

March 2011

Bodie's Discovery Story: As Told by Joseph Wasson, Judge J.G. McClinton, and E.S. "Black" Taylor

By
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"Ever since the mines of Bodie District began to attract general and particular attention in the affairs of the Pacific Coast," reported the *Daily Bodie Standard*, "the early history of the same began to be a subject of serious inquiry. . . ." In October 1879, responding to public interest in the booming gold town's past, area pioneer Judge J.G. McClinton led Joseph Wasson to the grave of the miner who had given the town his name.(1) They searched among the sagebrush on horseback for less than an hour and located a depression where the ground had settled beneath a pile of loosely arranged stones. Almost exactly 20 years earlier, the prospector buried there had discovered gold then died in a November 1859 snowstorm never knowing that a nearby bonanza would bear his name. His corpse remained beneath the snow throughout the winter until Spring 1860, when prospectors drifted back to the remote mining region and buried his bones. Miners named their diggings in honor of the fallen fortune seeker. But, because nobody was certain how to spell his name, they employed "Bodie," "Body," "Bodey," and a few other phonetic transcriptions. According to Wasson, who quoted the district's earliest records, miners formally organized the "Body Mining District" on July 10, 1860: "Art. I.—This district shall be known and designated as Body District." He added that, "they spelled "the name of the discoverer with a 'y,'" not an "ie."(2)

Wasson and McClinton invited reporters and the town's leading citizens to witness the grave's exhumation. Newspapers throughout the region reported that the discoverer of Bodie's rich mines had been found. Telegraphs spread the news from San Francisco to New York City, where investors awaited weekly updates on Bodie mining stock. The publicity sparked curiosity about the dead prospector's true past, and Wasson was prepared to tell the tale. While seeking information for two booklets intended to promote Bodie's mines to outside investors,(3) he had pieced together the discovery story from memories held by McClinton and other old-timers, including Terence Brodigan, who had led a four-man prospecting party into the hills north of Mono Lake, and Patrick Garraty, another surviving member of the group. Our most complete account of Bodie's discovery is preserved by Wasson in an interview published in the *Daily Bodie Standard*:

THE END—THE QUESTION SETTLED AS TO BODY'S GRAVE

Mono County having become altogether *par excellence* the leading mining section of California, it behooves all who have a permanent interest in the country to see “that the story of its times” be made as nearly correct as possible. In this connection, it is important . . . to look into the particular history of the discovery of the mineral deposits leading up to the final development of the Bodie of today—a development with results attracting at least national attention, and promising everything equal in fame to the historic mines of the world at large.

The only serious and conscientious attempt on the part of any one to collect and weave into readable shape any considerable number of these facts, and who exhibits any systematic determination to that end, is Jos. Wasson, who first began his work one year ago last January. . . . He set about comparing notes and digging up everything of interest. . . .

The subject of the present article is an interview concerning his labors regarding the original and immediate discovery of the Bodie mines, either placer or quartz. This has necessitated an unusual amount of trouble in the way of the collecting and sifting of testimony, a number of quasi “Tichborne claimants”(4) having appeared upon the scene. In short, who and what was the original discover in question?

In the *Bodie and Esmeralda* publication,”(5) Wasson, owing to the very limited time he had for collecting materials of fact, gave the credit, pure and simple, to one Wm. S. Bodie, or Body. In the interval between that and a second edition, he in effect, awarded the discovery to all practical intents and purposes, to one Terence Brodigan. The first named was a Mohawk Dutchman, a native of Poughkeepsie, New York,(6) according to the best accounts, the other, a Protestant Irishman, native of Donover, on the battlefield of the Boyne, Ireland. Both had lived and mined in and about Sonora, California. Brodigan came of a good and well-known influential family, but had few advantages as to education; but being of a very ambitious and independent disposition, he left “the old sod” when a boy, and landed in Australia, where he carried on a substantial business in the way of sheep raising for some years, after which he came to California, arriving at Sonora in 1851. Here he kept a hotel and conducted a livery business most of the time, and was well-known and respected. As the placer mines became exhausted, and his family increased, he began to look about for new worlds to conquer. In the meantime, the so-called “Dogtown Diggings” in the Mono country began to attract attention—the discovery occurring in 1858. W.S. Body was to a certain extent, in the same boat, but he had left his family “in the States.”(7) In July 1859, the diggings of Monoville were discovered. This added fuel to the flame or feeling created in the breasts of the citizens of “old Tuolumne,” and in the fall of ’59, Brodigan came over with one party and Bodie [sic] with another. The latter had been hovering about Oak Flat, Humbug, and other well-known placer resorts in that famous county. The two parties prospected along the route, coming together at a point on the old trail not far from what is now known as Leavett’s Station, on the present Bodie and Sonora wagon road. Bodie [sic] and Brodigan were well acquainted at Sonora, and the former being a guest of the latter, as the records show. They came on to Monoville in company. There a halt was made. Brodigan

