





# Dave Stamey Sees Ghosts

On a trail ride through  
Sierra Nevada ghost towns,  
cowboy singer Dave Stamey  
confronts the mythology  
of the American West.

Story and photography  
by RYAN T. BELL

**I. ROUGHING IT.** The trailer was loaded with a dozen saddle horses when the wheel bearing went out. The wranglers pulled onto the highway shoulder, near the salt-crusted shores of Mono Lake in eastern California. Meanwhile, 30 miles away, our group of 25 riders sat in a tour bus, anxious to start a four-day trail ride through Bodie and Aurora, ghost towns nestled in the hills above Mono Lake. Our host, Western singer Dave Stamey, announced the delay and suggested we kill some time at the Mono Basin Visitor's Center.

The bus parked in front of a sparkling glass building. We filed indoors, the sound of jingle bobs echoing through the building as we spent the next hour learning about the Kutzadika'a natives (they wove ornate baskets and ate larvae for dinner) and the ever-dwindling Mono Lake (a tabletop diorama looked like a toilet bowl that had been flushed and not refilled). I meandered into the bookstore and ran into Stamey. If he was sweating bullets, it didn't show. He flipped through a copy of Mark Twain's frontier memoir, *Roughing It*, a 550-page tome he's read—more than once. >>

**Right: The dilapidated Standard Consolidated Stamp Mill looms over Bodie. The original mill was equipped to run on electricity in 1893, eliminating the huge need for wood. It burned down in 1898, and its replacement, which still stands, was completed one year later.**



“Mark Twain was a partner on a mine in Aurora,” Stamey said. “They didn’t do their assessment right, and it got jumped by somebody else. If Twain had struck it rich, he might not have become a writer. Just think—no Tom Sawyer. No Huckleberry Finn.”

Eighth graders everywhere might rejoice at having one less book on the required reading list, but for Stamey, that Twain’s mining venture almost curtailed his literary career brought the ghost town of Aurora to life. Stamey has built an award-winning music career out of writing songs that explore the difference between history and mythology in the American West. Hit “play” on any of his nine albums (*Come Ride With Me*, for example) and the track list will take you on a journey through history, meeting idiosyncratic characters along the way and presenting alternate takes on the myths we take for granted as true. Like the story of California’s

Native Americans, lured into the Spanish missions by priests who promised salvation but delivered destruction (“The Mission Bell”). Or the tale of Ruby Moore, the parlor singer who dazzled audiences at the Tonopah Club in Nevada, circa 1958 (“Ruby Could Sing”). Or the grandchildren of Apache rebel Geronimo, who sold autographs of the chief at a roadside stand in Arizona to make ends meet (“Geronimo’s Children”).

Stamey’s cell phone rang and he stepped aside to take the call. I skimmed Mark Twain’s book and found a chapter about Mono Lake.

“It is one of the strangest freaks of Nature to be found in any land . . . lies in a lifeless, treeless, hideous desert, eight thousand feet above the level of the sea, and is guarded by mountains two thousand feet higher, whose summits are always clothed in clouds,” one excerpt read.

**Below: Managing 30-plus saddle horses in camp is a logistical feat. The wranglers of Mammoth Lakes devised a clever method of drawing a high-line rope taught between two flatbed trucks, to tether horses before and after each day’s ride.**



Two pages later: “This solemn, silent, sailless sea—this lonely tenant of the loneliest spot on earth—is little graced with the picturesque. [Mono Lake] is an unpretending expanse of grayish water.”

And four pages after that: “So uncertain is the climate in summer that a lady who goes out visiting cannot hope to be prepared for all emergencies unless she takes her fan under one arm and her snow-shoes under the other.”

Whose idea was it to stock the book at Mono Lake’s visitor center? I didn’t have a chance to ask. Stamey yodeled for us to load back into the bus. All saddle horses were accounted for at the trailhead.

**II. ALKALI DUST STORM.** I drew a gelding named Rambler who didn’t walk across the ground so much as churn it up. This was a problem for those riding behind me, because the ground was covered in alkali dirt, a powder so fine it reminded me of plaster of Paris. When it makes contact with a mucous membrane or a tear duct, alkali turns into hardened globs. We rode through several thousand acres of the stuff, navigating a sagebrush labyrinth into the Sierra Nevada foothills. The wind kicked up a dust storm, and those with bandanas pulled them up, bank-robber style.

