficult to control in a historic building like the Cerro Gordo Museum, and one of the most important challenges to overcome for the preservation of the artifacts housed there. Investing in pest control for the moths, curtains to limit natural light exposure, and secure acid-free storage for paper documents would be useful starting points. Collections guidelines and an emergency plan are important to establish for long-term stewardship of the objects at the Cerro Gordo Museum. Object labels would also be helpful additions to provide context and increase the educational value of the space.

Cerro Gordo's presence on YouTube also provides a variety of research avenues to explore. Although I touched on some of the reasons for *Ghost Town Living's* success, the complexities of YouTube's algorithm warrants a more extensive examination. Community is clearly an important aspect of YouTube so a larger empirical data sample from viewers could illuminate the kinds of people within in *Ghost Town Living's* viewership pool and be expanded into what is drawing, and sustaining, investment into the channel. I also did not have access to demographic data about the viewers drawn to *Ghost Town Living* so age, gender, race, class and other demographic features would be interesting data sets to review for trends. That information may support or counter assumptions I draw about the

production of heritage and the kinds of nostalgia present in *Ghost Town Living*, aspects that I feel impact interest in the site.

It would be easy to view Underwood's relationship with Cerro Gordo as straightforward, or even cynical, but the reality is complex. While I can only speculate about Underwood's true motives, YouTube seems to act as a muse, memoir, outreach and funding source for him. The various aspects of Cerro Gordo - the physical town, the YouTube channel, Underwood's involvement at the site - all interact and intrinsically impact one another. YouTube's functionality as a platform influences both the content and the way it is presented on *Ghost Town Living*. Since Underwood is using the channel as a funding source - through monetization, sponsorships, and donations - he is incentivized to produce content that would do well on the site - without YouTube as a funding source, he may not be able to cover the many expenses related to upkeeping the town. All of these intertwining pieces about Cerro Gordo and *Ghost Town Living* must be considered simultaneously.

While the majority of this thesis was focused on the past and present of Cerro Gordo, its future is of equal importance. The future in mind, it would be interesting to know the succession plans for Cerro Gordo. Since Cerro Gordo's transition from an active mining town to private property, the site had stayed connected to one family until Underwood became the current owner and caretaker through its purchase. While Underwood's goals were in line with the family's wishes to preserve the town, that could shift if ownership of the town changes hands. Perhaps a partnership with a museum or

institution like a university or local historical society would help insure Cerro Gordo can be appreciated by the public for many years to come.

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## APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

### Volunteer Questions

1. Can you tell me a little background about yourself?
2. How long have you volunteered at Cerro Gordo?
3. Why did you decide to start volunteering here?
4. How did your interest in [interest] start?
  - a. When did you first get interested in this?
5. How did you find out about the volunteer opportunities here?
6. What kind of work do you do at Cerro Gordo?
  - a. Did you receive any training when you started?
7. Do you watch the Ghost Town Living YouTube channel?
  - a. How often do you watch?
  - b. How does the real-life Cerro Gordo compare to how it seems online?
  - c. Are there other YouTube channels similar to Ghost Town Living that you watch?
8. Have you volunteered at any other places similar to Cerro Gordo?
9. What do you think Cerro Gordo is trying to show or tell visitors about?
10. What are your favorite parts about volunteering at Cerro Gordo?
  - a. What are the most difficult?
11. What would you like to see changed or improved in the town?
12. Would you like to add anything in addition to what I've asked?

### Visitor Questions

1. Can you tell me a little background about yourself?
2. Is this your first-time visiting Cerro Gordo?
  - a. If not, how many times have you visited?
3. How did you find out about Cerro Gordo?
4. What made you want to make the trip here?
  - a. Is this kind of trip a regular part of your summer plans?
  - b. Are there other places you've been to for similar reasons?
  - c. Are old places/historic sites/ etc. an interest of yours?