hunted around Mono Lake awhile with Jas. Stewart, once Sheriff of Tuolumne County. Getting restless, and desirous of carrying out his original intention, he determined to “strike out” on a prospecting tour. In this he was followed by Pat. Garraty, Wm. Boyle, and W.S. Body.(8) From Monoville, 15 miles southwest of Bodie, the Brodigan-Body party swung round the foothills next north to Mono Lake, and brought up first in the canyon where Aurora has since been built. They dug several holes for placers, but owing to the threatening attitude of the Indians, nothing definite was affected, and the party started back toward Monoville, camping and prospecting for a day or two by the way, in the ravine alongside of which are now located the works of the Dudley, Defiance, and Red Cloud [mines].

At this juncture, it was resolved that the result of the expedition be kept secret until spring of 1860, and the party returned to Monoville. Immediately following this, Body, who was doubtless a good prospector, was tempted to break the bargain, and in company with others, returned and went over the ground again. Brodigan had made preparations to return to Sonora for the winter, and started for home, notwithstanding he was quite apprised of Body’s bad faith. Meeting a new batch of adventurers from Sonora, he turned about and led them into the new diggings. . . . In the meantime, Body, with Black Taylor (a half Cherokee) (9) had thrown up a little dugout cabin at the head of what is now Green Street, under shelter of a point of rocks, about midway between what is now known as the Bulwer and Waltz Springs. There is left but a mere trace of this old cabin, . . .

Late in November, 1859, Brodigan again started for Sonora. When he and party got along about the Dogtown divide, Body and Taylor were caught up with. They were afoot, with a single animal heavily packed with provisions. They soon turned in the direction of their new camp, and Brodigan dropped back a moment and gave Body his parting blessing, adding that they would “meet in the spring.” Body and Taylor made a bee-line for their new habitation at the head of Green Street, but the former never again got sight of it, as far as this world was concerned. He fell by the wayside, under a point of black palisade rocks, about three-fourths of a mile southwest of his destination. He and Taylor were not lost, although there was a blinding snow-storm raging at the time. In that same unexpected storm, Brodigan and party came near losing their lives, having to abandon the Sonora Pass trail and return home by the roundabout way of Carson Valley and Placerville. Brodigan was given up for lost and he found the people of Sonora on the eve of organizing a party to search for him. The body of Mr. Body was not found until after the snow melted in 1860, and it was buried in the same blanket in which he was rolled and left by Taylor before life became extinct.(10)

Between the time of this event, and the one about to be recorded there is an interval of twenty years; very few of the original pioneers of this section of the State remain to tell the tale in any form whatever. The resurrection of things in general naturally elicited inquiry regarding the personal history of men and their affairs. . . .

Black Taylor was killed by the Indians near Benton in 1861. That same year, McClinton found a notice of location of a placer claim with the name of W.S. Body signed to it; it was on the leaf of a memorandum book or diary, closely

folded up and stuck in the fork of a bush growing in the little ravine leading down west from the Mono [mine], half way toward the present town.(11)

Based on McClinton's memory of the signature on a mining claim and upon entries preserved in the district record books, Wasson believed W.S. spelled his name "Body."(12) Recently discovered documents in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Tuolumne County, California, indicate Wasson and McClinton were probably right. Wherever W.S. oversaw his own name written, the scribe lettered "Body." His presumed wife in Poughkeepsie, however, spelled the name "Bodey."

