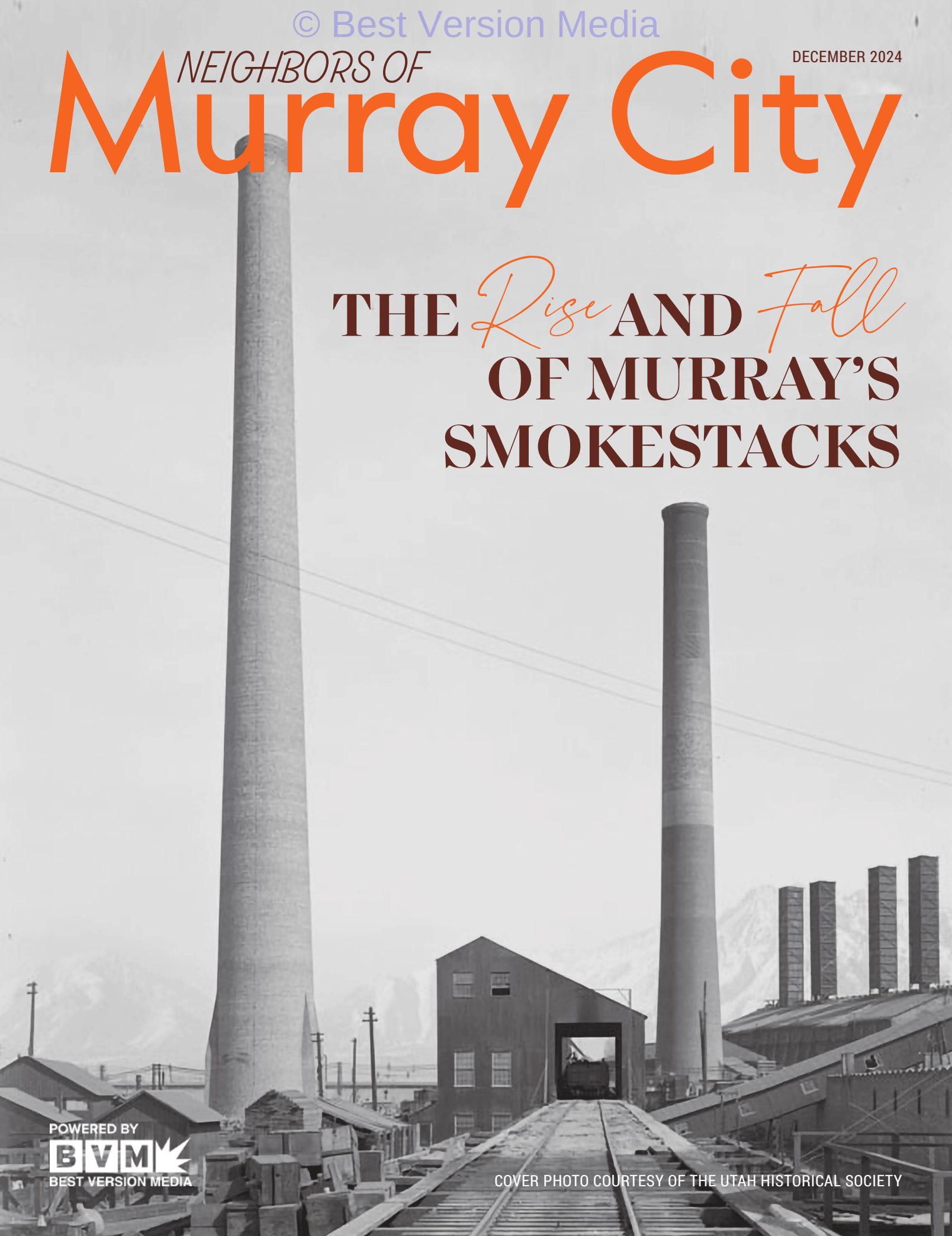
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NEIGHBORS OF
Murray City

