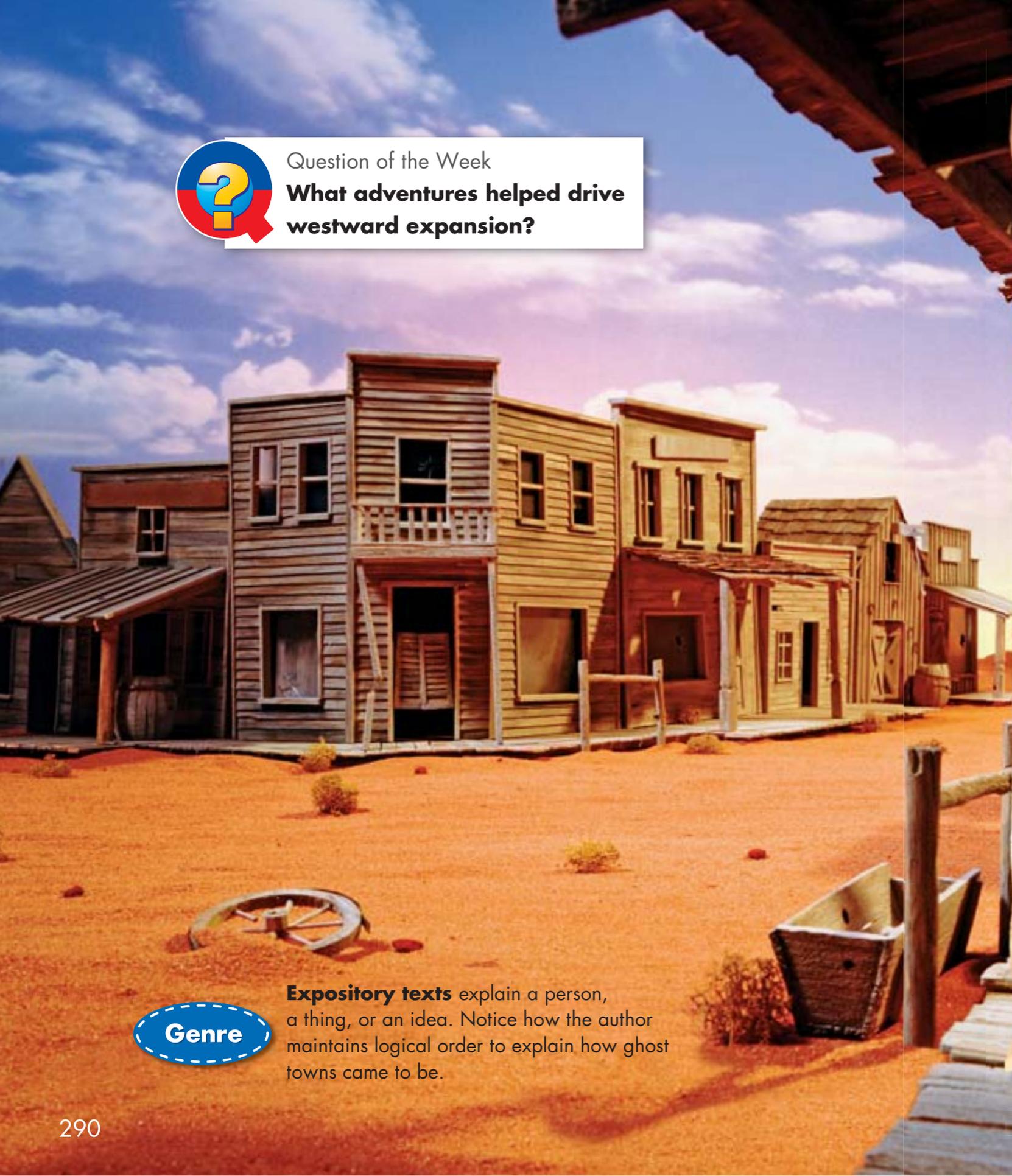




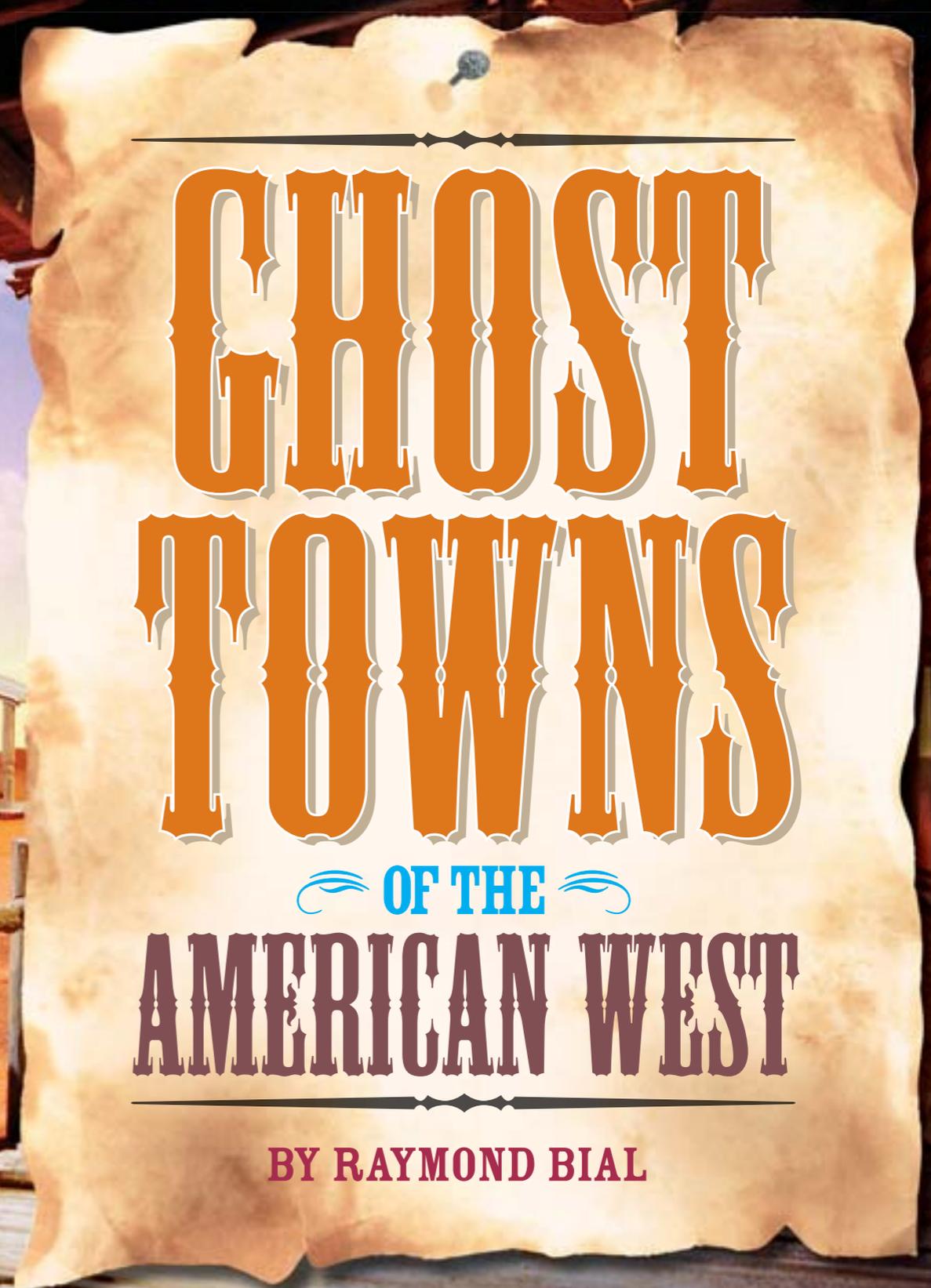
Question of the Week

What adventures helped drive westward expansion?



Genre

Expository texts explain a person, a thing, or an idea. Notice how the author maintains logical order to explain how ghost towns came to be.

