

Historic Reno PRESERVATION SOCIETY

FootPrints

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Housing Reno's 1930s Divorce Trade

by Mella Rothwell Harmon

For more than 60 years, Reno was Nevada's sin city, the divorce capital of the world, known as the 'Great Divide,' the place where you took 'the cure,' got 'Reno-vated,' threw your wedding ring into the Truckee River from the 'Bridge of Sighs'... and maybe had a fling with a cowboy. Reno's economy relied on the divorce trade from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the residency period was six months until roughly 1968. By 1909, Reno held the title of the country's "new divorce headquarters."

The political and social climate of the 1920s was ripe for the expansion of the trade and the residency period was shortened to three months. Nevada had discovered that when its traditional economic mainstays of mining and agriculture fell often to the vagaries of boom-and-bust cycles, legislating sin would fill the gap with remarkable dependability. The key to a quick divorce was satisfaction of the residency requirement and supplying resident witnesses to verify it. So to reap the rewards of Nevada's lenient divorce law, Reno property owners became eager participants in the trade.

Despite the Great Depression, the 1930s were Reno's divorce heyday. With the reduction of the residency period to six weeks in 1931, a Reno divorce became an American cliché. During that decade, more than 30,000 divorces were granted at the Washoe County Courthouse. Hotels, boardinghouses, divorce ranches, and private homes provided housing for divorce-seekers—six weeks at a time.

When the 1931 law was passed, there were already a variety of residential options available to divorce-seekers. The Riverside Hotel (1927) and the El Cortez (1931) were built expressly for

the divorce trade. Both were considered first-class hotels, catering to a well-to-do clientele that expected a certain level of elegance in their accommodations, as well as modern amenities. Reno boasted seven first-class hotels during the 1930s with rates from \$1 per day for a single with bath to \$10 for an apartment with kitchen facilities.



The Fuetsch Guest House on Riverside Drive offered comfortable accommodations in a family setting.

Photograph was provided to the author by Joelle Fuetsch Pehanick.

Rates at second-class hotels ranged from \$1 per day for a single room without a bath to \$3 per day for a double room with a bath, and third-class hotels brought from 50 cents per day for a single without a bath to \$2 including a bath. Basques and Italians operated a number of hotels in the second- and third-class category, located primarily on the east side of town.

Divorce lawyers owned and operated hotels as well, setting up their wives as hotel managers and resident witnesses. These included the Ames Hotel, which was operated by the wife of attorney W.B. Ames, and the Sutherland Hotel operated by F.K. Unsworth's wife. John Copren's wife Suzette managed both the State Hotel and an apartment house. Economic diversification by Reno's lawyers and their wives also included apartment houses, boardinghouses, and divorce ranches.

During the 1930s, Reno boasted around 70 apartment buildings, a significant number for a community with a permanent population of only about 18,000. Apartment owners and managers maintained networks with divorce lawyers, providing both housing and clients. In his diaries, attorney Clel Georgetta mentioned his arrangements with the Sovereign Apartments at 100 Court Street, and the Ridgeway Apartments at 303 Hill Street. With an influx of Jewish divorce-seekers, Rabbi

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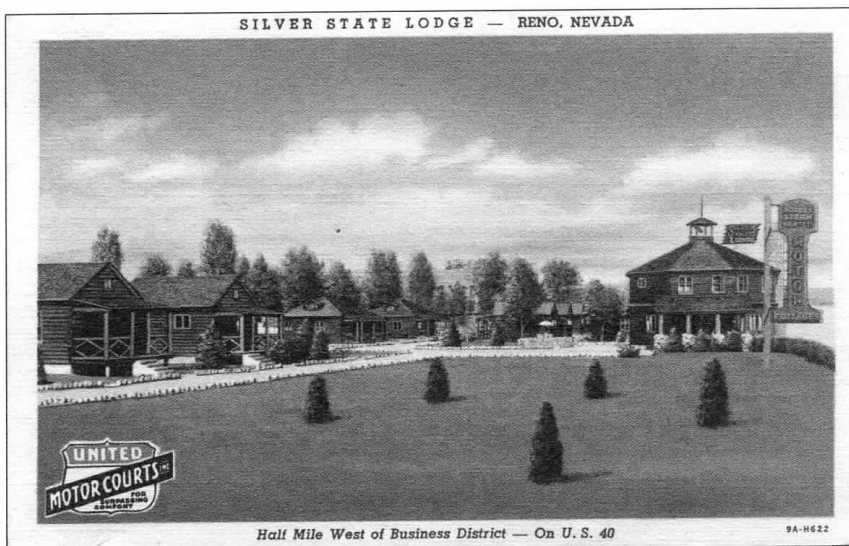
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Oppochinsky filled a need for housing that was sensitive to the requirements of his tenants, which included kosher meals prepared by his wife Pearl.

Apartment rents in the 1930s ranged from \$20 to \$100 per month. Little has been written about the interiors or the amenities offered, but primary sources reveal a few details. One New York divorce-seeker reserved space at the Bronxville Apartments at 320 Hill Street, which was described as: "A small apartment consisting of bedroom-living room, kitchenette and bath." A 1930 Chicago Daily News article offered the following: "Among the apartments I saw one called Court apartments, on Courthouse street [*sic*], and, of all improbable things, the Liberty Apartments on Liberty street. There was a room to be had for \$15 a month but it had an iron stove, and one was expected to do one's own firing. Not for me, baby! I finally found one for \$30. There are five other women 'doing time' in the same building."

Architecturally, Reno's apartment buildings ranged from simple, unadorned brick structures to the Victorian styling of the Butler Apartments on North Center Street built in 1900, and the Art Deco-style Ambassador Apartments on West Second Street built in 1933. The stately Colonial Apartments on West Street, with its Classical portico, is Reno's oldest existing apartment building. The Hiland Apartments on Liberty Street consisted of a series of modest little one-story Mission-revival structures surrounding a central courtyard.

