

# RECONNOITERING IN THE EASTERN SIERRA NEVADA & GREAT BASIN BY 4-WHEEL-DRIVE

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Trip 2006:

# An Arc of Jewels Over the Head of Tonopah

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## Introduction

**M**emorial Day weekend was fast approaching. A trip had been in planning since January and it was looking to be a fairly big and far-flung one: a broad arc across eastern Nevada centering on the ghost towns of Caliente and Pioche areas, with a possible smattering of ghost towns between Tonopah and Warm Springs. At least three other people besides myself were making plans to go.

As time wore on, most of the participants had determined that they could not carry through with travel plans, leaving one other – my oft present traveling buddy, Graham C. When I started making the preliminary plans for Trip 2006, Graham was in England with his aged mother. Though Graham seemed eager to go along for the ride, Graham was at the same time hatching trans-Atlantic plans of his own unbeknown to myself – Graham was negotiating a home purchase a few blocks from mine. And just prior to Graham's leaving for England, he managed to swing a sweet deal on a cherry 2000 Toyota Tacoma 4WD TRD very similar to my own personal Tacoma.

After Graham's arrival back to the States and he took possession of his new home, we renewed our planning of our trip. Gas prices started to soar once again back over the \$3 per gallon mark, Graham picked up a new half grown puppy to go with his new home, and with those two things bearing on the trip we started looking closer to home as well as cutting our travel time length short by a couple days.

In the early 1980s I used to love camping and traveling to many of northern Nye County, Nevada ghost towns. I have fond but chilly memories of [camping in deep snow in Ione and Grantsville](#); the splendor of Belmont; and the wide open spaces and tall mountain ranges that form wonderful backdrops. It had been more than two decades since I visited these ghost towns, Graham had never been and they were all within two or three hours of home. So we set our sites on a broad arc north of Tonopah.

Initial plans were to head to Ione, Nevada first, then camp out at Grantsville nearby. The next day was planned cross over into the Reese River Valley and head north to Austin for gas; then return a short distance down the Reese River Valley and up into the Big Creek / Kingston Canyon country atop the Toiyabe Range; then cross over Northumberland Summit in the Toiyabe Range, thence down to Belmont via the Monitor Valley, before returning home to Big Pine, California. However, it had been a heavy winter and several calls to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest ranger station in Austin affirmed that the Big Creek / Kingston Canyon road was technically open, however there was still a lot of snow at the summit and a large truck had gotten stuck astride the muddy road and was blocking it. Furthermore, the truck looked to be there a long time. It was stuck during the three previous days to our departure.

During the week prior to our trip, I began going through my camping equipment, sorting and cleaning, setting everything in the laundry room for packing. I packed my Tacoma on Friday afternoon, after I returned home from work, everything except the food, beverages and

ice, as well as my clothing. Saturday morning, realizing how cool it was, I changed my clothing choices to more cool weather friendly, with one pair of shorts and T-shirt thrown in in case it changed back to more seasonable temperatures.

## Trip 2006: Day 1, May 27, 2006

**S**aturday, May 27<sup>th</sup> was the date of our departure. Memorial Day weekend also signals the official start of summer. However, the weather forecast was anything but summer-like. In the Owens Valley, it was supposed to be sunny, but with clouds over the Sierra Nevada, with temperatures 15°-20° cooler than the previous week. Not checking the weather for the eastward region of our travels, I mistakenly assumed that the rain shadow effect of the Sierra Nevada would eliminate the chance of precipitation. I was proved quite wrong! But, it added to the beauty and the fun of the trip – albeit the fact that it was rather chilly!

Our sites were set on a leisurely drive to Ione for our first day. We left our itinerary largely blank as to time of arrival and how much we intended to fill our time with. We left it to chance and our moods at the time. Graham and I kept our cruise controls set to lower than legal speeds and we stopped often to let his new dog – Toby by name – stretch his legs and acclimate to traveling by Tacoma – to which Toby promptly christened with vomit as we set out on the trip.