Two days after Wasson's interview appeared in print, McClinton wrote a letter to the newspaper, approving of the research and adding more details:

Hon. Joseph Wasson:

My Dear Sir—I have read with much interest and satisfaction a report of an interview with you published in the *Bodie Daily Standard* of the 27th, which so far as it goes is excellent, and it clears up several doubtful and disputed points in the early history of this now famous place. While almost every one else has been engaged during the last three years of our local history in the great scramble for mines and money, the fact that you have, during the same period, devoted so much of your time to "digging up the bed rock facts," as you express it, of the early history of the district, with a view to their preservation in some permanent form, is greatly to your credit, and your zeal in the matter cannot be too highly commended. . . .

I became acquainted with Taylor very early in the year 1861, and learned from his own lips the full particulars of Body's death, and the facts stated by him to me do not differ materially from those published in the *Daily Standard* on Monday evening. The spot where we found the grave corresponds minutely with the locality described to me by Taylor as the place where he left Body, and where he was afterwards buried. Johnson King, one of the pioneers of this region assisted Black Taylor in the burial of Body's remains. . . .

The way in which the orthography of Body's name came to be changed as applied to the district, was as follows: In 1860, Prof. J.E. Clayton and the Hazlett brothers (Ben and John) located the Bodie Ranch between here and Aurora. They cut the natural growth of grass and packed it to Aurora—then a young thriving place—and built a small log stable. They then gave a verbal order for a sign: "Body Stable," but the painter, with an eye to the beautiful, which I highly commend, executed it "Bodie Stable" and the word looked so much better in that form, that the people soon adopted that style of spelling it.

I am not now certain to whom we are indebted for this orthographical improvement, but I think it was Robt. M. Howland,(13) who is now in Bodie. At any rate Bob was the first sign painter I remember having seen at Aurora.

I think Black Taylor was murdered by the Indians near Benton in the spring of 1862, instead of 1861, as stated in your interview. I saw him at Aurora late in the summer of 1861.(14)

The discovery story was now pretty well established, but unbeknownst to Wasson and McClinton, some 20 years earlier a reporter had traveled through the region and interviewed Black Taylor. Details provided by Taylor in 1860 differed somewhat from Brodigan's later account, and the reporter added another phonetic spelling to confuse the founder's legacy:

Mr. Taylor occupies one of four mining camps, situated on the west side of one of those cozy looking little valleys, which, with its rich carpet of grass and clover, contrast so finely with the barren, bleak looking mountains around, with their sandy and stony surfaces, and scattering bunches of sage and other brush wood. . . .

These diggings were called after the name of their original discoverer, a Mr. Boda [sic], whose melancholy fate, last winter, I do not recollect having seen in print, and will therefore, give some account of it, Mr. Taylor being our informant. Boda had attempted to bring in some supplies on a sled, the snow being deep, and the weather intensely cold. A snow storm coming on, he was compelled to abandon them, and make his way to the camp, which he succeeded in finding. During an interruption in the storm, accompanied by Mr. Taylor, he went in quest of the sled, and the two were soon lost in one of those sudden and terrible snow storms, so often witnessed in this elevated region during the winter months. After wandering for two days and nights in search of their camp, poor Boda's mind began to wander and his strength to fail, and Mr. Taylor being a strong and athletic man carried him on his shoulders, still hoping to find the camp, until his strength began to fail him, and he finally became so much exhausted that he was compelled to leave him on the way. This he did after making the best provision for him that he could under the circumstances. He then made another desperate effort to reach the camp, in the hope of obtaining relief for his exhausted companion and after wandering for several hours in his fruitless search, he found himself again on the precise spot where he had left him. He found him apparently asleep, his eyes half closed and his features calm and placid; but there was no arousing him from his slumbers, for he was sleeping the sleep of death. With his own approaching fate prefigured before him, in the lifeless and frozen form of his companion, and with heavy heart and failing strength, he resolved on making a last desperate effort, and shaking off the drowsy demands of exhausted nature, started off again in search of his camp. His athletic frame had already begun to yield to the demands of hunger, fatigue and cold, and it was with great difficulty that he could drag his numbed and weary limbs along through the deep snow, and perhaps with still greater difficulty that he could resist the almost overpowering demands of exhausted nature for repose.

