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# What the Historic Record Reveals about Bodie's Peak Population

By  
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Current literature offers various opinions about the number of people who swarmed into boomtown Bodie. Most modern-day pundits claim the uproarious mining town's population exceeded 10,000. Others say 12,000, or even 15,000 restless souls once occupied the place.<sup>(1)</sup> The historic record, however, reveals that fewer people lived in Bodie than mythmakers and witless writers have led us to believe. Immediately before hordes of disappointed fortune seekers began departing in mid- to late 1880, most eyewitnesses estimated the town's population at 8,000 or fewer. Their remarks are preserved in surviving newspapers. One journalist approximated Bodie's population in late 1879 while grumbling about muddy streets. "It is rather a humiliating confession to make that in a town of 8,000 inhabitants, in the principal street, and in front of the principal stores, a wagon should mire down. . . ." (*Bodie Morning News* 5 September 1879) Twenty days later, another newspaper published a letter praising the camp: "Two producing mines sustain a population close on 10,000 people. . . ." (*Daily Bodie Standard* 25 September 1879) A conflicting opinion appeared three weeks later: "The people, we are glad to know, are awakening to the necessity of having some settled form of [government] by which the various civil and criminal wants of a people, now numbering nearly 7,000 souls, can be supplied." (*Bodie Morning News* 16 October 1879) Meanwhile, Bodie's press championed the district by telegraphing promotional tidbits to newspapers throughout the West:

Bodie has five newspapers, two banks, Masonic, Odd Fellows and other halls, a fire department, seventy saloons, innumerable dance houses, 8,000 people and no church. So says the *Bodie Chronicle*. (*Idaho Try-Weekly Statesman* 4 November 1879)

Comments printed during the ensuing twelve months also contained population estimates. "There are thirty mines running with steam hoisting works, and as many more with horse whims, etc. . . . supporting a town of 8,000 inhabitants." (*Daily Free Press* 8 November 1879) "The number of people who reside in Bodie is estimated all the way from 4,000 to 8,000. . . . It is thought by those who are competent to judge that there are about 5,000 people here at present. During the summer there were at least 7,000 here, but the approach of winter has reduced the number considerably." (*Daily Free Press* 13 November 1879) "It is a fact, universally conceded, that the town of Bodie is quite in need of a local or municipal government. There are between 5,000 and 8,000 permanent residents in the place." (*Daily Free Press* 4 December 1879) "About a year ago Bodie had a population of about 2,000, but it has increased since to 7,000 or 8,000." (*Daily*

*Bodie Standard* 26 March 1880) “The business doing in the Bodie mines is sufficient to support a population of about 4,000, instead of from 5,000 to 8,000, which has been its population during the past year or eighteen months.” (*Bridgeport Chronicle-Union* 21 August 1880)

Complicating matters in 1880, the Tenth U.S. Census recorded little more than 5,400 people.<sup>(2)</sup> Bodie’s boomtown press quickly challenged the figure. “There are many complaints among citizens that their names are not on the census list,” argued one editor who charged that the enumeration was incomplete. “It is safe to say that the population of Bodie is at least 7,000 instead of 5,416 as reported.” (*Daily Free Press* 14 July 1880)

Discrepancies between informal estimates and the census set off arguments that continue to this day. One recent book claims (without documentation) that the low official count resulted because only homeowners and jobholders were interviewed. According to the theory, people living in boarding or rooming houses were considered transient and omitted. Minorities, such as Mexicans, Chinese, and Indians were supposedly neglected as well. (Sprague 2003, 101-103) This explanation sounds plausible, but it is not supported by research. National Park Service historian Corri Jimenez whose Master’s thesis includes an analysis of Bodie’s 1880 demographics from the federal census asserted, “I can vouch that people living in boarding and rooming houses *were* counted! I recorded lots of boarders, which usually followed a hotelkeeper or homeowner. Prostitutes were listed too,” affirmed Jimenez. “So were men in jail.” Minorities were also counted. Jimenez tabulated 4,969 whites (including 75 from Mexico), 256 Chinese, 171 Indians, and 14 blacks for a total of 5,410 inhabitants. (Jimenez 2000; 2003)

Theorizing that enumerators listed only homeowners and jobholders is crackpot speculation, pure and simple. Newspapers from 1880 also contradicted the theory by reporting gainfully employed workers who were not counted: “At the Standard Consolidated office,” remarked a disapproving editor, “they say no [census taker] has been around. Of the eight persons in the *Free Press* office no one is on the list.” (*Daily Free Press* 14 July 1880) Another annoyed newspaperman knew of other employees who were not recorded: “We have nine men in and about the Standard Printing House, but the census taker did not get the names of one of them that we know of. The same thing occurred at one or two other places in town. It is believed that we have nearer to 7,000 than 5,000.” (*Daily Bodie Standard* 15 July 1880) These complaints are evidence that the enumeration fell short. But who was omitted and for what reason will probably never be known.