Reno citizens embraced the opportunity to turn their homes into boardinghouses and rooming houses, and the town's stock of large Victorian homes lent itself well to that use. An example can be seen at 333 Ralston Street. This 1875 Gothic house served as a divorce rooming house for more than six decades. It was last operated by Estelle Nystrom, who came to Reno from San Francisco expressly to run a divorce business.



The Silver State Lodge on West Fourth Street was built for the divorce trade. It was conveniently located along the Lincoln Highway and offered the rusticity of the dude ranches with in-town convenience. From the author's private collection.

The large Victorian house that stood at 435 Riverside Drive (now Bicentennial Park) was converted for divorce-seekers in 1930 when the wealthy family that owned it fell on hard times. They transformed the library and music room into guestrooms, a barn into a cottage, and built a third structure on the property to house more guests. Josephine Fuetsch took over operation of the boardinghouse in 1932. Dedicated divorce housemothers would try to provide a safe and comforting environment to the "flock of troubled strangers in their home."

Another housing option was the single-family dwelling, which for purely short-

term and opportunistic reasons, offered "extra" rooms for rent. It has been reported that in many cases lodgers became part of the family and long-term friendships developed. Between 1915 and 1930, Reno was hit with a kind of bungalow fever. Many of these small masonry homes housed a divorce-seeker at one time or another. The 1917 bungalow at 105 Vine Street is an example. A similar case, with a long history of taking in boarders, was the Bruce home at 453 Ridge Street. Mrs.

Bruce had been in the business of renting rooms in her house for a number of years and she served as resident witness many times.

Remodeling and construction of additions were widespread during the 1930s, and this phenomenon can still be seen in Reno's neighborhoods. Additions built during the divorce period included wings and second stories, as well as separate cottages, and garage conversions. A number of examples can be seen, including the small structure at 745 Aitken, which was listed in the August 31, 1932

Reno Evening Gazette: "For Rent: 2-room furnished cabin. \$12."

Additions were customarily built with separate entrances and often billed as apartments or housekeeping units. This practice, especially as it was carried out during the Depression, has left an interesting and lasting imprint on the character of Reno's neighborhoods. One dramatic example of multiple additions at 208 State Street had so many that they gave the appearance of tumors seemingly growing out of control. Reno alleys reveal a conglomeration of smaller structures tacked willy-nilly onto simple residential buildings. The haphazard character of the additions suggests the urgency with which they were constructed.

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Housing Reno's 1930s Divorce Trade (continued)

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For those who could afford it, and especially for those who came to town with their children or other family members, the preferred housing situation was to rent an entire single-family dwelling. In May 1931, at the height of the divorce rush, one woman would settle for nothing less than a house with a garage. She reported in her testimony that when she first arrived in Reno with her son, they chose to camp along the banks of the Truckee River between Reno and Verdi until the desired accommodations became available.

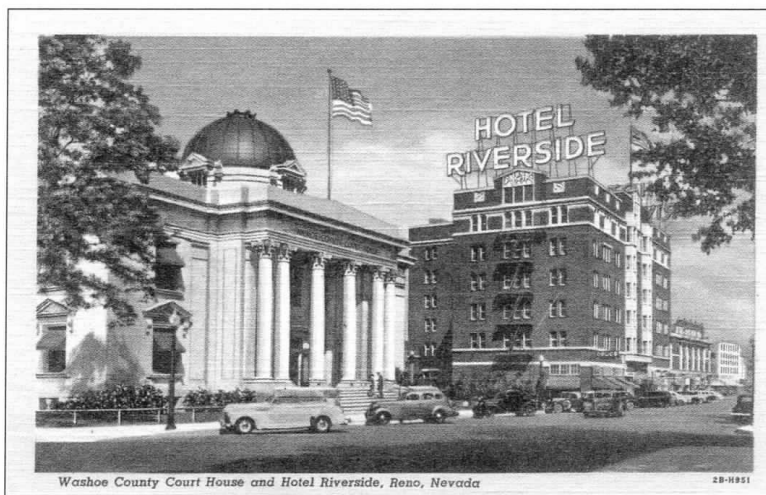
As the decade of the 1930s wore on, there was evidence that the divorce trade was slowing, not so much because of the Depression, but because there were portents of war on the horizon. Marriages tend to increase during a war, followed by an increase in divorces when the war is over, and reality overcomes the urgency and passion of wartime. For those who continued to come to Reno for a divorce during the latter part of the decade, the appeal of the divorce ranch increased, and the focus of the trade moved out of town. The completion of the transcontinental highway in 1927 affected the distribution of visitors to the area, as well. The highway attracted the automobile tourist trade, and hotels and auto camps (later motels) were built along highway routes rather than near the railroad station or the downtown core.

Auto camps provided accommodations ranging from light-housekeeping cabins to tent spaces, or a place to park your car so you could sleep in it. Reno's first-class auto camps cost from \$1.25 for a single person to \$4 for a double cabin, and second-class camps varied from 50 cents for a single to \$3 for a double. Kenbert Auto Camp in Sparks advertised:

"Modern 4-room cottages. Lights, gas and water furnished," and Coney Island Auto Camp offered: "Winter apartments now, 4-room cabin including lights, gas, steam heat, bath, toilet, \$25 and \$30 month. Single cabin \$5 per week, bath, lights, water and fuel included."

Several motels along Fourth Street trace their roots to earlier auto camps. The Star Motel was originally the Star Auto Court. The Silver State Lodge, once an

West built a row of ten cabins on his property. The first dude to stay at the ranch was divorce-seeker Ethel Andrews Murphy. West charged \$35 per week, which included two meals a day and the use of a horse. Since many divorce-seekers preferred privacy while they waited for their divorce, the idea of an isolated location held great appeal and, from 1929 on, divorce ranch operations proliferated in northern Nevada.




*The Riverside Hotel was a first-class address for divorce-seekers. It was conveniently located next to the Washoe County Courthouse.
From the author's private collection.*

upper-end complex of rustic log-sided cabins on West Fourth Street was recently demolished. The Silver State was built in 1927 specifically for the divorce trade. The most poignant reminder of Reno's auto camp period, however, is the battered and faded Restwell Auto Court sign, which now sits on the edge of East Fourth Street among light industrial buildings and warehouses. The Restwell was a complex of small cabins that provided minimal housekeeping facilities to a steady divorce crowd.