I arrived at Graham's house at 7:00 AM sharp Saturday morning. Graham and Toby were waiting out front of his place. Locking up his home, we pulled out of Big Pine and north onto US395 northward. Graham and I chatted electronically by FRS radio as we traveled northbound. It was sunny with a few small clouds over the Sierra Nevada, but it definitely was much cooler and also windy.

The big annual shindig of Mule Days were going on in nearby Bishop, the main street of town was closed for the parade. So Graham and I detoured town by an eastward route, coming out on US6 at Laws. We traveled northward on US6, made a brief stop at Benton, California so I could pick up some batteries for my FRS radio. Crossing into Nevada and over Montgomery Summit, we turned northward on NV360 toward US95 at Sodaville; then turned northward on US95. We made Mina, Nevada by 9:20 AM, 105 miles from our homes and in time for breakfast, so we stopped at the Silver King Cafe and bar.

Parking at the Silver King, Graham choose to park his truck sideways flush against the front of the building so as to shade Toby. This brought out the employee of the place, who scolded Graham for his unorthodox parking manner. Graham explained his reasoning, to which the employee suggested that Graham park his truck back a few yards so that the truck sat in front of the bar side of the building, which was still closed until later in the day. Getting out of my truck, I noticed that the wind in Mina was cold and biting.

The Silver King was simply furnished, but clean, the food good and prices reasonable. Oddly, though, our meal were served on plates about three-quarter scale as those in most restaurants, which had our breakfasts of eggs, meat and hashbrowns all piled atop one another.



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Map of our first day's travels.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

My truck packed up and ready to go the evening previous to our leaving on Trip 2006.



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View of the Sierra Nevada as I leave my home and head to Graham's house.



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The view of the Sierra Nevada as we bypass Bishop on its east side.



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Graham's silver 2000 Toyota Tacoma 4WD w/TRD package parked next to my white 2002 Toyota Tacoma 4WD w/TRD package at a small mini-mart in Benton, California; where I had stopped to pick up a package of batteries for my FRS radio.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Entering Mina, Nevada; our sites and bellies set on some breakfast.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

The Silver King Cafe-bar at Mina, Nevada.

Graham and I spent about an hour at the Silver King, then returned to our journey northward on US95. It is a short hop to the small

community of Luning, where we turned off of US95 and onto NV361, bound for the small community of Gabbs. The weather began to get noticeably cloudier and chillier as we progressed along the course of our journey. By the time we got to Gabbs, we could see precipitation beginning to fall from many of those clouds.

It had been more than two decades since I had come through Gabbs – that community being 145 miles from my home. I wondered if its mining based economy had stayed intact during the years of boom and bust cycles in Nevada's mining economy. Turning off on the first street in town, Graham and I slowly drove through Gabb's neighborhoods and surveyed its downtown section. Though not appearing emaciated, it certainly looked like times were a bit dull in the community. I didn't see any abandoned homes; I noted a couple of real estate signs indicating homes for sale; yards were largely green, trim and their trees healthy. The main business section of Gabbs didn't appear to have much – a small store, a couple of cafes and a gas station. The large mining plant just out of town appeared to be operating, but I could not see much going on – only a couple of small steam discharges indicated that the plant was up and running. As we drove through the neighborhoods, we did notice that quite a few vehicles were busily shuffling about making Saturday morning rounds of neighbor to neighbor.



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Northbound, US95 a few miles north of Mina, we came to the smaller community of Luning. At the northern edge of this little burg, NV361 turns northward, bound for Gabbs and eventually allowing passage to the Ione Valley.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

The junction of US95 and NV361 on the northern edge of Luning.



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Zoomed in across the wide expanse of the Gabbs Valley and onto the small mining community of Gabbs, situated at the foot of the Paradise Range. Note that some of the clouds are beginning to drop their payloads of precipitation.



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Our Tacoma's parked in the broad Gabbs Valley, to allow Toby some time to excersize and smell the sagebrush.