DECEMBER 2024

THE *Rise* AND *Fall* OF MURRAY'S SMOKESTACKS



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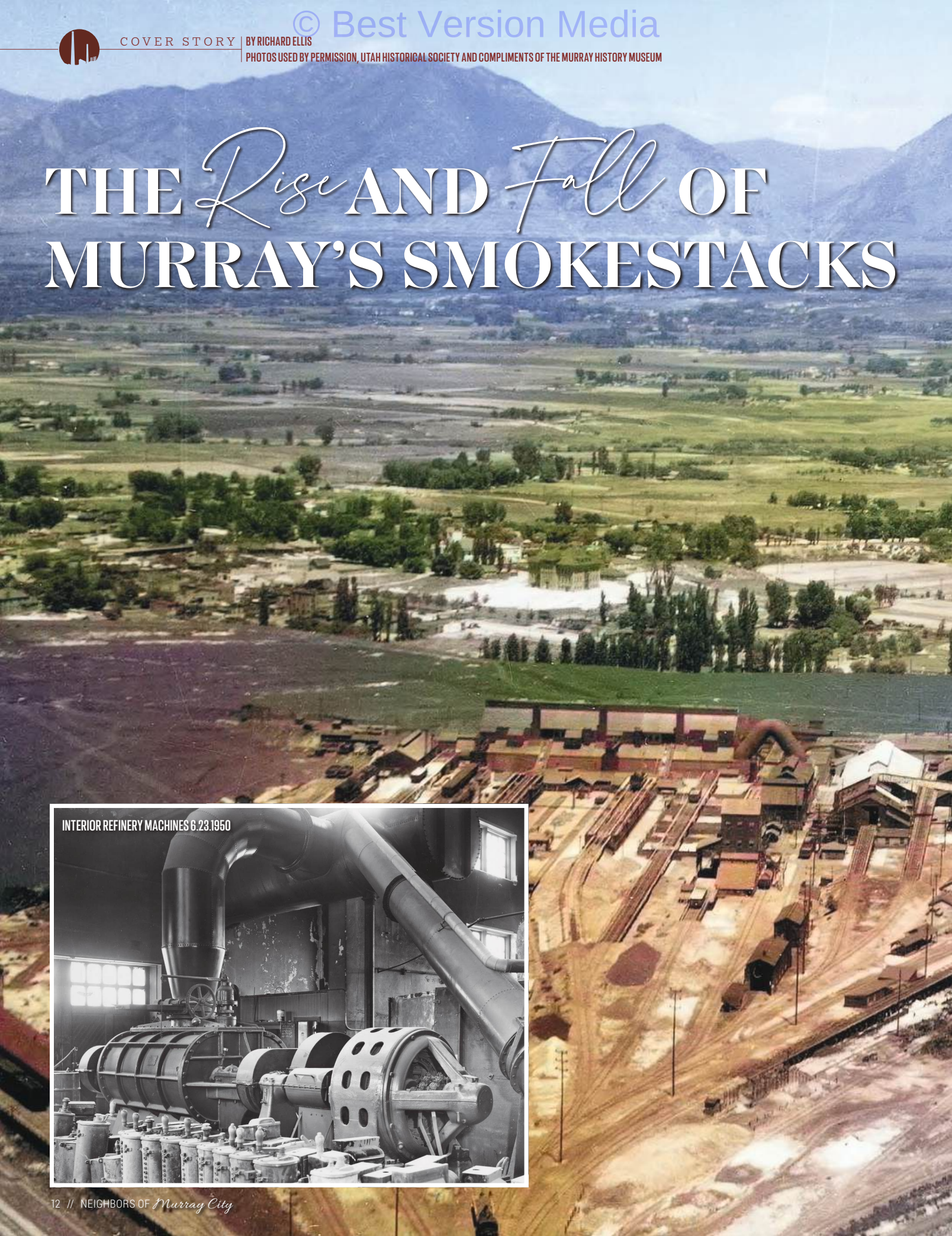
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BY RICHARD ELLIS