Divorce ranches captured the imagination of writers and filmmakers and they represent the romanticized image of the Reno divorce trade. The TH Ranch, located above Pyramid Lake, was Nevada's first dude ranch. Originally the Hardscrabble Ranch, it was an operating cattle ranch until 1927 when owner Neil

The divorce ranches were situated north of Reno near Pyramid Lake, and south of town as far as Franktown. They consisted of a main lodge, where meals and communal activities took place, and a grouping of small cabins or cottages. Rates ranged from \$33 to \$46 per week, which included meals, auto trips to Reno, horseback riding and a resident witness. Ranches needed to be close enough to Reno so divorce-seekers could conduct their business, receive mail, and obtain provisions.

Although many of the buildings that housed divorce-seekers are gone, the effects of the social phenomenon that was migratory divorce can still be discerned in Reno's built environment and cultural landscape through the organization and design of its buildings. The perplexing arrangement of additions that line alleys, the proximity of a former hotel to the County Courthouse, and the abundance of bungalows and apartment houses all tell the story of when the Biggest Little City was the Divorce Mecca of the World. 

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The Virginia and Truckee in Reno, 1872-1950

by Debbie Hinman

*There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run
When the wild majestic mountains stood alone against the sun
Long before the white man and long before the wheel
When the green dark forest was too silent to be real.*

Gordon Lightfoot, "Canadian Railroad Trilogy"

Author's Note: I was born a little too late to experience the V&T Railroad, but would have loved to hear its whistles and engine sounds as it chugged up Holcomb Avenue on its way south. I wish I had been lucky enough to sit surrounded by vintage luxury inside the McKeen Motorcoach and watch Reno fade into outlying train stops through the unique porthole windows. If one can be nostalgic for something one has never experienced, then that is what I am, and that's why I wanted to write about the V&T Railroad, and tell the story of how Reno was enriched by being a part of its colorful history.

Railroad tracks rolling endlessly across silent lands, huffing locomotives and the adventurous aspect of rail travel have long been romantic symbols of the early days of the American West. Carrying travelers and goods to and from the young and wild lands, the various railroads contributed greatly to the economic growth of our nation and the development of new population centers. While there have been quite a few railroads servicing Nevada throughout the years, none was quite so proudly thought of or so regarded as truly Nevadan as the Virginia and Truckee Railroad.

Though there were a few false starts to providing a railroad to the Comstock in its booming days, the powerful Bank of California moguls Darius Ogden Mills, William Sharon, and William Ralston made such an ambitious undertaking a reality.

William Sharon was in charge of the Virginia City branch of the bank. As the bank acquired mines and mills through the financial difficulties of its customers, Sharon became aware that teamster charges for hauling the ore to the stamp mills down on the Carson River and carrying lumber back up to the Comstock

tremendously impacted profits from the mines. In May of 1867, Sharon incorporated the Virginia and Truckee Railroad Company. The proposed route would travel westward from Virginia City to Carson City.

In December of 1868, Sharon approached leading mining surveyor Isaac Jones about building the railroad. Their three-sentence

500-foot long trestle was built across Crown Point Ravine, outside of Gold Hill.

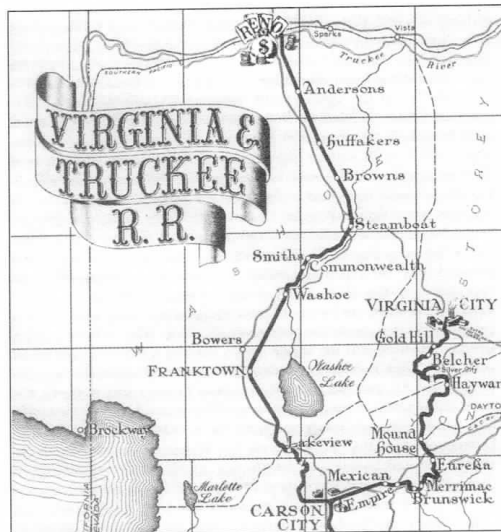
The new line earned its nickname "The Crookedest Railroad in the World." The 21-mile route began in Virginia City, curved its way half a mile south to Gold Hill, crossed the famous Crown Point trestle, ran through more curves to American Flat, then traveled down to Moundhouse and through the Brunswick Canyon into Carson City. It was said the route made enough turns in the trip to go around in a circle 17 times.

On November 29, 1869, the first train pulled by Locomotive No. 1, "Lyon", reached Gold Hill followed by No. 2, "Ormsby." Two months later the first train reached Virginia City. Writer and V&T historian Ted Wurm wrote "The train pulled up on E Street and triumphantly blasted its deep-toned whistle at the hotels, saloons and residences perched above, and at the multitude of mine buildings, headframes, smokestacks, and ore dumps below. Cost of the railroad had been \$1,750,000 not counting rolling stock and buildings."

The town of Reno was born out of the tiny outpost of Lake's Crossing on May 9, 1868 when the Central Pacific completed its path through the Truckee Meadows and began auctioning building lots. John Townley in *Tough Little Town on the Truckee* wrote: "On that day, the only substantial structures decorating Reno's townsite were Lake's hotel and his grist mill north of the bridge's abutment. Shanties for railroad crews sat scattered along the track at intervals, but otherwise, only sagebrush or the furrows of an abandoned field covered the area." However, within a month of the auction, over a hundred businesses were open and thriving.

Once the V&T was in operation fulfilling its primary purpose of carrying ore to the

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Map of the V&T circa 1872. Lucius Beebe & Charles Clegg, *Virginia & Truckee*, 1949. Courtesy of and Published by the Nevada State Railroad Museum.

conversation has become famous over time. Sharon: "Can you run a railroad from Virginia City to the Carson River?" Jones: "Yes!" Sharon's terse response: "Do it then, at once!"