Stamey rode a bay gelding with white socks and two white clouds crossing its forehead. He hosts several of these trips each summer in conjunction

with Mammoth Lakes Pack Outfit, and they keep the horse on reserve for him. Fans of Stamey’s music know that in addition to songs about history, he writes about packing in the Sierra Nevadas. He’s come a long way since the days when he last worked full time, leading mule strings over craggy mountain passes. The Western Music Association awarded Stamey with Entertainer of the Year honors (three times), Songwriter of the Year (also three times), and Male Performer of the Year (four times). In 2001, the Academy of Western Artists honored him with the Will Rogers Award. He sells out concert halls across the West, yet can’t help but lead horseback trips that expose him to time-bomb wheel bearings and anxious tourists. Best I could figure, it keeps him connected to three of his favorite things: horses, the trail and his guitar.

We rode up a hillside and topped out on a narrow-gauge railroad bed that appeared out of nowhere. Normally, you can see a roadbeds from a mile away, a pronounced scar on the landscape. Not this one. Stamey explained that it was a rare switchbacked railroad. He pointed down the hill at the zigzag route that trains used to ascend the mountains on their way to the now defunct mining town of Bodie. I barely made out the roadbed’s faint impression on the ground, the indentation eroded by weather and overgrown with sagebrush in the years since the line was abandoned in 1917 and the tracks scrapped.

**Center: Dave Stamey stands in the aisle of a tour bus filled with 25 horsemen, eager to hear him sing around the campfire.**

**Below: Forest Newman, Dave Stamey and John Summers lead the riding group down the dusty streets of Bodie. The state park receives 200,000 visitors, annually. For those who visited on the day we rode into town, the horsemen were like an apparition of old.**





Riders pass the tumbledown remains of a stone tollbooth on the old Bodie and State Line Toll Road. By the 1880s, toll roads connected Bodie with other mining centers, such as Aurora and Virginia City. These privately owned roads charged by the animal for stagecoaches, freight teams and saddle horses.

“The train would climb one section,” Stamey said, “then somebody would get out and switch the track so the conductor could reverse up the next switchback.”

In 1876, the Standard Company struck gold in Bodie, and the town boomed almost overnight. By 1879–80, the peak year, 10,000 people lived in the town, and 60 different mines were in operation. They burned 300 cords of wood per day, running steam-operated equipment such as hoists, pneumatic drills and water pumps. Factor in wood used for cooking and heating, and it was a high-demand commodity. But as Mark Twain less-than-lovingly pointed out, the region was a “treeless, hideous desert.” Wood cut down in far-off logging camps in the Sierras was delivered by pack mule until 1881, when the railroad was built. A cord of wood cost \$4. A miner made \$4 a day. Do the math—it wasn’t an easy life.

*You live inside a muddy tent,  
Beneath the California rains,  
Digging gravel until your back is numb,  
A shovel costs you fifty bucks,  
And that’s if you can find one,  
There’s coffee and tobacco you can buy.  
They pack it in on mules, all the way from Sacramento,  
The bacon’s green, but it won’t make you die.  
The flour’s bad, but it won’t make you die.*  
—“A Pan Full of Dust”

**III. THE ANSWER’S BURIED IN THE GROUND.** That night, seated around the campfire with a guitar on his knee and a crescent moon in the sky, Stamey was in his artistic element. Like Claude Monet standing at an easel on the banks of the river Seine, or Ernest Hemingway on safari in Africa.

Stamey sounded as pitch-perfect in person as he does on a studio album. Like his contemporaries—

Tom Russell, Don Edwards, Michael Martin Murphey and Ian Tyson—Stamey’s cowboy music succeeds by not overreaching his capacity to perform it live. If anything, an album can’t compare to a campfire performance because there’s no fitting the Sierra Nevadas into a recording studio. The outdoors minted each song unique. The horses stomped the ground in the pasture, munching on hay flakes the wranglers doled out. The omnipresent wind played didgeridoo on an open-ended pipe somewhere. A flapping canopy tarp was the rhythm section. And Stamey’s voice and guitar warbled through the heat of the flame, sounding close one moment, and far away the next.

Stamey’s musical career began at age 6, on the day he watched Burl Ives perform on television. Ives was a solo act—just a man, his guitar and a story to tell. In what many people consider to be one of Stamey’s finest storytelling songs, he turns the lens on himself to sing about growing up on the family ranch outside of Billings, Montana.

