

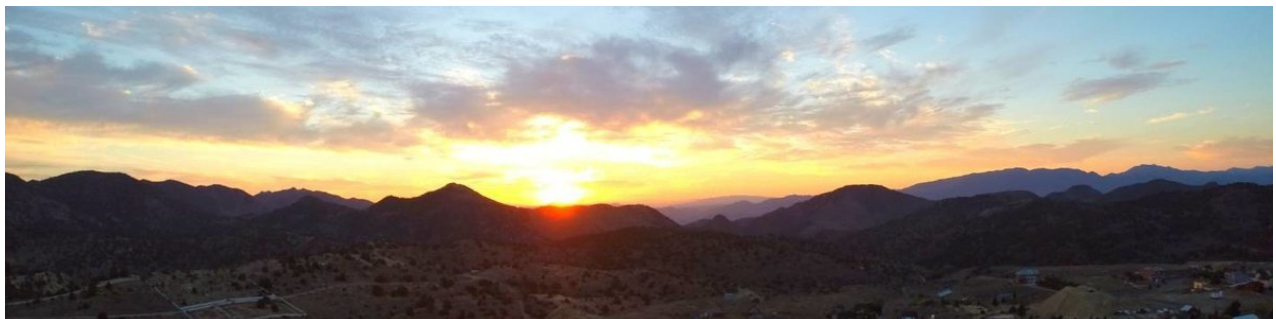
The Virginia City Hillclimb

For more than half a century, a closed mountain road above one of the West's oldest mining towns has hosted one of North America's premier hill climbs. This is how it began, how it runs, and why it endures.

I A Town on the Comstock

Ascant 30 miles east of the backbone of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range sits Mount Davidson. Terraced on the east, facing the upper slopes of this 7,864-foot peak, is the town of Virginia City, Nevada. It is an icon of the Old West, a rough-and-tumble mining town in the heart of the Comstock Lode, the greatest of the silver rushes of the nineteenth century, and maker of the Bonanza Kings. For more than half a century, it has also been the home of one of North America's premier hill climbs.

U.S. 50 runs east out of Carson City. About five miles down the road, Nevada State 342 heads north towards Virginia City. Four miles off 50, 342 forks with Nevada State 341 taking the right fork and running 5.2 miles into Virginia City. This is the truck route, the road for today's Hillclimb. It was carved out of the hills at 5,000 to 6,000 feet of elevation because the highway's turns were too tight for trucks and buses to negotiate safely.



| Sunrise looking southeast from above Virginia City.



Drivers, crew, and spectators on Route 341 with abandoned Comstock-era mining works on the slope above. The ruins are some of the many historic remains of the silver rush that built Virginia City.

II 1964: The First Run

It all started on the weekend of May 23 and 24, 1964, when Road & Track joined with the Aston Martin Owners Club to conduct a hillclimb on 342 from Silver City to Gold Hill on the way to Virginia City. The course was just 2.6 miles in length. More than 100 applications were whittled down to 70 entries. There were 26 Aston Martins, 14 Jaguars, 9 Lotus, a smattering of Cobras, Ferraris, Formula Juniors, and miscellaneous other marques. The King of the Hill that weekend drove a Lotus 19. The event was sponsored by Martini & Rossi, and the big prize was the Martini Trophy. In fact, the event was billed as the First Annual Martini Trophy Hillclimb, and it also celebrated the Centennial of Nevada Statehood.

The Martini Trophy Hillclimb lasted only one year. A San Francisco regional sports car club took it over in 1965 and staged a second event on September 18 and 19 of that year. It was apparently a flop. Precious little information about it survives in newsletters or board minutes. It did occur, but the details are lost in the foggy mists of memory.

III 1972: Revival on Route 341

The event was revived in 1972 by a Southern California sports car club. The idea came out of a visit to Virginia City in December 1971, when two members drove up 341, the truck route. One of them lost it and spun out at the place we now know as Turn 3. No damage was done, save to his pride, but an idea was planted: why not a hillclimb here? Many phone calls and lots of fancy footwork put the event together. A scant nine months after the spin, there was another hillclimb to Virginia City, only this time on 341, which was, and is, 5.2 miles from the start line to the finish at the bridge just short of what is now the Sheriff's substation. In that distance, the road climbs a bit more than 1,200 feet in a serpentine course encompassing some 20 major turns or turn complexes.



The grid mixes vintage muscle with modern prep. The hill has always attracted cars from across the spectrum, from sixties touring legends to current-day track weapons.

For the next several years, the hillclimb was a Sunday-only event. Saturday was devoted to practice, a concours, a parade through town, and just having a raucous good time. A tradition born in those early days was the Big Wheels award. It is given each year at the Sunday evening dinner to the driver who had the biggest non-life-threatening "screw up" on the Hill. Tradition holds that the winner must in some manner improve or add to the kid's trike, which has become quite elaborate and unstable over the years, then ride it, or at least attempt to ride it, take it home and, by obligation, return with it the following year.

Through the rest of the 1970s and into the 1980s, organizing responsibilities moved between Southern California and Bay Area regional sports car clubs, with steady involvement from the NorCal Shelby community whose contributions trace back to those first years. Most of the people who shape the event today first came to the hill through that long lineage.

IV The Road

The hillclimb's distinct advantage is that it is the only major hill climb in the United States with a separate road for drivers to return to the start line.

Drivers make runs up the hill on Nevada Route 341, a beautiful two-lane road closed to traffic during the entire two-day event. After completing the course and reaching the top, they use parallel Nevada Route 342 to return to the start, rather than waiting at the top until all have completed their runs and descending back down the same road as a group.



Route 341 between runs. Cars are launched 60 seconds apart, and the field rotates between staging at the bottom, running the hill, returning down parallel Route 342, and waiting again.