Grading of the V&T right-of-way began in February of 1869. By September, the route was ready for rail. V&T superintendent H. M. Yerington drove a silver spike into the first rail at Carson City. The railroad project was no easy engineering feat, requiring seven tunnels and an elevation drop of 1,575 feet. An 85-foot high,

The V & T in Reno, 1872-1950 (continued)

mills and lumber back up to the Virginia City mines, it became a logical step to extend the line northward to Reno.

For a year and a half, Sharon held off building the Carson to Reno leg of the railroad, probably hoping for bonds from Washoe County to help fund the project. But Washoe commissioners wisely realized that Sharon would build the extension anyway, if they just held out a little longer. In July of 1871, work began on the Reno leg, after a competitor arrived on the scene with his own plans for a shoestring narrow gauge line from Reno to Virginia City. Suddenly surveyors appeared in Reno to begin the process of extending the line.

The townspeople of Reno were not overjoyed to see the V&T coming into town to connect with the Central Pacific. They visualized their new town becoming a way station on the overland route, instead of a significant commerce center in itself by being a shipping point for the Comstock.

Nonetheless, grading soon began in Washoe Valley and a contract was signed with Amasa Thompson, the Gold Hill contractor who built the Crown Point trestle, for construction of a bolted timber bridge over the Truckee in line with Holcomb Avenue to the south. The bridge was completed by the middle of September, after three months of labor and \$30,000. According to Townley's *Tough Little Town on the Truckee*, the bridge was "the finest in the state ... eleven trestles in the river's channel, supporting a main span 150 feet in length ... over 350,000 board feet of lumber and twelve tons of iron fittings went into the structure."

A footwalk was later added to give townsfolk access to the yards and homes of V&T employees living on Park and High Streets. Grading also was occurring in Carson City, as well as Steamboat and Washoe City.

The V&T owners, in an effort to placate the disgruntled Renoites, arranged a "grand excursion" for 500 residents in November of 1871, from the Reno depot to Steamboat Springs. By April of 1872, 350 workers were employed extending the V&T line between Steamboat and Carson. Just in time for the Fourth of July, the newest locomotive of the line, No. 11, lavishly adorned with polished brass, arrived and was christened "Reno" to further placate local citizens. On August 24, an enthusiastic crowd of 600 witnessed the driving of the last spike, about a mile west of Carson City. On that day the "Reno" ran the full length of the

transforming the hotel into an island amid a sea of tracks. There was also a turntable for the V&T at one end of Commercial Row.

Downtown Reno was not the only stop in the Truckee Meadows, however. The next stop after leaving the town center was a community known as Anderson's with a platform near the Anderson Ranch, which sat south of present-day Gentry Way, to the east of South Virginia Street. Beyond Anderson's was Huffaker's, another of the Truckee Meadows' early communities. A small depot marked this stop, near today's intersection of Longley Lane and Huffaker Lane. Past Huffaker's was Brown's, another stop sporting only a platform, and then Steamboat, whose geysers and hot springs had attracted early settlers since the late 1850s.

Before the Steamboat to Carson City portion of the railroad was completed, the community flourished and quadrupled its population as goods were carried by rail from Reno and then off-loaded and transferred to wagons to make the trip up to Virginia City. Unfortunately for Steamboat, this brief boom

subsided once the railroad was completed and the hot springs resorts, which had been created with an eye toward attracting the attention of cure-seeking tourists, never achieved the developers' vision.

While V&T's activity to and from the Comstock began to decline following the playing out of the mines between 1880 and 1890, its Reno-to-Carson leg was business as usual, up through the early 1900s. The bridge over the Truckee was replaced in 1880, then again in October of 1894 by a steel span. In 1906 the tracks were extended from Carson City southward to Minden.

With the poor roads and scarcity of auto-



V&T engine #11, the Reno, named for the city of Reno.
Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb.

line, from Virginia City to the Truckee River, a total of 52 miles.

So the people of Reno became accustomed to the V&T, and even began finding it useful for commuting to Carson City or Virginia City. The daily express train in particular was much faster than the horse-drawn coaches that had been their former most common mode of transportation. The tracks ran around the rear of the Depot Hotel on the corner of Commercial Row and Center Street. The Central Pacific tracks ran in front of the hotel, and the inter-connecting tracks for the two railroads ran to the east and west of the hotel,

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The V & T in Reno, 1872-1950 (continued)

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mobiles during this period, many locals found the line convenient for commuting.

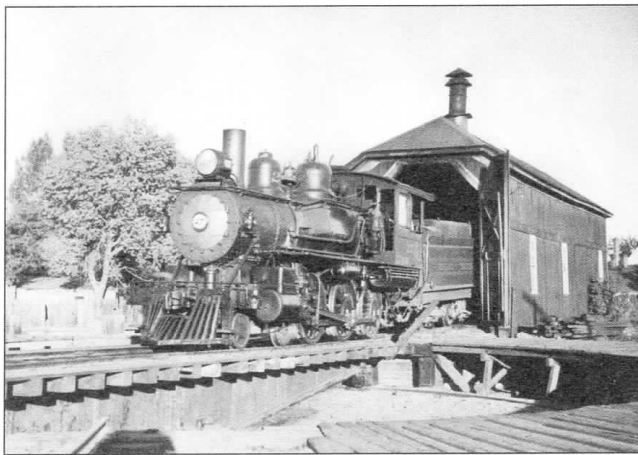
One of the most famous regular customers was Governor John Sparks. In office from 1903 until his death in 1908, Sparks ranch was at Anderson's Station. There was no official Governor's Mansion in Carson City. Due to his large cattle holdings just south of Reno, Sparks rode the V&T into Carson City to conduct state business. Construction of a Governor's Mansion was begun in 1908 to ensure that future governors would reside in the state capital. In addition to Sparks, four U.S. presidents rode the celebrated short line: Rutherford B. Hayes in 1878; Ulysses S. Grant in 1879; Teddy Roosevelt in 1903; and Herbert Hoover in 1933.