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Gabbs, home of the Tarantulas and not much else. Years ago, when I last came through this town, it seemed much busier, as Basic Industries was the primary employer and the community thriving and healthy.



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Downtown Gabbs. I did note a couple of cafes and a gas station, but not much more.



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The Premire Company plant at Gabbs.

About a mile north of Gabbs, NV844 turns eastward and climbs up and over the piñon covered Paradise Range, then runs out into Ione Valley and turns itself into a bladed dirt pathway. Topping the range, we stopped to enjoy the view and realized it was flurrying snowflakes. That proved a precursor to what was yet to come.

Dropping into Ione Valley, the view ahead looked over the Shoshone Range, with the higher Toiyabe Range in the background. Dominating



the scene was the 11,773 foot mound of Arc Dome in the southern Toiyabe Range. Snow still graced its summit, as well as some of the upper summits of both the Shoshone and Toiyabe Ranges.

Coming to the middle of Ione Valley, NV844 gives up its pavement at a dirt three way intersection: the left leg heading northeast for the semi-ghost town of Ione; the middle leg heading due east to the ghost town and Nevada State Park of Berlin; the right leg heading due south and eventually joining up with NV89 heading to Tonopah. Graham and I were now 164 miles from home. The two of us chose the left fork heading northeast into Ione. Snow squalls were falling all about the Ione Valley and the Shoshone Range ahead.

Coming into Ione, 171 miles into our trip, a large, rustic welcome sign greeted us, making a nice photo op. Snow flurries were falling from sullen and somber skies. In a small park in the middle of the semi-ghost town is a Nevada State historical marker, which reads:

#### IONE

*“Ione Valley had a dense and permanent aboriginal population, dating back about 5,000 years. Unusual property arrangements and agricultural methods were practiced later by the Shoshone and northern Paiute Indians. Silver was discovered in 1863, and in 1864 Ione City was named first county seat of newly created Nye County[.] Over 600 people worked in this prosperous town until Belmont Wealth attracted most of the miners in 1865, and the county seat in 1867. Alternately prosperous and poor, yet never completely deserted, Ione suffered mining depressions, milling difficulties, and the loss of miners to richer strikes throughout its history.”*

The first thing that was on Graham's mind was to pop into whatever little cafe or bar that Ione afforded for a hot cup of coffee to take the chill off the weather. Ione is the home of the Ore House Saloon. When we pulled up in front of cut stone building that houses the Ore House, a heavy snow squall began to fall. Walking into the warm wooden interior, we found a couple of men drinking beer and watching the satellite TV, a man and woman with their toddler playing billiards and a young woman behind the bar. It seems that in all small towns in Nevada, dogs are welcome in any bar, and so Toby was allowed in and settled himself down at Graham's feet. Graham ordered a coffee and so did I. The coffee maker was very slow, it being broken because I guess it's not used to making anything less than distilled or cold brew, and it took nearly a half hour for the pot to fill with a hot, dark roast. The woman bartender, obviously a bit embarrassed, didn't charge us for our coffees.

As Graham and I sat at the bar and sipped our coffees, other people walked into the bar seeking refuge from the falling snow. They were staying in RV's set up in a lot across the street from the saloon. We all started chatting. The two men watching TV were from the east coast; the young couple with child were from Bishop – they also seeking refuge from the crowds of Mule Days; one other man was from Bishop; the rest were from various Reno area points.

After we had our coffees, Graham and I decided to go walk Ione's streets. The sky alternated between snow flurries and snow squalls and made the whole scene surrealistic at times – where else could we find lavender blooming while covered with snow? Toby got to see his first horses, which were in a pen by the Ore House, and he went ballistic at seeing such large beasts.