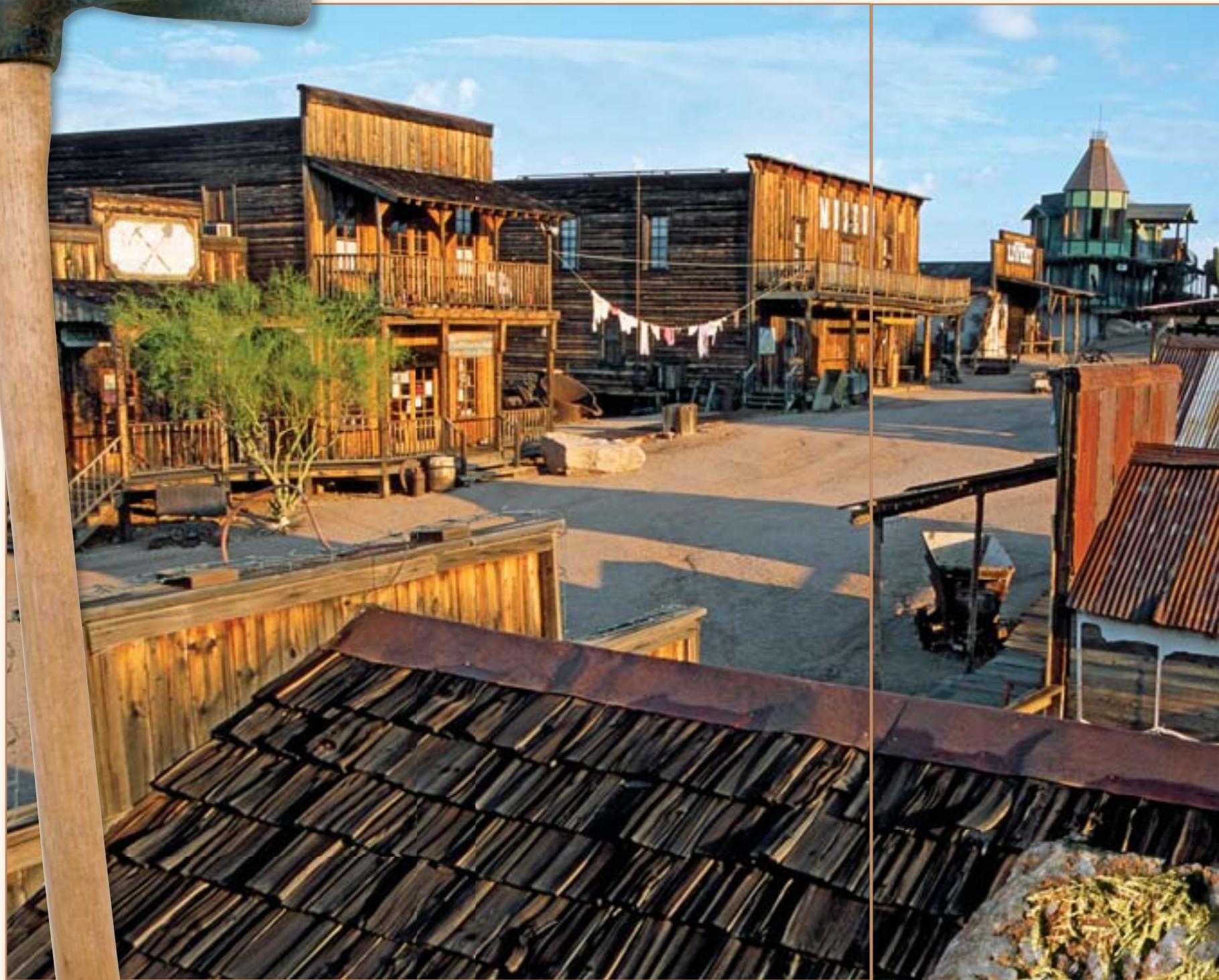


GHOST TOWNS

OF THE

AMERICAN WEST

BY RAYMOND BIAL



While its neighbor, Phoenix, flourished, Goldfield, a turn-of-the-century ghost town in Arizona, did so only briefly, and then declined as a mining town. However, the collection of buildings has since been given new life – as a ghost town.