In 1910, the railroad invested \$22,000 in a truly innovative conveyance produced by the McKeen Motor Car Company of Omaha, Nebraska. The car was 70 feet long, bright red and powered by a six-cylinder 200 horsepower internal combustion gasoline engine. Ted Wurm described the car as "a strange curiosity, cruising along in spooky silence [with its] pointed nose [and] large round windows, which gave it a submarine-like appearance." The car was lavishly appointed inside with inlaid Cuban mahogany, a maple floor and a beautifully decorated linen headliner.

The McKeen was first intended to serve the entire line, but due to its length and the difficulty in navigating the twists and turns from Virginia City down to the Carson valley, it was soon relegated to the Reno - Carson City - Minden run. Until 1945, the McKeen carried passengers to and from these destinations on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Following its retirement, the car began a new life as a diner, then as part of Al's Plumbing and Heating in Carson City. Owner Al Bernhard generously donated the car to the Nevada State Railroad Museum in

1996 where restoration is underway on this unique vestige of American railroad history. The McKeen car has been listed on the Historic Register.

The last dividend paid to V&T stockholders was in 1924. Passenger-only service between Virginia City and Reno was discontinued, and the V&T began to die. The grandson of Darius Mills purchased the remaining third of the railroad from the estate of William Sharon and in a sentimental tribute to its former glory, picked up the line's deficits until his death in 1937.




*V&T engine at the Reno Roundhouse, June 1937.
Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb.*

To keep the V&T running, some cars and engines were sold to Hollywood. In 1938 the last trains ran to Virginia City; the tracks were torn up and sold for scrap iron in 1941. A mixed steam train ran between Reno and Minden three days a week, supplementing the McKeen. To the regret of all local passengers who had a proprietary fondness for locomotive #11, the Reno was sold to MGM Studios in 1945 for \$5,000.

The V&T limped along for five more years. In January of 1949, V&T Vice President and General Manager Gordon Sampson applied to the ICC and PSCN for an order authorizing abandonment. The order was granted and May 31, 1950 saw the final run of the V&T. The local newspapers reported a quiet death for the 81-year-old "tired little railroad." Engine 27, three

cars and a caboose pulled out of Reno at 7:30 a.m. with little to no fanfare and less than 40 of its 60 seats filled, the remaining seats held for passengers in Carson and Minden.

Nevada State Journal reporter Peggy Trego wrote the following eloquent tribute three days before its demise: "So the V&T will die this week, and its memory will join that of the Comstock and the Comstock's kings. Reno, which once fought the V&T so bitterly, will regret the loss of something irreplaceable. The past will have claimed another great part of Nevada's history."

Though the V&T of old is gone, a huge debt of thanks is owed to the Nevada State Railroad Museum, whose staff and volunteers have worked tirelessly to preserve this history. It is through their efforts that artifacts of this glorious past can be seen and experienced. And if all goes as planned, I just may get that ride on the McKeen someday after all. 

*Information for this article came from: David Myrick, Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California, 1963; Ted Wurm, Rebirth of the Virginia & Truckee R.R., 1992; Ted Wurm, Jim Walker, and Harre Demoro, Silver Short Line: A History of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad, 1983; John M. Townley, Tough Little Town on the Truckee, 1983; Don Bush, "The History of the Crookedest Short Line in America, the Virginia and Truckee Railroad," www.vcnevada.com/history/Vnthist.htm, 1992; Peggy Trego, "Old Railroad Has Brilliant, Splendid Past," *NSJ* 5/28/50; Richard Datin, "A Pictorial Review of a Unique Motor Car," www.mckeen-motor-car.com/pages/1/index.htm, 2003; *Conversations with Loren Jahn*.*

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Reno and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake

by Debbie Hinman

At 5:12 a.m. on the morning of April 18, 1906, thousands of San Franciscans and visitors to the city were shaken out of bed by the largest earthquake to strike the San Francisco Bay Area in modern times. Estimates of the magnitude range from 7.7 to 8.3 and strong shaking lasted from 45 to 60 seconds. The quake was felt from below Los Angeles to the south, to southern Oregon to the north, and as far as central Nevada, to the east.

The earthquake was destructive enough in itself, but the fires that quickly ensued and the dynamiting undertaken to try and curtail them compounded the devastation, loss of life and property. The final toll would be 28,188 buildings destroyed, an official death count of 500 people (which researchers now feel may have been understated by 2,500), and of the 400,000 residents shown on the previous census, an estimated 225,000 newly homeless.

In Reno, the "Extra" edition of the April 18th *Nevada State Journal* carried the headline "Hundreds Perish in Earthquake Leaving San Francisco a Mass of Flames and Shapeless Ruin." The paper reported that the quake was very pronounced in Reno. According to the *Journal*, "The movement was from east to west and continued several minutes. Late stayers in Reno resorts grew dizzy and sick and hastily left while the lights, electric fans and everything hanging swung violently." Minor damage included the conduit for the lights that hung from the Virginia Street Bridge. South of town in Steamboat Springs, there were reports the temperature of the pools was increasing and rocks were being ejected from some of the springs.

The "Extra" edition of the *NSJ* used a Sacramento dateline. As one telegraph line out of San Francisco was still operational, reporters were able to telegraph

the Sacramento office, which in turn contacted Reno, which published the extra edition.

The cities of Reno and San Francisco were very closely linked. Connected by the railroad since 1868, it was an easy jaunt from Reno to San Francisco. There was hardly a Reno resident at that time that did not have a friend, relative or business tie in San Francisco. A "This Was Nevada" article by Phil Earl from the 1980s noted that Reno locals clustered around the Southern Pacific depot all day, awaiting word on friends and relatives.



Sacramento Street and approaching fire by Arnold Genthe. From Steinbrugge Collection of U.C. Berkeley Earthquake Engineering Research Center.
www.zpub.com/sf/history/1906earth.html

One notable Nevadan, George Wingfield, identified as a "well-known Goldfield mining man," had been staying at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. The *NSJ* quoted Wingfield: "A piece of plaster about 10 feet square falling on my head was the first premonition I had of any trouble."