Graham and I enjoyed walking the streets of Ione. In the snowflakes, Ione's history talked to us:

## **IONE**

**1865**

She was a rather small town but busy with the activities of 500 people. She was proud of her silver, her newspaper – the Nye County News – and the proud fact that she was the seat of huge Nye County. She was queen of an area that sprawled east across present day White Pine County to meet with Utah Territory; she went south to the boundary with Arizona Territory (which then comprised part of southernmost Nevada as well); south and west to squeeze under Esmeralda County to adjoin California; and if it were not for Lander County she would have touched Oregon and Idaho as well.

## **1867**

In February she had an unpleasant situation on her hands. Belmont – fifty miles, three mountain ranges and three valleys southeast – was booming. Belmont was rich, had a rapidly rising population base, it coveted rulership of Nye County. Belmont appealed, Belmont won. Ione shrank in defeat.

## **1882**

Her population was shrinking, but the faithful always stayed on. She had her ups and downs, but she was down more than up. Her population stabilized at about 25. Depending on who's account, her post office either closed or changed names until 1903.

## **1918**

Production of mercury sparked some life into the old town. The small population was supplemented by a small influx of new residents who came to work the new mines, about 50 of them. Ione regained her post office once again. A large mill was constructed on the edge of town.

## **1940s**

The old town was feeling old and lonely again. Mercury production had ceased during the last decade and only sporadic mining kept her barely alive. Population dwindled.

## **1959**

Only a dozen souls pick up mail, so the post office closes. Total mining production to date is about \$1,000,000.

In the early 1980s, my friend Jim S. and I camped in deep snow at a cousin Jack above Ione and I decided to go see if I could find it. I began climbing eastward in increasingly blinding snow toward Ione Summit. I noted that there were fairly new modular homes dotting the canyon near Ione. The road out of Ione was paved for a short distance as it passed in front of these homes, then turned back to dirt at the National Forest boundary. I went as far as 7,483 foot high Ione Summit, about 3½ miles east of town. I could not find the cousin Jack, but



did see a home sitting in a location where I think the cousin Jack might have been behind.

After my fruitless search for the cousin Jack, Graham and I turned back down and went back to Ione, then set our sites on the ghost town of Berlin.



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Junction of NV361 and NV844 just north of Gabbs.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Graham in my rearview mirror as we climb up out of Gabbs Valley and into the Paradise Range.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

After topping the Paradise Range, NV844 drops into Ione Valley. The view ahead takes in the Shoshone Range, with Arc Dome and the Toiyabe Range dominating the background.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Continuing eastbound on NV844 into Ione Valley. Snow squalls will be encountered ahead.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

The pavement ends on NV844 at the three way junction of roads heading north, east and south. The view looks northeast into Ione country.



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At the same location, the view eastward looks to the ghost town of Berlin, now part of the Nevada State Park system. Berlin is kept in a state of "arrested decay," much like that of Bodie, California.



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Continuing northeast toward Ione. The well bladed roadway allows comfortable travel at speed.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Welcome to Ione, Nevada.



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The Ore House Saloon at Ione.



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Across the street from the Ore House Saloon is a



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Graham and Toby outside the Ore House Saloon.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Graham and Toby inside the Ore House Saloon.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Junction of NV361 and NV844 just north of Gabbs.



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small park with a historical site plaque from the State of Nevada with a bit about Ione's history.



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On this snowy day, the few people in town were staying warm inside the Ore House Saloon over a friendly game of pool.



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Graham and Toby, plus a couple other patrons of the Ore House Saloon.



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In the early days of Ione, patrons of the saloon would tire up their horses to the hitching rail. On this sullen and snowy day, our Tacomas needed no tethers tied up to a rail to stay put.



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Ione, Nevada.



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Ione, Nevada.



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Ione, Nevada.



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Ione, Nevada.



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Ione, Nevada.



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Toby's first encounter with horses.



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Driving up Ione Summit in the increasing snowfall.



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My Tacoma atop Ione Summit.