An air of mystery swirls around the ghost towns of the American West. What sad and joyous events happened within the tumbledown walls and on the wind-blown streets? Why did people settle in these lonesome places? Why did they pull up stakes and move away? What went wrong in these towns? Virtually every ghost town has untold stories of people who longed for a chance at a better life. Relics of the past, the towns now stand as evidence of high adventure, hopes of striking it rich, and the sudden loss of fortune—or life.

Although ghost towns can be found throughout the world, in the United States they are most often thought of as the mining camps, cowboy towns, and other settlements of the sprawling western frontier.

Most ghost towns were originally mining camps where men sought gold, silver, copper, and other precious minerals.



and farming communities on the broad prairies also enjoyed brief prosperity before they were abandoned. Along with the miners, cowboys, and farmers, merchants and bankers, as well as doctors and schoolteachers, also went west. They laid out streets and put up buildings in hopes of growth and prosperity. As one newspaper editor declared, most folks wished “to get rich if we can.”

Most were once mining camps where adventurous men came to seek their fortunes. These communities boomed as miners sought gold, silver, copper, or other precious minerals but died out when all of the ore was panned from streams or blasted from rocky tunnels. In cowboy towns, cattle were driven to other towns, and then shipped to markets in the East. Many lumber camps in deep forests

In 1848, James W. Marshall discovered gold at Sutter’s Mill when he shut down the water on the millrace and glanced into the ditch. “I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump for I felt certain it was gold,” he recalled. Soon the word was out. “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!” shouted Sam Brannon, waving a bottle of gold dust as he strode through the San Francisco streets. Seeking pay dirt, “forty-niners”

(as the prospectors came to be known) streamed into California in the first of the great American gold rushes. Yet, over time, people came to refer to the sawmill as “Sutter’s Folly” as the land of John Sutter was **overrun** with prospectors. Everywhere, men claimed “squatter’s rights,” in which they settled on land without paying for it.

Towns sprang up overnight. Charles B. Gillespie, a miner who worked near Coloma, California, described the typical main streets of these towns as “alive with crowds.” To him, the miners were ragged, dirty men who were otherwise good-natured. They were a mix of Americans and immigrants—Germans, French, and other Europeans,



After several hard hours of travel, these trail-weary settlers paused in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Unhitching their wagon, they watered their livestock, ate a noontime meal, and briefly rested.



Loading all of their possessions in Conestoga wagons with billowing canvas tops, settlers seeking independence moved westward to homestead farms, staked a mining claim, or set up storekeeping in a new town.

and gold seekers from China and Chile, along with British convicts from Australia. Mark Twain declared, “It was a driving, vigorous, restless population in those days . . . two hundred thousand *young* men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy.”

In 1851, when a Scottish artist named J. D. Borthwick arrived to try his luck as a prospector, he wrote that the main street of Hangtown, later renamed Pacerville, “was in many places knee-deep in mud, and was plentifully strewn with old boots, hats, and shirts, old sardine-boxes, empty tins of preserved oysters, empty bottles, worn-out pots and kettles, old ham-bones, broken picks and shovels, and other rubbish.” Borthwick described the town as “one long

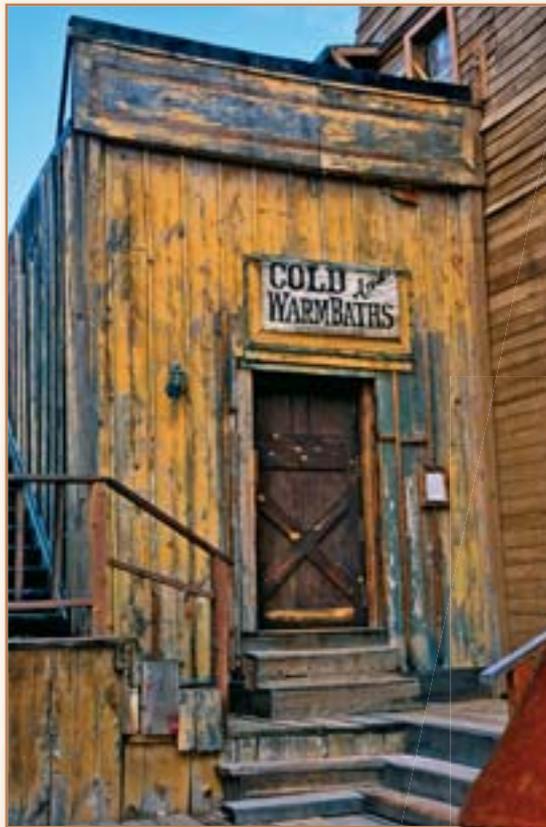
straggling street of clapboard houses and log cabins, built in a hollow at the side of a creek, and surrounded by high and steep hills.” Along the creek, he said, “there was continual noise and clatter, as mud, dirt, stones, and water were thrown about in all directions, and the men, dressed in ragged clothes and big boots, wielding picks and shovels . . . were all working as if for their lives.”