Reno townspeople rallied to the immediate aid of the troubled city. A relief center was established at 216 Center Street. Over a two-hour period the evening of the 19th, the center received 1500 loaves of bread and 100 blankets. Wagons labeled "Food Wagon Relief Committee" were engaged that would travel to all parts of the city, picking up donations for the relief effort. These were packed at the center and transported to the Southern Pacific Depot, where train

officials had agreed to transport all supplies to the Oakland Pier at no charge. Among the local businesses the Riverside Mill Company offered to furnish flour to all who would bake for the refugees; and the Nevada Meat Company donated 159 hams. Locals were asked to donate any clean, used clothing, particularly children's clothes.

Cash donations were a welcome resource. The *Nevada State Journal* started a fund that would "prove of material benefit to the unfortunate homeless citizens of dismantled San Francisco."

The local Chinese and Japanese residents began their own relief funds on behalf of their California countrymen, and fraternal organizations such as the Oddfellows displayed their generosity. The *NSJ* reported the entire school body from the smallest child to the youths in the senior class of the high school helped.

On the 100th anniversary of the San Francisco earthquake, a lot has changed about Reno. But what hasn't changed is the sense of community and the willingness to rally to help those in need. We did it for the Katrina victims, the World

Trade Center families and countless other worthy causes over the past century. No doubt, many San Franciscans long remembered the "Tough Little Town's" generosity. 

Information for this article came from: "Hundreds Perish," NSJ 4/18/06; "This City is Stirred by the Awful Catastrophe," NSJ 4/20/06; Phil Earl, "Reno and San Francisco's Great Quake," NHS "This Was Nevada" series, Gazette Journal 4/13/80; Simon Winchester, A Crack in the Edge of the World: America and the Great California Earthquake of 1906, 2005.

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Carpenter Gothic Country Houses of Northern Nevada

by Loren Jahn and Jack Hursh, Jr.

Entering the Bartley Ranch Park Western Heritage Interpretive Center, your eye is immediately drawn to the striking mural of ranch life painted by Loren Jahn in 2000. The lovely little ranch house nestled amid the towering trees is a prime example of Carpenter Gothic architectural style.

Carpenter Gothic houses are perhaps the most representative of pure Americana of all architectural styles. We're fortunate here in northern Nevada to have several fine specimens to admire. The Winters' Ranch house near Washoe Lake on Highway 395 near the turnoff to Bowers Mansion is perhaps the grandest and best-known example of Carpenter Gothic in Nevada. Built in the early 1860s, this house features the large main gable plus central side gables framing the large signature gothic lancet windows.

The definition of Carpenter Gothic refers to carved, wooden ornamentation used on American houses of varied architectural style, mainly before the Civil War. Gothic architectural style is thought of as a predecessor of and influence for Victorian with two defined periods: Gothic Revival 1830–1880 and Victorian Gothic 1860–1890. The style was very popular in church architecture in the 1840s, becoming prevalent in domestic architecture in the 1850s.

Originally, the Gothic Revival style was meant to be executed in stone or brick to imitate the lofty, imposing cathedrals of medieval Europe. A form of Gothic Revival, the Carpenter Gothic style in America grew out of a need for quickly built houses — and the desire for fanciful details. The new balloon framing technique and the invention of steam-powered scroll saws, which allowed for the mass production of intricate mouldings, paved the way for this style.

New England architect Andrew Jackson Downing popularized the style with his published pattern books *Cottage Residences* (1842) and *Country Houses* (1850). The architecture is described as having asymmetrical massing, with the emphasis on balance rather than symmetry. Although modest examples of Gothic architecture appeared symmetrical, the intent was to revolt against the boxiness

Downing's philosophy that a country person did not have to have a plain house. They could live in refinement and experience the "lifting towards the heavens" and be "one with beauty," which the style offered.

Identifying features of the Carpenter Gothic style include steeply pitched roofs and gables, gingerbread ornamentation, fancy scroll work, barge boards, carved porch railings, and strong vertical design elements, such as board-and-batten siding. Window trim typically replicated the masonry trim of English Gothic cathedrals on these otherwise simple country cottages.

Carpenter Gothic houses appeared on the landscape in western Nevada in the late 1850s and early 1860s with the boom of the Comstock Lode. The ranches of the Truckee Meadows, Eagle Valley (Carson City), Carson Valley and the Honey Lake Valley provided food for a Virginia City population. As settlers emigrated to Nevada from the eastern United States they brought with them the styles of the time, including Carpenter Gothic architecture. So they built their ranch homes closely following the patterns and ideas popularized by Downing. These houses were stick framed with wood drop siding or clapboard siding. In later years, many of them had an application of asbestos siding placed over the top of the original siding. Often times, square nails and the original siding can be observed where the asbestos has broken off.

These early Nevada Carpenter Gothic country houses sported clapboard siding and ornate wooden adornments. Though some of Nevada's early mills and carpenters may have been producing these products, it is thought that some of the more refined building materials were shipped around the horn from the eastern United States and brought up to northern Nevada from the ports of San Francisco Bay, many even before



Roberts House in Carson City, 2000.



The Longley House with lancet window and woodwork on the roof and front porch, 2002. Photos courtesy of Jack Hursh, Jr.

of classical design. Downing had been influenced by the English Gothic theorist Augustus Pugin who felt that Gothic architecture was very moral because it did not impose rigid orders upon the design and that classicism was pagan. Pugin's vision of Gothic as the perfect marriage of the functional and the beautiful was one of the foundations of Downing's ideology.

The Gothic styles were seen as most suitable for rural areas. It was Pugin's and

Continued on page 9

Carpenter Gothic Country Houses (continued)

Continued from page 8

the establishment of the Central Pacific Railroad. It is also suggested by their similarity and common occurrence that these houses may have been shipped from San Francisco in complete kit form and erected by early Nevada builders, following Downing's patterns.