After Graham and I left Ione, we head 5.5 miles south to the ghost town of Berlin and the Berlin-Ichthyosaur State Park. Much like the ghost town of Bodie in California, this town is kept by the Nevada State Park system in a state of arrested decay. Berlin's timeline:

**BERLIN****1895**

Silver is discovered by state Senator Bell, who then promptly sold out to John Stokes, of New York.

**1897**

The townsite of Berlin is platted out.

**1905**

The Nevada Company brought in two mills and construction of a new thirty stamp mill is underway.

**1907**

Because of the financial panic that hit the west – and Nevada in particular – the business of mining slowed dramatically and the mine and mill closed. A few people remain.

**1909**

Some life is pumped back into the town when two men lease the mine and mill.

**1914**

Leasers pulled out of operations and Berlin sunk into decline.

**1919**

Berlin as a town has died and the post office closed and moved to Ione on December 18th.

**BERLIN****POST****1919**

In the 1920s, the Goldfield Blue Bell Mining Company purchased claims. The mill was overhauled and modified, ore was run on a trial basis. The company kept the mine superintendent at Berlin until 1947, then dismantled the milling equipment and moved out. No activity has occurred since. Total production from Berlin's pockets was \$850,000.

Arriving at Berlin, Graham was ahead of me and radioed back that the state park system now charged \$4.<sup>00</sup> to enter Berlin and another \$3.<sup>00</sup> to see the large Ichthyosaur fossil, located nearby in a large building constructed over it. Both of us would have liked to see Berlin, but due to weather and the desire of both of us to get to our final destination of Grantsville – 5½ miles away and get our respective camps set up early, we elected to bypass the ghost town.

Heading southward through Ione Valley, intermittent snow squalls punctuated by sunshine and the ever present wind greeted us, making us wonder what would await us at Grantsville.





[Click to Enlarge](#)  
Leaving Ione, Berlin bound.



[Click to Enlarge](#)  
Re-entering Ione Valley in a snow squall.



[Click to Enlarge](#)  
Berlin. Due to time and weather, Graham and I elected not to walk Berlin's streets.



[Click to Enlarge](#)  
Berlin as viewed from a distance out in Ione Valley.



[Click to Enlarge](#)  
Ione Valley between Berlin and Grantsville.

Graham and I arrived at Grantsville at 3:35 PM, with plenty of time to set up our respective camps and to explore the town. I parked my truck for the final time that day with the odometer reading that I had traveled 189.4 miles since I left my home this morning.

A time line of Grantsville:

## GRANTSVILLE

**1863**

Gold is discovered by P.A. Havens. The town of Grantsville, named for Ulysses S. Grant, is platted. About fifty residents make Grantsville their home.

## 1867

The veins pinch out, Grantsville becomes a ghost town.

## 1877

The Alexander Company comes to Grantsville at the insistence of one of the original inhabitants, who claims there is still gold to be found. He was right, the company made rich discoveries. A 30-stamp mill is built. A newspaper, the **Grantsville Sun** begins publication.

## 1880

The mill is enlarged to 40 stamps. A thousand people live and work here. The paper, the Sun, has folded in 1879, but now another paper – the **Grantsville Bonanza** – takes its place as the town crier. In 1879, the post office had

opened.

### **1881**

The town is prosperous. Over 40 businesses are lining the streets, including ten merchandise stores, five saloons, two assay offices, express office and a bank. Fourteen mines were pouring out wealth.

### **1884**

Things have slowed down. Population dwindles to 400. The ***Bonanza*** ceases publication.

### **1885-1900**

The town goes through the same vicissitudes as nearby lone – up one year, down the next. Only a handful of people remain.

### **1901**

The post office ceases business at the end of the business day October 31. Less than ten people pick up mail.

### **1921**

The Webster Mines Corporation buys up the old Alexander shaft, the riches of all mines in the canyon. It is worked until 1923.