One boom-era journalist dismissed the possibility that Bodie contained 10,000 people. He believed the population was little more than half that figure and expressed confidence with the census: “St. Louis and Chicago, San Francisco and Sacramento, have been growling because the census enumerators have not footed up a population equal to what has been claimed for them by their papers. And now comes Bodie a growling, the census taker giving us a population of only 5,417, when we have been

claiming from 7,000 to 10,000 people in our altitudinous burg. Perhaps our enumerators have omitted a few, but is not 5,416 a goodly population for a place that may be said to be really only about two years old? We think it is.” (*Bodie Chronicle* 17 July 1880)

So, why is the notion that Bodie contained more than 10,000 residents so persistent if boomtown reporters and census takers thought otherwise? A generation after the boom, imaginary numbers began appearing as if they were established fact. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a newspaperman interviewed three aging Mono County pioneers. “Bodie had a population in 1879 estimated at 10,000,” reported the journalist in 1906, unaware that in 1879 and 1880 most eyewitnesses reported 8,000 people or fewer. (*Bridgeport Chronicle-Union* 6 January 1906) Perhaps a trio of seasoned storytellers exaggerated to increase the dying town’s importance in Western folklore. Or maybe time clouded their memories.

Seeking stories about ghost towns a decade later, a magazine writer motored onto Main Street. “Bodie was bad and still looks it,” he thought as he searched for signs of life among abandoned storefronts in 1915, two years after the Standard Mine closed. Only 200, perhaps 250, people remained. “In her feverish prime,” claimed one local, “Bodie boasted of the widest street in any Western mining camp, the wickedest men, and the worst climate out of doors.” The article in *The Saturday Evening Post* celebrated the once-thriving gold mining center as a ghostly relic of the Old West. The magazine’s popularity also guaranteed that at least one tall tale would gain widespread acceptance. “The town, which had once housed 10,000 turbulent souls, was all there,” the visitor reported, revealing gullibility for colorful stories and an appreciation for the astonishing number of surviving buildings. (*The Saturday Evening Post* 25 September 1915)

Mining had all but ceased a dozen years later, during which the population had dwindled to 20, maybe 30, stalwart individuals who refused to believe the gold was played out. A few downtown businesses hung on, when a visiting writer in 1927 questioned veteran of the excitement, James S. Cain, age 73. In the words of the interviewer, “Twelve thousand active citizens centered their hopes upon the mining bustle on Bodie Bluff, 12,000 men and women lived the unrestrained existence of the almost lawless camp.” Cain, who was actively promoting the district to outside interests, divulged his vision for the place: “Bodie’s activities in 1879 will be as nothing when compared to the boom that is coming!” (Russell 1927, 90)

Elsewhere in town, another staunch believer anticipated Bodie’s revival. Gazing upon Main Street’s abandoned storefronts, the old-timer fetched a cherished object from his vest pocket. “That’s Bodie ore!” he exclaimed, displaying a golden match case faced with high-grade rock. “Look at it. More gold than quartz! And there is more of it in the old hill yonder. I’ll stay till she booms again.” (Russell 1929, 19) (3)

Another gold rush seemed within reach two years later in 1929, when a multi-national corporation moved into Bodie and reopened a group of old mines. Pinning their hopes on modern technology and ample funding, company geologists believed they could find “the lost vein.”

The activity attracted a reporter who described J.S. Cain, the town's only remaining banker and its principal landowner and optimist. "He has hopes, too," wrote the journalist, "for he owns a lot of the old claims up on the four hills. After waiting fifty-one years, he is certainly entitled to liberal dividends." Acting unofficially as the district's historian and advocate, Cain glamorized the past. "We had 15,000 people here in 1880," he alleged, indulging his fantasies while demonstrating that Bodie's peak population increased as memories faded. (*San Francisco Chronicle* 23 September 1930)

Despite wishful thinking and romantic stories, Bodie never boomed again and the town never contained 15,000, 12,000, or even 10,000, inhabitants. The first two figures were certainly 20<sup>th</sup> century inventions, and the latter estimate was soundly refuted during the boom. Witnesses at the time believed only about 7,000 people, maybe 8,000 at the most, ever really populated the place.

## NOTES

1. "The mines at Bodie supported a populace of 15,000. . . ." (Beebe 1951, 38)  
"The population was 10,000." (Cain 1956, 37) "Bodie's population reached between 10,000 and 13,000." (Johnson 1967, 20) ". . . 10,000 remains a likely figure for the 1880 population of Bodie." (Sprague 2003, 103)
2. "Census Enumerator W.A. Mather furnishes us with the following: Bodie has a population of 5,416, as per census returns. The above is based upon instructions that no one be enumerated who had not their usual place of abode in Bodie on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of June, 1880. Persons arriving here after that date are not enumerated, it being understood that they be enumerated where they resided on that date." (*Daily Bodie Standard* 12 July 1880)
3. Author George Williams III believes that the unidentified old-timer interviewed by Russell in 1927 was saloonkeeper Ernest Marks, Rosa May's longtime lover. If so, the gold match case faced with Bodie high-grade is pictured on page 64 of Ella Cain's book. See, George Williams III, *Rosa May: The Search for a Mining Camp Legend* (Dayton, NV: Tree By The River Publishing, 1979), 79-81.

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