In addition to the Winters' Ranch house, there are about a dozen Gothic style houses in the Carson Valley that were built in the late 1850s to 1870s time frame. Although quite modest, all retain the basic architectural style of a gable roof with a steep central gable window and front entrance below.

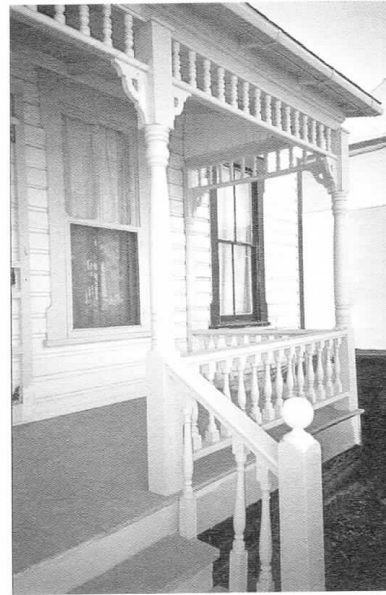
The James D. Roberts house was built in Washoe City in 1863, disassembled and moved to Carson City (1207 N. Carson Street) in 1873 and reassembled. The Roberts House is thought to be one of the oldest houses in Carson City and is now a museum. Typical Gothic Revival elements include its gingerbread bargeboard, lancet windows and a steeply-pitched roof.

Governor John Sparks purchased a large property at Anderson's Station in 1887, south of Reno near a Virginia & Truckee Railroad stop. He moved his family there and built the Alamo Stock Farm and ranch house. Now called the Sparks-Moffett house, it was located at the northwest corner of Peckham and S. Vir-

ginia. The ranch house was moved south of Steamboat to the west side of Highway 395 near Pleasant Valley in 1978. Lately, this house has undergone extensive restoration and remodeling but one can still observe the original steep gothic gables.


One of the best examples of Carpenter Gothic architecture in the Truckee Meadows is hidden within an industrial park on old Longley Lane. The A.A. Longley (later years Beidelman and Capurro) house was built circa 1870 and is constructed in the pattern book (Downings, *Cottage Residences*, design No. IV, An Ornamental Farm-House) style. Much of the gingerbread and porch details are still intact. This cutting-edge house was designed with indoor plumbing and carbide gas light illumination, before Reno had its own light generation system. The carbide gas system was contained in a small hip-roofed outbuilding.

Within downtown Reno, 339 North Ralston Street is the best-preserved original Gothic example. Built by James Borland in the summer of 1875, it has the traditional steep central gable and modest lancet window. The main attic on the north end has a beautiful radial vent. This home also holds the distinction of being on The National Register of Historic Places. The registry is currently being updated and the house will be referred to as the Borland / Clifford house as it has been proven to have no association with John Orr as previously thought.



Borland was a local businessman who held several jobs in Reno, Rye Patch and Martinez, California before moving to San Francisco. The house was used as a rental whenever Borland worked out of town and was eventually sold in 1902. In 1907, O.J. Clifford purchased the house. He was a local pharmacist and lived in the house until his death in 1932. His son kept the house until his death in 1984.

Halfway through the 20th century, there were numerous

Carpenter Gothic country homes in Washoe County and the Carson Valley. One by one many of them have been replaced by industry, business and modern housing developments. Truckee Meadows Remembered would like to find a way to save these remaining structures, in particular the Longley Lane home whose days may be numbered. As the small outbuildings of Bartley Ranch Park were rescued and relocated, a similar destiny is envisioned for this architectural gem where future generations can appreciate its historical significance and graceful design. 



*The cute and original property at 339 Ralston, 2005.
Detail of the porch shown above.*

Jack Hursh, Jr. is a Reno native and third generation Nevadan. He is an activist, through his photography, for the preservation of Nevada heritage. Hursh is a member of the HRPS Board and is responsible for the 2006 programs.

Loren Jahn is a local historian and artist whose work can be seen in a mural of ranch life in the Interpretative Center at Reno's Bartley Ranch. With Jack Hursh, Jr., Loren formed Truckee Meadows Remembered to save historic buildings.

2006 Historic Preservation Month Walking Tours

Historic Reno Preservation Society will present eight historic walking tours during the month of May, in honor of Nevada Historic Preservation Month. Walking Tours are \$10 per person, free for HRPS members; walks generally last 2 hours. No dogs, please. We would appreciate it if you would call 747-HIST (4478) to reserve space, so we can better plan for the appropriate number of guides.

Saturday, May 6 10 a.m.	PARSONS/MILLS ARCHITECTURE - Join us for a stroll in one of Reno's most unique neighborhoods to view the distinguished designs of two famous Reno architects, Edward Parsons and Russell Mills. Meet at the corner of Marsh and La Rue Avenues. Tour guide, Anne Simone.
Tuesday, May 9 6 p.m.	UNR HISTORIC DISTRICT - Visit Morrill Hall, Mackay School of Mines, the Keck Museum, and learn the history of this beautiful campus. Meet at Honor Court, 9th and Center Street. Tour Guide, Jack Hursh.
Saturday, May 13 10 a.m.	BEYOND THE ARCHES - Learn Reno history with a walk through old "downtown" noting the historic banks, a vintage Italian hotel, and the railroad depot. Meet at the National Automobile Museum parking lot, 10 Lake Street. Tour guide, Debbie Hinman.
Tuesday, May 16 6 p.m.	UPPER RALSTON/NORTHERN LITTLE ITALY - Enjoy a walk in a residential neighborhood with a mix of architectural styles. Proximity to the University has traditionally determined the mix of residents, professors and students alike. Meet at the intersection of Washington Street, The Strand, and College Avenue. Tour Guides, Jim & Sue Smith.
Saturday, May 20 10 a.m.	MANSIONS ON THE BLUFF - View high-style architecture in Reno's most significant political neighborhood. Meet at the McCarran House, 401 Court Street. Tour Guide, Joan Collins.
Tuesday, May 23 6 p.m.	RIVERSIDE DISTRICT AND LITTLE ITALY - Discover Reno's beginnings with a walk through a second "Little Italy" neighborhood, noting historic churches, hotels & motels, homes, and other fine old buildings. Meet at McKinley Arts & Culture Center. Tour guide, Felvia Belaustegui.
Saturday, May 27 10 a.m.	LAKE ADDITION - Meander past divorce trade dwellings and Victorian architecture, including a stop at the Lake Mansion. Meet at the Nevada Museum of Art, 160 West Liberty Street. Tour Guide, Debbie Hinman.
Tuesday, May 30 6 p.m.	WELLS AVENUE NEIGHBORHOOD - A stroll through a working class neighborhood along the path of the Wells Avenue streetcar, across from the V&T tracks, past the homes of the "Thoma Street Gang." Meet at Southside School, Sinclair & Liberty Streets. Tour Guide, Mark Taxer.