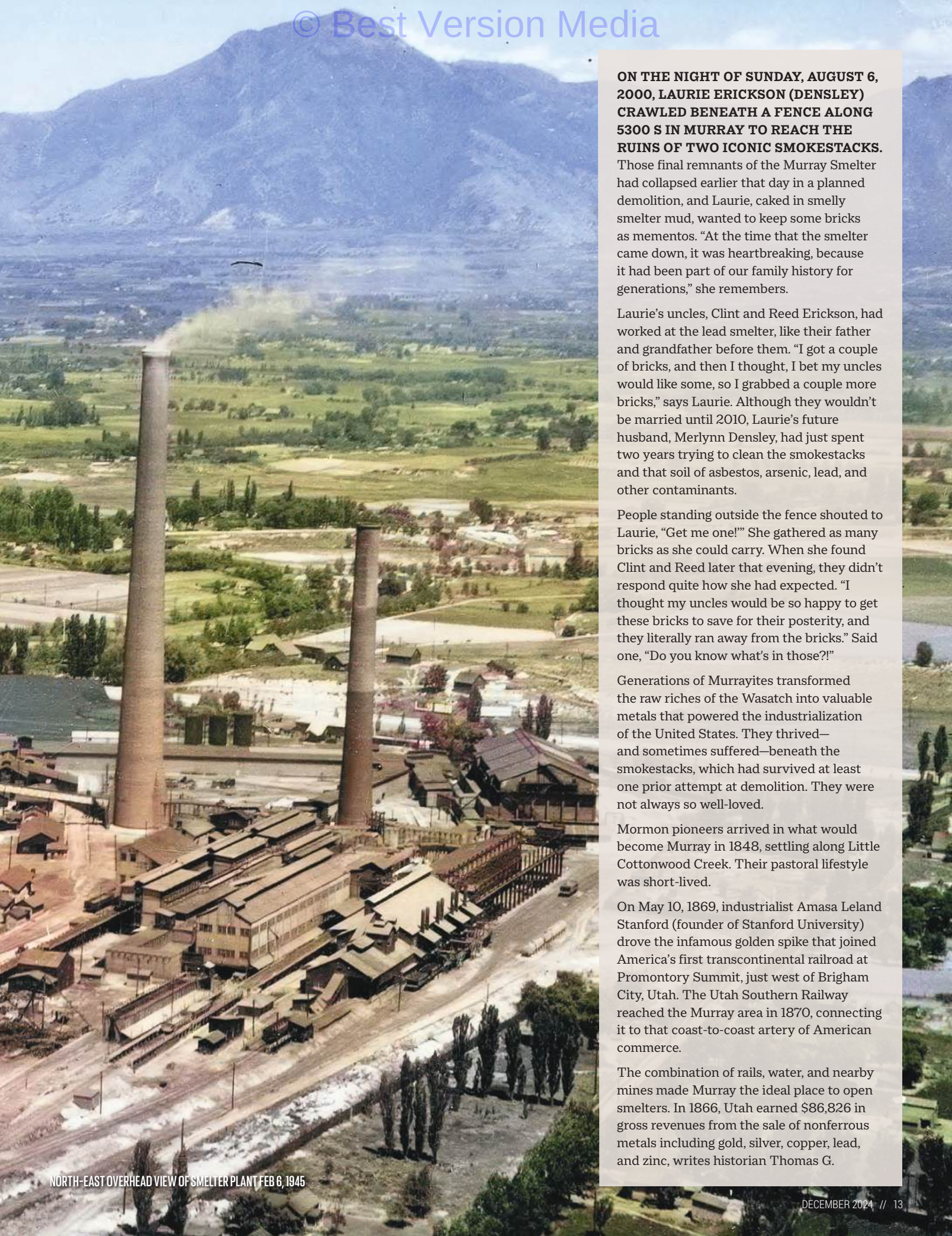
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THE *Rise* AND *Fall* OF MURRAY'S SMOKESTACKS