The Hillclimb is a time trial. Drivers try to better their own quickest elapsed time to complete the 5.2-mile course. It is not a wheel-to-wheel competition. Each driver checks in the night before, presents a signed technical inspection form for their vehicle and helmet from an approved per-

formance shop, and signs the waiver of liability. All event rules and safety procedures are reviewed at the mandatory drivers' meeting, including how to respond to the different flags used by the course workers.

Until the mid-1990s, the rules allowed almost any car. That meant a steady stream of non-street-legal race cars: a 250 LM, a Porsche 904, a Lotus 79 (one of Mario Andretti's 1978 F1 championship cars), and many other equally iconic racers. Then, as Nevada became more concerned about road races run in the state, new rules required that all cars be street legal, that all entrants be disclosed to the State in advance, and that DOT-approved street tires be used. While this affected the grid makeup, it had little impact on the speeds achieved by participants.



A Radical RXC 600R at the start. The course record was held by a Ferrari F40 for over a decade, then a Nissan GTR, and more recently, a McLaren Senna. Modern hypercars, including a McLaren GTR and a Pininfarina Battista, have made exhibition-only runs on the hill.

V The Weekend

The event in practical terms is four days in length.

Friday is a Ride 'n Drive from the San Francisco Bay Area to Virginia City. It is an all-day affair, covering about 250 miles, with a route that varies year to year as different paths through the California foothills and the Sierras are tried. The past dozen or so years have included a lunch stop at one or another of the many wineries which have sprung up along the way. Traversing the

Sierras on a secondary road is an experience not to be missed. There is more beauty, more spectacular scenery, and more breathtaking road packed into that one day than a week of driving most anywhere else.

Saturday begins with the drivers' meeting, known as the Sermon on the Mount, a name it picked up when it was held at an outdoor rock outcrop near the start line. Today it takes place indoors Friday evening at the new restaurant space at the Silverland Inn, but the format and intent are the same. The Event Chair, the Chief Steward, and one or two other luminaries take the floor. The purpose is to impart the reverence the old timers hold for this event, to impress upon the participants that we could lose this jewel in a heartbeat, and to convey that we are guests and should act like respectful visitors. The sermon also covers the standard drivers' meeting fare: safety, rules of the road, flagging. We do our best to impress on entrants that it takes six or more years to really get to know the hill, and at least a half day for experienced hillclimbers to re-familiarize themselves and note changes from the prior year. Familiarization runs follow, then timed runs from late morning to approximately 5 p.m.



The drivers' meeting earned its name from the rock outcrop near the start line where it was held for decades. The format moved indoors as the event grew, but the welcoming address still does the same work.

Saturday evening the event moves to various local venues, such as the Fourth Ward Schoolhouse, where participants pack into the historic four-story building with its creaky hardwood floors and original student desks for a buffet dinner.

Sunday morning we re-staff the course, make safety checks, and at 9 a.m. send off the first car. We run until 5 p.m., breaking briefly to provide lunch to the safety crew, otherwise only to allow buses and trucks to transit the hill or to attend to cars broken down on the course. Drivers are divided into two groups to keep the size of the grid manageable. Professional corner workers are paid and have worked at tracks in the area; they stay on the hill the entire day. We break Saturday into two sessions and Sunday into four, although by quarter of three Sunday afternoon many attendees are tapped out and the course is often open to anyone at that point.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Beware the curse of "getting in one last run" - this is often the one that sends people home on a flatbed with a large repair bill.

Sunday evening is the awards banquet at Piper's Opera House, built in 1885. The banquet takes the traditional form of an awards dinner with a side of good-natured ribbing. Run times for the entire weekend are announced for the first time, and awards are presented for the first three places in each of several classes, which are made up each year depending on the entries. There are generally seven or eight classes. The banquet is also an opportunity to poke fun at one another, and often hilarious special awards are provided. Awards include the Bronze Gloves, given to the driver who is most active in supporting the event; the Spirit of the Hill; and the Big Wheel. The winner of the Big Wheel must add something to the trike and then attempt to ride it across the Piper Opera House stage. It is a raucous, fun evening, though by then we are all pretty much wiped out. A nice capper to a great event.

Monday morning we all head out. Some take Highway 80 and a quick trip home. Others gather in small groups and do their own tours back, meandering through the Sierras and the Great Central Valley as an all-day event. It is typical to be mellow on the way home after the prior three event-filled days.

VI Why the Hillclimb Endures

What has kept the Virginia City Hillclimb running for more than half a century is not the speed. It is the people. The event is run by volunteers, experienced drivers and technicians who know the course, and supported by well over two hundred participants, more than twenty local businesses, sponsors, and the City of Virginia City itself. Organizers have developed first-name relationships

with politicians and residents whose support is essential to keeping the road closed each September. The committee is well known to the sheriffs and firefighters of Lyon and Storey Counties, and to the Nevada Department of Transportation.



Modern supercars share the staging lane with vintage muscle and purpose-built race cars. The mix has always been part of what makes the weekend feel less like a race and more like a reunion.

The event has weathered serious political storms, leadership transitions, and the kind of generational handoffs that end most things like this. It has survived because the people running it stayed friends, and because new drivers, new corner workers, and new volunteers keep finding their way to the hill and being welcomed in. The Friday drive, the Saturday sermon, the school-house buffet, the Sunday roast at Piper's. These are not the trappings of a race. They are the trappings of a reunion that happens to involve some of the most beautiful cars in North America making the most of every driver's dream: a closed mountain road.

The Virginia City Hillclimb is now an independent event, no longer affiliated with the aforementioned clubs. Most of the staff who have done this work for years are still doing it, the road is still closed every September, and the invitation is the same as it has been since 1972: we'll see you at The Hill.