*When I was a kid the snow would drift  
high on the barn.  
Before daylight broke I’d be out  
with a bucket on my arm.  
And the cattle would watch  
through the dark and the cold,  
With steam in their breath and ice in their coats.  
The snow beneath my boots would glitter and squeak,  
Over bones of the buffalo, buried so deep.*  
—“Montana”

If the lyrics read like a short story, that’s because Stamey is a closet novelist. He collects antique typewriters, his favorite a 1958 Olympia SM3 that he uses to write lyrics. He counts the novelist John Steinbeck as a songwriting influence. Stamey once even wrote a 400-page novel, titled *The Posthumous Autobiography of Billy*



*the Kid*. In researching it, Stamey realized that most of what is accepted as fact about Billy the Kid comes from a book written by Pat Garrett—the man who killed him. “A little conflict of interest there,” he jokes. The novel wasn’t published, but it did inspire the song “The Skies of Lincoln County.”

“I learned not to accept history that was taught by rote,” Stamey said.

That lesson dates to the fourth grade when young Dave researched the gunfight at the OK Corral.

“I used real source material, like newspaper clippings and tombstone epitaphs, that made the event come to life as more than just a bunch of names and dates,” he said.

Stamey is a revisionist historian who scours the past for absconded truths that are superbly entertaining. He’s even willing to prune the family tree to prove or dispel a myth. His mother’s family passed down the legend of an ancestor who supposedly rode in the 7th Cavalry and narrowly missed being sent to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Stamey dug into the archives and found that instead of a cavalry soldier, his ancestor was an infantryman under General Crook. He marched from Missouri to Arizona and fought in the Apache Wars.

“Our family history was wrong, and the truth was much more interesting,” Stamey said. “The legend also goes that he carried an Indian warhead lodged in his knee the rest of his life. That could still be true. Who knows? The answer’s buried in the ground.”

**IV. GOODBYE GOD, I’M GOING TO BODIE.** Here is a legend for you: The townsfolk of Bodie watched the gang ride into town, a cloud of dust rising above the north-end toll. The riders stampeded past the tollbooth without paying 25 cents each. A lawless bunch, for sure. Shopkeepers ushered their patrons inside and barred the doors. The schoolmarm herded her flock into the school-

house. The threat of such outlaws led one schoolgirl to write in her diary, “Goodbye God, I’m going to Bodie,” when she moved from San Francisco.

And here is the truth: We rode into Bodie on the second day. True, we rode by the tollbooth without paying. But that was because the crumbled stone building hadn’t been in operation for 100 years. The town’s doors were barred. But they had been since 1962, when California designated Bodie as a State Historic Park.

Still, a ghost town has a way of riling up a horseman’s rebellious spirit. I looked at Rambler’s and my wavy reflection in an antique pane of glass and muttered Clint Eastwood’s classic line from *High Plains Drifter* (filmed on the shores of Mono Lake): “It’s about time this town has a new sheriff ... any objections?”

Today, Bodie is maintained in a state of “arrested decay.” If the wind blows off a roofing shingle, they’ll tack it back on. That’s about it. If this was how Bodie looked in 1962, when the last residents pulled up stakes, then they had given up on appearances. The place looked like someone had set up for a garage sale and then quit. Wagon wheels, tools and mining implements were scattered around the grounds. It was a dump. Stamey didn’t seem to notice.

“I’ve been here a hundred times,” he said, a far-off look in his eyes. “It’s gotten to the point that I don’t even see the tourists. I imagine the buildings how they used to be.”

We rode to the outskirts of town, where the Mammoth Lakes wranglers set up a highline for the horses. We made sandwiches from a cold-cut tray laid out on their flatbed truck, then raced to catch a tour of the Standard Consolidated Stamp Mill. Our guide met us at the gate, dressed in an old-timey dress and a wide-brimmed hat whose ribbon fluttered in the wind.

