Bodie – where the West was Wildest

The spirit of the "Wild West" has been one of the defining themes of American culture - literature, film and art - for the last 150 years. But the great age of the Wild West was actually rather short. It began around 1850, with the opening up of the American west, but by 1900 it was over. Towns appeared one year, and disappeared a few years later. One of the finest examples is the California "ghost town" of Bodie, which was once said to be the wildest town in the Wild West.

Once this was one of the wildest places in the Wild West.

Today the second biggest city in California is San Francisco. Once it was Bodie.

"Bodie?", you say. "Where's that?"

Good question. But in 1880 in America, reactions would probably have been very different. Then, Bodie, with its population of over 10,000, was one of the most infamous places in the whole U.S.A., reputed as the worst, most violent and most lawless town in the Wild West. Many historians have quoted a letter from a young girl whose parents decided to go and live and work in Bodie; even this 12-year old knew of Bodie well by reputation, and in her *diary* she wrote: "Goodbye God! I'm going to Bodie". Bodie was "hell on earth".

In 1859, a gold prospector named William Body (pronounced like "roadie") discovered gold-*bearing* rock in a desolate part of the California desert. Claiming the *stake* in his name, he set up a base cabin there with two friends.

Since it was the start of winter, Body and one of his companions then went off to buy *stores* from the nearest shop..... about a hundred miles away. By the time they started back however, the temperature and the winter snows had begun to fall; and as the snow got deeper and deeper, the journey got harder and harder. Though the men were tough and knew how to survive under most circumstances, they had not *reckoned with* the terrible cold in the high California desert, situated at an altitude of over 2,500 metres. A few hundred metres from their cabin, Body collapsed. His friend *struggled* on to get help, but by the time it came, the snow had covered up his *tracks* completely. William Body's body was not found until the following spring.

Thus Body never extracted a single *ounce* of gold from his claim; but since it was his *claim*, the mining camp, then town, that grew up on the spot got named after him.

According to legend, the town's name changed from *Body* to *Bodie* because a sign-writer could not spell correctly. In actual fact, the change was deliberate, the townspeople did not want the name to be mis-pronounced. "Body" (rhyming with "*shoddy*") and implying a dead corpse, sounded rather macabre!

At first the town grew slowly, as there was more gold to be found in some other towns in the region, than near Bodie; besides, Bodie was such a desolate *spot*! It was not until some very rich veins of gold were discovered in 1876 that the Bodie gold rush really began.

Like most gold rush towns, Bodie grew very fast, then *shrank* again almost as fast, as the gold ran out. Maximum size was reached in 1880, when the town *boasted* 65 saloon bars and its own daily newspaper, in which its violence and lawlessness were reported in fine detail. On 5th September 1880, for example, the *Bodie Standard* reported three shootings, plus two hold-ups of *stage coaches* in one day!

By 1885, the town's population had dropped to a couple of thousand, many of the miners having gone off to *seek* better fortunes elsewhere; many of the town's wooden buildings had been burnt down. Fire, indeed, was a permanent risk in Bodie's dry climate, and the town was actually destroyed several times in its history, the last time in 1932.

It survived until then as a small town, *providing* services to the local area; but the 1932 fire signed the town's *death warrant*. Many of the facilities were destroyed, as were the homes of many of the surviving residents. After the fire,

there was no reason for people to go on living in Bodie.

The man who did most for Bodie was Jim Cain, who opened the town's first bank in 1880. He was also one of the most successful of Bodie's miners, and as the town declined, he bought most of the buildings that no-one else wanted — including the principal mine.

After Bodie was abandoned by its last inhabitants during the Depression of the 1930's, Cain saved the town from total destruction. A watchman was installed at the mine, and his job was to make sure that no-one came and *dismantled* the remaining wooden buildings (as happened to so many other ghost towns).

As a result, the 150 buildings in Bodie that survived the fire have remained standing, as a real ghost town, until this day.

Today, the remains of the most lawless town in the West stand exposed to the hot summer sun and the cold winter frosts, as a memorial to one of the most turbulent ages in American history. During the short summer season, a few adventurous tourists drive along the unmade roads, to walk for themselves through the now-quiet streets of this once-active town; but most of the year, the streets are quite empty, and the only noise is the whistling of the cold dry wind as it blows round the corners of deserted buildings

And in the old cemetery, just outside town, the bodies of William Body and others who *perished* in this desolate *spot* now lie in peace.

WORDS

diary: personal journal - **bearing:** carrying - **stake:** to reserve territory - **stores:** necessary things for the winter - **reckon with:** take account of - **struggle:** fight - **tracks:** marks in the snow - **ounce:** a few grams - **claim:** reserve - **according to:** in the words of - **shoddy:** of poor quality - **spot:** place - **shrink:** get smaller - **boast:** be proud of - **stage coach:** passenger coach - **seek:** look for - **provide:** ensure, give, supply - **death warrant:** death order - **dismantle:** take to pieces - **perish:** die

STUDENTS' WORKSHEET

Bodie - Where the West was Wildest

Say whether the following statements are true or false.

1. Once its population reached about 10,000, Bodie never got any larger.   **TRUE   FALSE**

2. The Bodie gold rush began with William Body's claim.   **TRUE   FALSE**

3. By 1885, not much gold could be found.   **TRUE   FALSE**

4. On September 5th 1880, the stage coach was held up twice, and three people were killed.   **TRUE   FALSE**

5. Jim Cain died before he had time to celebrate his fiftieth birthday.   **TRUE   FALSE**

6. The watchman's job, created before the Great Depression, was to make sure that no-one stole the remaining gold from the mines.   **TRUE   FALSE**

7. Today Bodie has about 150 buildings still standing.   **TRUE   FALSE**

8. William Body died a few hundred yards from his cabin.   **TRUE   FALSE**

9. Within the space of 12 years, Bodie grew to being a big town, then returned back to its original size.

    TRUE FALSE

10. Today, Bodie is a major tourist attraction.   **TRUE   FALSE**

Creative writing Using information from this article, and your imagination, write an article for the Bodie Standard of 5th September 1880.