## **GRANTSVILLE**

## **POST**

**1923**

In 1927 the Webster interests are leased. It is worked a year then changes leasers and worked until 1929. The stamp mill is remodeled for this operation. The district then fell quiet until 1939. That year another mine was purchased and a small mill built. That operation was profitable until 1940. The district fell silent for five years. Then came World War II. The war effort killed most mining in the west, but it was determined profitable to the war effort that the Alexander and Brooklyn mines were worked for lead concentrates. This operation continued until 1947, and then the district fell silent for good. Grantsville's total production came to about 1.6 million dollars.

The sun was shining when Graham and I arrived at Grantsville, but that quickly changed to a heavy snow squall. We poked around for a while trying to determine a sheltered location in which to set up our camps. A hollow up in the southern hills was large enough for both of our trucks, sheltered by piñon pines and had a nice view of the Grantsville townsite; but we chose to park our rigs astride a half collapsed brick building at the lower end of town due to the fact that a corrugated metal addition to it was intact and had a roof to keep us dry and relatively sheltered.

Graham and I then poked about the camp's ruins, standing structures and millsite for the next hour or so, amidst alternating heavy snow squalls and sunshine. The wind was biting and cold. Graham's dog Toby managed to find himself a grand chew bone – the leg bone of a deer.

After browsing the ghost town of Grantsville, it was time to set ourselves to setting up our individual camps. Our trucks were parked on each side of the brick house and I set up my kitchen inside the corrugated addition. It was still cold and drafty, but a large improvement over tailgate culinary activities.

While cooking, I wanted a bit of music and news, so tried my truck's radio to see if I could get anything. I found KHWG, 750 on the AM dial. Broadcasting 78 miles away as the eagle flies out of Fallon, Nevada with 10,000 watts of power, it came in clearly in Grantsville. The station identifies itself as "K-Hawg," and spins great country classics from the 50s-70s.

Though we had some shelter, it was just plain too cold to eat comfortably, and so we gobbled down the easiest of foods that we prepared. I had a Cup-O-Soup and some cheese. It was too cold to have a beer, I was wishing I had brought along a bit of wine or something stronger.

After we ate, the sun came out with some gorgeous evening colors. Graham stayed at camp, I took a reconnoiter about Grantsville and shot video and photos.

After the sun went down, I downloaded all 218 images I had shot this day into my laptop computer, in which Graham and I sat and shivered to a slide show of the photos of the day. The outdoor temperature as displayed by my Tacoma was 38°.

After the slide show was over both of us had our fill of the chilly weather and so we retired to our respective Toyota Tacoma abodes with a half collapsed brick house in between.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Entering Grantsville Canyon and Grantsville townsite.  
A substantial mill is first encountered.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

The ruins of a brick house that Graham and I chose  
to use as a campsite in the Grantsville townsite.



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Our camp and an incoming snow squall.



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Grantsville. Individual snow squalls often left a  
dusting of snow behind, which would quickly melt ...  
until the next one hit.



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Stone ruins of old Grantsville. View to the north.



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Looking westward to our campsite in the lower end  
of the townsite.



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One of Grantsville's earliest structures. Our camp  
can be seen in the background.



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The millsite area near the mouth of Grantsville  
Canyon.



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Though I'm not certain if this mill was an original  
Grantsville fixture or came later, the bulldozer is  
likely from the mining boom that hit this area in the  
early 1980s.



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A steam piston and flywheels at the millsite.



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Millsite.



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The ruins of a brick house that Graham and I chose  
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Our camp and an incoming snow squall.

My kitchen facility back at our camp. I am also  
charging my camera batteries using my 12v power  
pack and a 115v inverter.



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Graham's dog Toby relaxes on his own mattress.



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Graham (left) and myself have a chilly dinner inside  
the ruins.



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After we ate, the sun came out and afforded us  
some beautiful late afternoon colors.



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The old building that Graham and I used for our  
camp. My truck is in full view at left, while the nose  
of Graham's Tacoma can be seen poking out on the  
other side.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Watching a slide show on my laptop of the photos I  
took this day.

This completes Day 1: May 27, 2006. Please go to [Day 2: May 28, 2006](#).