**Tucker Ellise, one of two Summers grandchildren who rode along, watches Hailie Hauser replace a missing shoe. Hauser was raised in Rainbow, California, where she apprenticed as a farrier for eight years. She hired on with Mammoth Lakes to further her skills as a horsewoman on a path to becoming a veterinary technician.**



**Campfires figure in the lyrics of several of Stamey's songs. At the end of each day's ride, we retired to a fire ring where Stamey would knee-up his steel-string guitar and play. Many ride participants brought song lists and called out favorites for him to play.**

A stamp mill, she explained, processed the raw material hauled out of the Standard Mine, located on the hill above town, by crushing it under a series of "stamps." Picture an elephant's foot made of steel, stomping the ground. The rubble was sent down corrugated sleuths and was bathed in mercury to separate gold from rock. At the peak of operation, the Standard Mill ran 20 stamps, each crushing rock at the rate of 90 stamps per minute. Travelers could hear the deafening sound from three miles away. Except on Sundays, a day of rest whose quiet was said to have caused the town's babies to cry.

Working in the Standard Mine was dangerous. During a 60-day period in 1878, the Bodie newspaper reported miners killed in a variety of ways. One man was crushed under falling timber. Another was buried by a caved-in tunnel. A third poor chap fell from the hoisting cage that brought miners up and down a 70-foot mine shaft. And a fourth never saw death coming when a careless coworker dropped his bag of tools down the mineshaft, clobbering him. I scratched "mine worker" from my list of dream jobs.

## V. THE SHADE OF A PINION PINE.

Not to split hairs, but a place that gets 200,000 visitors each year isn't exactly a ghost town. However, Mark Twain's old haunt, Aurora, was the real deal. You need either a horse, something with four-wheel drive, or a hiker's constitution to reach it. Aurora is so lost that, for a while, Nevada and California weren't sure on whose side of the state line it fell. That confusion had evidently been cleared up. On our third day, we rode by a sign marking the state line. It was shot so full of bullet holes you could use it to strain spaghetti. The curl of the exit wounds indicated that most of the shots were fired from the California side.

I rode with Stamey and his packer sidekick Forest Newman, with whom Stamey had logged hundreds of miles over the years. They scoured the hillsides for evidence of the old stagecoach line between Aurora

and Bodie. One minute it was plain as day. The next, poof, it vanished without a trace.

The trail reached a secluded basin where the most prominent landmarks were a two-story concrete wall (again, pockmarked by bullets), and the skeleton frame of a mill stamp that reminded me of a church's pipe organ. John Summers, owner of Mammoth Lakes Pack Outfit, has family history dating back to Aurora's boom time. Supposedly, they still owned a town lot. We sat our horses overlooking the sagebrush field, trying to imagine the town's plat. The once busy streets were indiscernible.

Newman remarked "It'd be like riding horseback through Los Angeles one hundred years from now and seeing only sagebrush."

We ate lunch at Aurora's graveyard, hidden in a grove of juniper and piñon pine. The air was silent. We tethered our horses and dis-

persed to walk through the forest like ghosts.

"There's a gravestone you should see," Stamey said. "It tells Aurora's story as well as anything."

In the cemetery's back corner, under the shade of a piñon pine, I found a white obelisk. Needles carpeted the ground and someone had placed a tin can with a bouquet of artificial flowers at the base. Most of the cemetery's headstones were humble slabs of rock; the marble pillar must've cost a fortune. The engraving was eroded by the effects of time, but I managed to make out four names:

*Dick Marden, Age 6, 2-16-1878*

*Frank Marden, Age 8, 2-20-1878*

*Pearl Marden, Age 2, 2-23-1878*

*Daisy Marden, Age 4, 2-26-1878*

A diphtheria outbreak killed the Marden siblings within 10 days of each other. The parents, Horace and Lizzie, carried their children to the Aurora cemetery in a glass-sided hearse. They expressed their pain in the epitaph:

*Rest there in peace with blessing in thy heads,  
Past to the land where sinless spirits Dwell,  
Gone but not lost we will not call the dead,  
The Angels claimed the dear and dead ones.  
FARE THEE WELL*

Stamey was right; the headstone evoked life in Aurora even better than a book by Mark Twain. Perhaps that's why ghost towns inspire him. In them, you rediscover that while myths are repeated long into the future, it's the nuance of history that has the power to break your heart. 🍷

Contributing editor **RYAN T. BELL** writes the column Backcountry Insight. Visit his website at [ryantbell.com](http://ryantbell.com). For more about **DAVE STAMEY'S** music, visit [davestamey.com](http://davestamey.com). To learn more about **MAMMOTH LAKES PACK OUTFIT**, visit [mammothpack.com](http://mammothpack.com). Send comments on this story to [edit@westernhorseman.com](mailto:edit@westernhorseman.com).