5. How has your experience in the town been?
  - a. What was your favorite part of your visit so far today?
  - b. Is there anything that left you confused, concerned, or with more questions?
  - c. Do you plan to make another trip to Cerro Gordo in the future?
6. What do you think Cerro Gordo is trying to show or tell visitors about?
7. Have you ever watched the Ghost Town Living YouTube channel?
  - a. If so, how did you find out about it?
  - b. How often do you watch the channel?
  - c. Are you subscribed to the channel? What made you decide to subscribe?
  - d. What are some of the projects showcased on the channel you're most interested in?
  - e. Are there other channels similar to Ghost Town Living that you watch?
  - f. Was there anything that surprised you/ matched your expectations/ different from your expectations after visiting Cerro Gordo?
8. Would you like to add anything in addition to what I've asked?

### Principal Questions

1. Can you tell me a little background about yourself?
2. What made you decide to start documenting your experiences at Cerro Gordo on YouTube?
  - a. Did you post on YouTube prior to starting Ghost Town Living?
  - b. Why did you choose YouTube instead of a different social media platform?
  - c. What are your favorite parts about having a YouTube channel?
  - d. Is there anything you don't like/ is difficult about having a YouTube channel?
3. What has the response been like online to Ghost Town Living?
  - a. How has that changed over time?
4. What impact does Ghost Town Living have on what you do at Cerro Gordo?
5. How has the YouTube channel impacted visitation to Cerro Gordo?
6. What are the most popular topics or activities you showcase on the Ghost Town Living channel?
7. Are there things that you're interested in doing/ showing on Ghost Town Living that the viewers seem less interested in?

8. What would you have done if the Ghost Town Living YouTube channel didn't become popular?
9. What do you want visitors to the town and viewers of Ghost Town Living to know about/ learn about Cerro Gordo?
10. How do your prior careers and experiences inform/ impact the work you do at Cerro Gordo and creating Ghost Town Living?
11. You've been pretty upfront with your viewers about funding for the town, but please only share what you're comfortable sharing – could you share more about how the funding of Cerro Gordo is impacted by the YouTube channel?
  - a. What about visitation and donations?
12. What makes Cerro Gordo unique?
  - a. How does it differ from other sites of a similar nature?
  - b. How is it similar?
13. What does the next five years look like for Cerro Gordo?
  - a. What is your vision for the town?
14. Is this a lifelong project?
  - a. If not, what do you think the future holds for Cerro Gordo?
  - b. How would you decide who takes over responsibilities of the town after you?
15. Are you working with any anthropologists or historians?
  - a. If so, what does that look like?
  - b. Do you have plans to continue/ implement working with anthropologists or historians?
  - c. What support could anthropologists or historians provide for you?
16. Would you like to add anything in addition to what I've asked?

APPENDIX B: Photos



*Figure 13: Hail at Cerro Gordo and Brent Underwood.*



*Figure 14: Wade.*



*Figure 15: Belshaw House.*



*Figure 16: American Hotel rebuilding site.*



*Figure 17: Gordon House.*



*Figure 18: Chapel and parking lot.*



*Figure 19: Various objects.*



*Figure 20: Assay Office and Cribs.*



*Figure 21: Assay Office interior.*



*Figure 22: Assay Office interior.*



Figure 23: Outhouse.



*Figure 24: Cerro Gordo landscape.*



*Figure 25: Tram Buckets.*



*Figure 26: Discarded items.*



*Figure 27: Cerro Gordo.*



*Figure 28: Cerro Gordo.*



*Figure 29: Building at Cerro Gordo.*



*Figure 30: Water containers.*



Figure 31: Cerro Gordo animals.



Figure 32: Tofu and other goats.



*Figure 33: 40,000 gallon water tank.*



*Figure 34: Me.*



*Figure 35: The view from Cerro Gordo.*



*Figure 36: Cats.*



*Figure 37: Bunkhouse.*



*Figure 38: Chapel/ Theater.*



*Figure 39: Wagon.*



*Figure 40: Cerro Gordo private property sign.*



Figure 41: Keep out sign.



*Figure 42: Stove from the American Hotel.*



*Figure 43: Lumber.*



*Figure 44: Hoist House.*



*Figure 45: Miscellaneous items.*



*Figure 46: Road from the Hoist House.*



*Figure 47: Mortimer Belshaw (left) and Remi Nadeau (right).*



*Figure 48: Objects on display in the Museum.*



*Figure 49: Cerro Gordo Museum.*



*Figure 50: Moths in the Museum.*



*Figure 51: Objects on display in the Museum.*



Figure 52: Cage to enter the mines.