From Your HRPS President

Why should you be a member of HRPS? Membership in HRPS is an open door to information, entertainment, and an opportunity to learn about our city.

Walking Tours, which are free to HRPS members, give us an up-close look at our architectural treasures. Tours also offer insight into the past and present citizens who have made our city grow with vitality and character. Tours are offered during May, July and in 2006, September.

Our Wednesday night programs are so varied and well presented, people hate to miss a single evening. Seven programs are offered each year, two in the fall and five from January through May. These



wonderful programs are offered free to our membership and to the public.

Our newsletter, *FootPrints*, has been praised for content and style, but mostly for well-developed factual information. It's the kind of publica-

tion that you want to keep, because it is such a valuable resource. The primary reason is our exceptional founding editor, Sharon Walbridge, who is stepping down after eight years at the helm. Thank you, Sharon, for guiding this quality publication and for always striving to make each issue better than the one before. Managing Editor Carol Coleman will be stepping up to fill Sharon's shoes, and I have every confidence she will do so admirably.

These three components: Walking Tours, Programs and *FootPrints*, can only happen with superb volunteers who come forth to extend the scope of our mission. We need you! Keep coming!.

— Joan L. Dyer, President

HRPS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please check your mailing label! Renew your membership and help HRPS preserve historic Reno!

Please make checks payable to **Historic Reno Preservation Society**, and mail along with this application to:
P.O. Box 14003, Reno, NV 89507

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Annual membership includes: Footprints (HRPS Newsletter) • Free participation in walking tours

- ☐ Student \$15.00 ☐ Individual \$25.00 ☐ Family (Children 18 yrs and younger) \$40.00
☐ Business Contribution \$50.00 ☐ Supporting \$100.00 ☐ HRPS Angel \$250.00

Additional donation: _____

Thank you for joining HRPS. An organization is only as strong as its members. There are many areas in our organization where your enthusiasm, skills, and dedication will be invaluable to historic Reno and future generations. The goal of the Historic Reno Preservation Society is to preserve the historic resources of our community. What would you like to contribute to HRPS?

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RV 08.28.05/FO-DCD

Membership Report (Nov. 20, 2005 - Feb. 22, 2006)

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Pat Wehking
Ursula Wellman

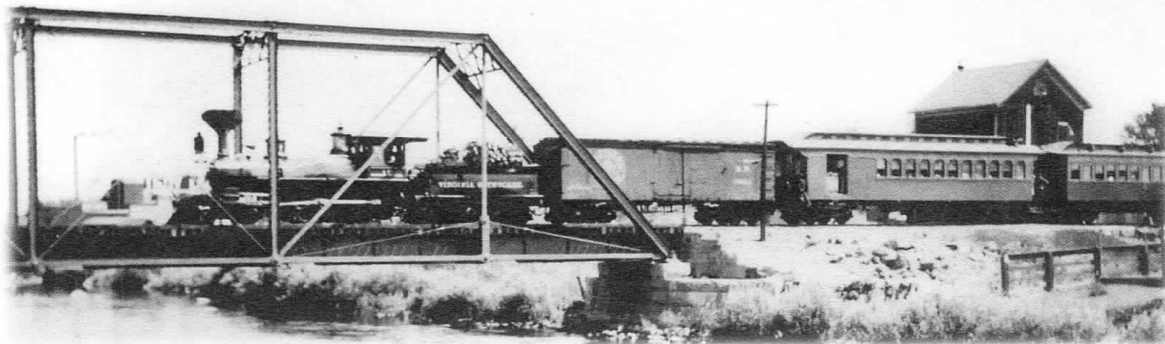
Karen Wells
James Zubere

New Members:

Phillis & Bruce Bassett
Karl Breckenridge
Al & June Calsbeek
Merrily Duncan
Gary & Jane Foote
Marianne Franz & Ellie Dunn
James & Jenni Sue
Zara Stender

Correction:

We apologize. The date the Federated Church was torn down was not 1950. It was closer to 1960. We agree with Virginia Recanzone that she and her late husband Elmo were married there in 1956, before the church was torn down. Vol. 9, No. 1, Page 7, Item 19. Vol. 8, No. 4, Page 7.



V&T crossing the Truckee at the Holcomb Bridge, Reno. Photo courtesy of the Nevada State Historical Society.



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SPRING PROGRAMS 2006

Jack Hursh, Jr. – Program Chair: 746-3252

All program events are on the 4th Wednesday of the month at 7 pm, at Mt. Rose School (Lander Street between Taylor and LaRue, just off Arlington), unless otherwise noted.

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

Local Historian Loren Jahn will introduce us to historic ranch house architecture with particular focus on Carpenter Gothic ranch houses like the Longley and Winters' Ranch houses. Photographic accompaniment by Jack Hursh.

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

Due to popular demand, we'll have an **"Open Microphone Night"** at HRPS. Come and share a favorite Reno story or two with people who love Reno stories. Your story can be about the famous, the not so famous, and yes, even the infamous. But please, no politics. We will also have display tables for those who would like to share old photos and/or memorabilia with the group. Annual Meeting & Election of new Board members.

Watch for Mella Rothwell Harmon's article on African American Divorces in an upcoming issue of FootPrints.

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