In the typical western town, the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks, along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses. There might be a bank made of solid brick to assure depositors that their hard cash or gold dust was safe from robbers. There might also be a mercantile store, an early version of the department store, as well as a general store. The town certainly had to have a

blacksmith shop and livery stable, as well as corrals for horses and cattle. Some towns had a telegraph office and their very own newspaper. The town might be lucky enough to be on a stagecoach route, a Pony Express station, or, better yet, a railroad stop.

“The Americans have a perfect passion for railroads,” wrote Michel Chevalier, a

French economist, in the 1830s. If the railroad bypassed the village, it quickly became a ghost town. Helen Hunt Jackson described Garland City, Colorado, where she lived: “Twelve days ago there was not a house here. Today, there are one hundred and five, and in a week there will be two hundred.” However, the town lasted only a few months, at least at that site. When the railroad passed thirty miles to the west, folks moved the entire town—walls and windows, as well as sidewalks, furnishings, and goods—to the railroad tracks. Railroads laid down thousands of miles of gleaming tracks across the grasslands, with a transcontinental link completed in 1869.



None of these towns would have prospered, even briefly, and the frontier would never have become settled, without women and children. Storekeepers and farmers occasionally brought their wives and children with them, but men still outnumbered women nine to one. Most towns actively sought women. In 1860, a letter to the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*

from the new settlement of Breckenridge, Colorado, read: “A few very respectable looking women have ventured over to see us. Send us a few more.” Another Colorado writer asked, “We have one lady living in Breckenridge and one on Gold Run; we would be glad to welcome many arrivals of the ‘gentler’ portion of the gold-seeking humanity, and can offer a pleasant country, good

locations, and peaceable neighbors . . . except for an occasional lawsuit.”

The waves of western migration reached a peak between 1860 and 1880. Over time, some towns grew into large cities, such as Denver and Phoenix, while many others were abandoned and forgotten in the desert sands or mountain snows. Most went bust because of **economic** failure—all the gold or silver was mined or the cattle were driven to another market town. A few people got rich, but others suffered heartbreak, hunger, and plain bad luck, and then abandoned the town. Perched on mountain cliffs, tucked into a wooded valley, or baking in the desert sun, these ghost towns are so remote that they are almost impossible to find. People often have to travel to them by four-wheel-drive vehicles and then hike several miles up rocky

slopes or over cactus-studded deserts. Finding the ghost towns may be as difficult as the search for gold that led to the founding of the towns.

John Steele described Washington, California, in the 1840s, just six months after it had been founded: “With a large number of **vacant** cabins it contained several empty buildings and quite a large hotel, closed and silent.” Once ringing with the voices of cheerful people, the towns have now fallen silent. They have become little more than empty shells of their former selves. There may be a handful of old false-front buildings, weathered to a haunting gray, with open doorways and broken windows. But little else remains; few people even remember the place. Even the memories, along with the hopes and dreams of the inhabitants, have blown away, like so much dust in the wind.



ABOVE: Cabezon, New Mexico, ghost town. In ghost town cemeteries, names of the dead were sometimes **scrawled on rough boards.**

RIGHT: Here, a group of men have set up a mining camp at a place known as Gregory's Diggings during the early days of the gold rush in Colorado.