INTERIOR REFINERY MACHINES 6.23.1950

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NORTH-EAST OVERHEAD VIEW OF SMELTER PLANT FEB 6, 1945

ON THE NIGHT OF SUNDAY, AUGUST 6, 2000, LAURIE ERICKSON (DENSLEY) CRAWLED BENEATH A FENCE ALONG 5300 S IN MURRAY TO REACH THE RUINS OF TWO ICONIC SMOKESTACKS. Those final remnants of the Murray Smelter had collapsed earlier that day in a planned demolition, and Laurie, caked in smelly smelter mud, wanted to keep some bricks as mementos. "At the time that the smelter came down, it was heartbreaking, because it had been part of our family history for generations," she remembers.

Laurie's uncles, Clint and Reed Erickson, had worked at the lead smelter, like their father and grandfather before them. "I got a couple of bricks, and then I thought, I bet my uncles would like some, so I grabbed a couple more bricks," says Laurie. Although they wouldn't be married until 2010, Laurie's future husband, Merlynn Densley, had just spent two years trying to clean the smokestacks and that soil of asbestos, arsenic, lead, and other contaminants.

People standing outside the fence shouted to Laurie, "Get me one!" She gathered as many bricks as she could carry. When she found Clint and Reed later that evening, they didn't respond quite how she had expected. "I thought my uncles would be so happy to get these bricks to save for their posterity, and they literally ran away from the bricks." Said one, "Do you know what's in those?!"

Generations of Murrayites transformed the raw riches of the Wasatch into valuable metals that powered the industrialization of the United States. They thrived—and sometimes suffered—beneath the smokestacks, which had survived at least one prior attempt at demolition. They were not always so well-loved.

Mormon pioneers arrived in what would become Murray in 1848, settling along Little Cottonwood Creek. Their pastoral lifestyle was short-lived.

On May 10, 1869, industrialist Amasa Leland Stanford (founder of Stanford University) drove the infamous golden spike that joined America's first transcontinental railroad at Promontory Summit, just west of Brigham City, Utah. The Utah Southern Railway reached the Murray area in 1870, connecting it to that coast-to-coast artery of American commerce.

The combination of rails, water, and nearby mines made Murray the ideal place to open smelters. In 1866, Utah earned $86,826 in gross revenues from the sale of nonferrous metals including gold, silver, copper, lead, and zinc, writes historian Thomas G.

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4TH OF JULY PARADE 1970 W HARMON CAFÉ AD


SMELTER CHARGE CAR


SMELTER TRAIN

Alexander in a chapter of From the Ground Up: A History of Mining in Utah. Revenue ballooned to $1.4 million in 1870. By 1872, Utah produced 45.5 percent of the nation's lead, a metal revered and feared since the days of the Roman Empire. Lead found its way into plumbing, metal alloys, glass, ink, ammunition, and eventually, paint and gasoline.

Among the most successful of these early outfits was the Germania Refinery & Wasatch Smelter, which began operating in 1872. It stood west of State Street, straddling both sides of Little Cottonwood Creek, a short walk from the fence that Laurie ducked in 2000.

Jobs in the Germania and nearby smelters attracted immigrants from far and wide, including Laurie's great-grandfather, Carl Olaf Erickson. He was a Swedish ship captain who sailed to the United States under unusual circumstances. "He had a little thing going with the cook on the ship," Laurie explains. "They took off and left their families in Sweden."

Murray's smelters attracted workers not only from Scandinavia, but from Greece, Armenia, Italy, Japan, and the Balkans. It also attracted industrial magnates. The American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO), a consolidation of lead-silver mines, formed in 1899 and acquired the Germania Smelter that year. ASARCO soon merged with M. Guggenheim Sons, founded and run by a family known today for its foundations and museums.

In 1902, ASARCO finished building a new smelter to replace the Germania. It was the world's largest lead smelting facility, able to produce up to 1,200 tons per day. The 300-foot smokestack was designed to minimize the spread of fumes. Its limited success in that endeavor marked a turning point in Murray history and the story of Laurie's family.