After searching thus for hours he at last came upon a spot which he recognized, and which he pointed out to me, and to his great joy found that he was in sight of his camp, and not more than a half mile distant from it. Such was his exhaustion, however, that although his position was sufficiently elevated to overlook the camp, he was some twelve hours in crawling down to it, through the snow.(15)

Contrary to several modern-day versions of Bodie's discovery story, nowhere does the historical record place Taylor among the original prospectors. Until more compelling evidence is presented, these three articles are all that is known about the discovery that gave rise to Bodie and the struggle in a snowstorm that claimed the life of a miner who gave the district his name.

NOTES:

1. A newspaperman from Boise, Idaho Territory, Joseph Wasson started the Silver City *Idaho Avalanche* in 1865, then as a correspondent he accompanied General Crook on several Indian campaigns. Wasson moved to Nevada in 1868, where he wrote for the Winnemucca *Argent*, then the Pioche *Review*. At Bodie he was elected in 1879 to the California State Assembly, representing Mono and Inyo counties.

James Giles McClinton arrived at California from Illinois. He mined at Monoville, then Esmeralda, during their excitements in the early 1860s. Between 1864 and 1866 he was city editor for Aurora's *Esmeralda Union*. The Nevada Governor appointed McClinton to the office of District Judge for Aurora in 1869, where he presided until 1871. He served one term as Nevada State Senator representing Esmeralda County, beginning in 1873. During this time, McClinton prospected, managed, and invested in Aurora and Bodie mines. The McClinton Mine at Bodie was named after the respected pioneer and long-time resident of the region.

2. Wasson, *Bodie and Esmeralda* (1878), 5-6.

3. Joseph Wasson, *Bodie and Esmeralda: An Account of the Revival of the Affairs in Two Singularly Interesting and Important Mining Districts, Including Something of their Past History, and the Gist of the Reports of Profs. Benj. Silliman and Wm. P. Blake, the late J. Ross Browne, and State Mineralogist R. H. Stretch and H. R. Whitehill—Also, Detailed Description of Mines most Developed, Tunnels, Mills, etc.—Also, General Resources of Mono and Esmeralda Counties—With Maps and Illustrations* (San Francisco, CA: Spaulding, Barto & Co., 1878); Joseph Wasson, *Complete Guide to the Mono County Mines: Description of Bodie, Esmeralda, Indian, Lake, Laurel Hill, Prescott, and Other Mining Districts—With Maps and Illustrations* (San Francisco, CA. Spaulding, Barto & Co., 1879).

4. "Tichborne Claimant" recalls a sensational 1871 English trial that proved the apparent heir to the Tichborne family fortune was an impostor posing as Roger Charles Tichborne, who had vanished at sea nearly 20 years earlier.

5. Wasson, *Bodie and Esmeralda* (1878), 5-6.

6. The meaning of “Mohawk Dutchman” remains unclear, but it probably does not imply Wasson believed W.S. was mixed blood Iroquois and Dutch or Palatine German. A year earlier, Wasson called W.S. a “Knickerbocker Dutchman,” suggesting ties to New York City (New Amsterdam). “Mohawk Dutchman” most likely refers to Poughkeepsie’s location north of Manhattan in the Hudson River Valley, named for English explorer Henry Hudson who sailed for the Dutch, and the region’s Indian heritage, celebrated by James Fenimore Cooper’s leatherstocking novels.

7. Three descriptions of W.S. have emerged:

“From all accounts, Body was rather under-size in stature, say 5 feet 7, and weighed about 170 lbs; had a dark, sandy complexion, and was of very slow and slouchy habits. Frank Shaw, of Adobe Meadows, a very plain-spoken man, describes Body as being ‘a dirty old devil.’ He met the Brodigan–Body party on his return to Sonora on their first trip here.” (*Daily Bodie Standard* [Bodie, CA] 27 October 1879)