Life in Murray's lead smelting years was tumultuous, to put it mildly. As Murrayite and historical preservationist Korral Broschinsky writes in her book, Murray (Images of America), the move to incorporate Murray as a city in 1903 began out of a desire for public order and safety after a confrontation between cowboys and smelter workers "resulted in robbery, riots, and the burning of a brewery and dance hall."

Some changes in Murray came about less eventfully, though with longer-term consequences. When local farmers realized that fumes from the smelters were killing their crops and harming livestock, they sued many of the smelters including ASARCO. The courts forced the smelters to close until they could mitigate the fumes.

So, ASARCO engineers introduced a then state-of-the-art technology called a baghouse. It was a filtering system of 2,080 canvas bags, each 18 inches by 33 feet long, coated with zinc oxide, which would react with sulfur dioxide, a noxious byproduct of smelting. Salt Lake Tribune reported in 1910 that that baghouse is "reported to be doing its work perfectly," insisting that it "relieved" gas from the furnaces of "of all their poisonous characteristics."

The smelter workers would have begged to differ. They called the baghouse the "Hell Hole." It was arguably the most dangerous place to work at a dangerous facility. One challenge of filtering hot smelter fumes with canvas bags is that they can catch on fire. To solve that problem, the ASARCO baghouse upgraded to using bags lined with asbestos.

"They'd call it the 'miracle fiber,'" says Merlynn. He spent his career mitigating asbestos, first as an industrial hygienist with the United States Navy and later as an employee of Industrial Health Incorporated, the company hired to clean up the Murray Smelter site.

Asbestos could withstand abrasion, heat, and pressure like nothing else available, but it wasn't invulnerable. The smelter's hot, abrasive fumes degraded the asbestos bags into particles small enough to inhale, and back then, workers like Henry George Erickson, Laurie's grandfather, didn't wear respirators.

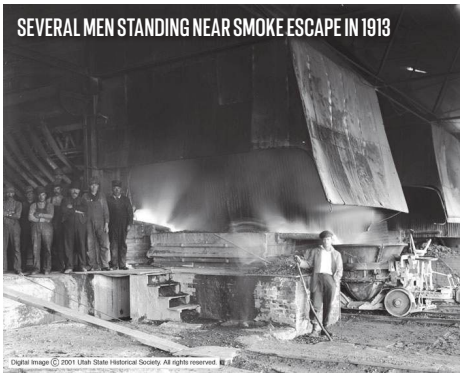
After a career in the baghouse, Henry George Erickson came down with mesothelioma, a lung cancer linked to asbestos exposure. "He was very ill," Laurie remembers. "My dad would try to clean out the wounds in his chest. And I was seven, and I could remember my dad handing me these icky towels...and I'd rinse them out, give them back, rinse them out, and give them back. It was disgusting."

"And I can remember my grandpa saying, 'When I get better, I'm going to buy you a little nurse outfit,'" Laurie says. "I remember thinking, 'he's not getting better.'"

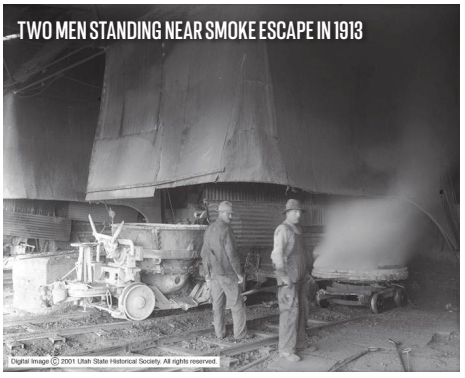
Henry George passed away in 1967, some 18 years after the Murray Smelter had ceased operation. The baghouse never appeased the

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ASARCO WORKERS GROUP PHOTO 1910


SEVERAL MEN STANDING NEAR SMOKE ESCAPE IN 1913

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TWO MEN STANDING NEAR SMOKE ESCAPE IN 1913

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farmers anyway. In 1918, ASARCO was ordered to build a second, taller smokestack, in theory that it would mitigate the fumes more effectively. That 455-foot smokestack stood in Murray until August 6, 2000.