“While here [in Poughkeepsie] he followed the trade of a tinsmith, working for the firm of J.H. & J.E. Allen, who carried on business for a long time on the corner of Main and Academy streets. The deceased was also a member of the Phoenix Hose Company . . . and an industrious, hard working man. He was regarded among his fellow work[ers] in the trade as a leader, because of his superior skill, and because of his naturally energetic disposition. He was an earnest member of the fire department and a leading Odd Fellow, and introduced some of the now prominent citizens, who were then young men, into the mysteries of that order.” (*Daily Eagle* [Poughkeepsie, NY] 28-29 October 1879)

“Sylvanus B. Cobb, informs us that he was a partner of the deceased pioneer from the Fall of 1857 until the early part of 1859, and that his name was William S. Bodey—not Body—and that he was a very fine man, temperate in his habits, and very neat in his personal appearance, in fact, uncommonly so. He was about 5 feet 6 inches in height, light complexioned, with hair and whiskers very gray, and aged about 45 years.” (*Bodie Chronicle* [Bodie, CA] 1 November 1879)

8. Based on information gathered during July and August 1878, Wasson initially wrote in *Complete Guide to Mono County Mines* (1879) that the four members of the prospecting party were: “Terence Brodigan, John C. Doyle, Tim Garraty, and W.S. Body.”

9. Wasson introduced Taylor in *Bodie and Esmeralda* (1878) as “E.S. (alias ‘Black’) Taylor.” In *Complete Guide to Mono County Mines* (1879), Wasson initially thought, “Body and Taylor had been delegated to return from Monoville with provisions, construct winter quarters, and represent the new claims until spring. In doing so, they encountered an unexpectedly severe snow storm in which Body lost his life.” This does not appear correct. Information published in a later interview indicates none of the miners intended to inhabit the remote mining outpost through winter. One prospector recalled that he was the second arrival the following spring. (*Daily Bodie Standard* [Bodie, CA] 10 May 1880)

10. Taylor returned to the mines in the spring of 1860 and, with the help of other miners, buried his former partner's remains. Johnson King, who assisted with the burial, described the skeleton: "most of the flesh had been stripped off by the coyotes and the bones were much scattered. One of the arms was never found." (*Daily Bodie Standard* [Bodie, CA] 29 October 1879) Some 20 years later, in October 1879, the grave yielded a nearly intact skeleton surrounded by the blanket in which Taylor had wrapped the dying man before leaving him in the snow. Other artifacts included a shoe containing the right foot (the left shoe was missing), a silk necktie, a button, a bowie knife in a leather sheath attached to a belt that encircled the skeletal waist. The knife had a 10 inch blade and its "hilt was marked with a medallion of a woman's head on one side, and a lion on the other." (*Daily Bodie Standard* [Bodie, CA] 27 October 1879) Bodie assayer A. Soderling claimed many years later that he owned the barrel of W.S.'s pistol, "which was found in his grave." Eyewitnesses at the gravesite, however, did not list a firearm. (*Chronicle Union* [Bridgeport, CA] 29 August 1903) Does W.S. Body's knife survive today? "The Pacific Coast Pioneer Society of Mono County decided to donate the 'Bodey bowie-knife' to the California Museum Association of Sacramento, and the knife has been received by Secretary Ray. It is a heavy blade 15 inches long, including the handle, and is badly rusted, though secure in a half-decayed scabbard.... The knife was found with the remains." (*Daily Alta California* [San Francisco, CA] 5 May 1885)

11. *Daily Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 27 October 1879.

12. We will probably never know for sure how W.S. spelled his name until a document is discovered that displays the dead miner's signature. For more information on Bodie's discovery and the evolution of the founder's name, see, Michael H. Piatt, "Who Was W.S. Body, Bodey, Bodie?" in *BODIE: "The Mines Are Looking Well . . ."* (El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books, 2003), 24-26.

13. Robert Howland shared a cabin with Samuel Clemens during the young writer's brief stay at Aurora in the Esmeralda Mining District between April and September 1862. For more information, see, Robert E. Stewart, *Aurora: Nevada's Ghost City of the Dawn* (Las Vegas, NV: Nevada Publications, 2004), 28-34, 88, 90. Clemens' whimsical account of his adventures at Esmeralda is in *Roughing It* (1871) 167-222.

14. *Daily Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 29 October 1879.

15. *Alta California* (San Francisco, CA) 7 October 1860.