The first attempt to demolish the Murray Smelter took place in 1912—and it was decidedly not a government-sanctioned attempt.

Newspapers from the 1890s and early 1900s used to share in graphic detail the stories of workers who died from train collisions, ore slides, falls, and more at the smelter. Workers wanted to be fairly compensated given those risks, which is part of why the Western Federation of Labor called a strike at the ASARCO Smelter on May 1, 1912, demanding an increase in wages from $1.75 to $2 per day. In 2024 dollars, that would be a hike from $56.88 to $65.10.

Some 500 workers went on strike. "The men are peaceably inclined and there have been no attempts at violence," noted the Salt Lake Tribune. It had called the ball early.

On May 17, the Tribune reported that a striking employee attempted to "assassinate" smelter superintended W.W. Norton, but accidentally shot a fellow striker instead (who lived). Strikers also tried to blow up the smelter gas plant with a stick of dynamite, "...which would have wrecked the town of Murray," opined the Tribune.

Thankfully, the dynamite didn't explode near enough to the gas tanks to ignite them. The National Guard promptly sent 50 rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition to support the sheriffs attempting to contain the strike. The smelters were back up and running by May 25.

As lead mining and smelting became less profitable in Utah, the industry contracted. When the Murray Smelter closed in 1949, though, it took an unexpected role in the burgeoning service economy.

In 1952, businessman Leon Weston "Pete" Harman, owner of Harman's Cafe at 3890 South State Street in South Salt Lake, became the first restaurant in the country to franchise Colonel Harland Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken recipe. To advertise, Harman paid ASARCO for the right to turn its 455-foot smokestack, located about two miles south of the restaurant, into a billboard. It featured Colonel Sanders' face and read "Harman Cafe Welcomes You," probably excising the 's for aesthetic reasons.

The smokestack became a better loved symbol of Murray the more it aged. Every year after graduation at Murray High School, a few seniors would attempt to climb the 445-foot stack and place an "M" up high. In 1978, Utah Holiday magazine named it the "Worst local landmark" in a Utah listicle of bests and worsts.

"You could always tell where Murray was, no matter where you were. You could be in Salt Lake, you could be anywhere in this valley, and you could look and say, 'there's where home is,'" Laurie says.

Over time, the increasingly unstable, polluted smokestacks became a risk to the community. Murrayites realized that to make full use of the land beneath and near the smelter, they'd need to clean up byproducts from seven decades of smelting. In 1998, Murray residents voted against a $3.4 million bond to preserve the stacks. The subsequent demolition and cleanup made way for the Intermountain Medical Center, Costco, and a TRAX station.

"It was just such a part of our family and Murray life for so long. And it was painful. It was very painful to watch them come down," Laurie adds.

The stacks came down with a mix of mirth and mayhem. There was immense fear that demolishing the smokestacks would spread smelting contaminants all over the valley. So, workers dug a large trench adjoining each of the stacks, intending to topple them into a grave of sorts. They also "chopped out" the lower parts of the stacks, Merlynn explains, hoping they'd fall like a tree into the trench. Water cannons were ready to spray the rubble and thus prevent dust from going airborne.

It didn't go quite to plan.

"The curious thing was that when they actually did the explosions at the base of the stacks, rather than coming down like a tree would fall, the stacks basically imploded on themselves and came straight down," Merlynn says, "which I thought was really kind of funny, because these big trenches and everything that they dug were for nothing."

Had the smokestacks fallen into the trench, maybe Laurie wouldn't have those bricks, which, to this day, remain under glass in her basement. The smelter remains likewise in the collective history, culture, and memory of Murray—shallowly underground but never fully out of sight or mind.