

Historic Reno PRESERVATION SOCIETY

FootPrints

Dedicated to Preserving and Promoting Historic Resources in the Truckee Meadows through Education, Advocacy, and Leadership.

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Reno Press Brick: a Reno Institution

by Debbie Hinman

Author's Note: I wish to thank Arline Laferry and Beth Miramon for their help with the following article. Arline, a docent with the Nevada Historical Society, provided her newspaper research on the company, as well as biographical sketches of the principals. Beth, author of *Reno's Axle: Historic Fourth Street*, contributed her knowledge of the pressed brick process, and made valuable corrections to the text of the article.

One of the first things that occurs to anyone taking a stroll through some of Reno's historic neighborhoods is the prevailing use of brick in home construction. From the early part of the 20th century into the 1950s, brick or brick-faced homes dominated our residential neighborhoods.

The primary reason for this was the fact that the brick buildings were more fire safe than wood structures. In its early days, Reno suffered a series of horrendous fires, the worst in 1879, where ten city blocks in the core of downtown Reno, all frame structures, were decimated. In addition to safety concerns, brick structures exuded more of an impression of prosperity and permanence. And residents in the first part of the 20th century did not have to look far for this desirable building material. A fine product was now available from the newly-created Reno Press Brick Company.

In 1900, two local men, Charles Clough and Charles Gulling, purchased the four-acre Ryland Brick Yard in the general area of Fourth Street and Keystone Avenue. By the following year, newspaper advertisements began appearing for the new Reno "Pressed" Brick Company at that location.

Born in Wisconsin, Clough had come to Reno in the latter part of the 19th century advertising himself as an architect, builder and contractor. Gulling was born of French parents living in California who moved the family to Reno in 1873. He attended Reno schools then took a business course in San Francisco. Following a brief teaching career, Gulling joined a survey company, which was engaged in laying out the Nevada-California-Oregon railroad.

He was a principal in the Orr Ditch Company for thirty-five years, and worked for various companies in the lumber industry before becoming involved in establishing Reno Press Brick.

In January of 1902, the *Daily Nevada State Journal* reported "The Reno Pressed Brick Company is a new enterprise in Reno, but is already doing a rattling business. The entire output of the works has already been sold and orders for future delivery are coming in. As soon as the ground thaws the works will resume operations." The bricks were

touted as being of a superior quality, weighing 5 1/4 pounds apiece. One of Reno Press Brick's first projects was to supply brick for the University Hospital Building on the University of Nevada campus. Note that somewhere along the line, Reno Pressed Brick became Reno Press Brick.

By February of 1903, the fledgling business was successful enough that Charles Clough traveled to Chicago to buy new machinery for the plant. The *Reno Evening Gazette* reported that the new plant would have a guaranteed output of 20,000 bricks per day. The new hydraulic brick press to be used was one patented by Chisholm, Boyd & White.



*Built in 1904, the Elk's Home, originally 38 W. First St., was one of Reno Press Brick's earliest projects. The building was seriously damaged in a 1957 downtown explosion and demolished soon after.
Postcard courtesy of Debbie Hinman.*

Continued on page 2

Reno Press Brick: a Reno Institution (continued)

Continued from page 1

Brick making is an ancient practice—the Bible tells of the problems incurred by the Israelites in making mud bricks for the Pharaoh. The bricks were dried in the sun, which did not provide the necessary strength.

The modern dry-press brick process used at Reno Press Brick was state-of-the-art for its time. First the mixture was pulverized and then passed through a series of screens to remove any remaining large pieces. The large pieces were sent back to the pulverizer. The end product was then forced into the hydraulic press where the “clay” was squeezed through whatever shaped nozzle was being used for any given run. The stiff tube of extruded clay would push along a table, past wire-bladed cutters, which were spaced according to the product being processed at the time. From there, the newly-cut bricks went to air dry for a time, until they were dry enough to burn without exploding from heat-created steam. The final step in the process was a trip to the kiln where the dried bricks would be fired in order to harden them.

In May of 1903, the *Reno Evening Gazette* reported that the new plant was installed and “the wheels are ready to turn as soon as the power company gets the power to the plant.” They went on to say “Within five days after the plant starts the first kiln will be burned...the first kiln will be used on the Thoma-Bigelow building (at First and Virginia Streets) and the new Elks’ Home (on First and Sierra Streets).”

In May, the company held its annual meeting, electing the following slate of officers: C. E. Mack, president; Harvey DeHart, vice president; G. F. Blessing, secretary; C. E. Clough, treasurer, with all of the former plus Charles Gulling as trustees. The board then named J. E. Monroe plant superintendent. The

Nevada State Journal received a sample brick which was, in their words, “As smooth as ever a pressed brick was and it is a perfect piece of workmanship.”

The new plant utilized electricity, still a new innovation in Reno at that time. The early kilns required 60 cords of wood to fire 200,000 bricks. An oil-burning kiln was soon added to the enterprise. Clay for the bricks came from a 21-foot-deep clay bed in a 14-acre piece of land owned



The Twentieth Century Club, 335 West First Street, was constructed in 1925. It was supplied with brick from Reno Press Brick. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

Photo by Carol Coleman.

by the company. When D. W. Cumings, an experienced pressed brick man, came from Chicago to set up the new press, he proclaimed it the best brick material he had ever seen.

Once the improvements were made and the new plant swung into full operation, Reno Press Brick never looked back. Plant employees worked 12-hour shifts, and were kept busy trying to fill the orders that were rolling in. The only hiatus occurred when the ground was too frozen to obtain the needed clay. Meals were served to employees, as evidenced by a 1904 advertisement with the curious wording “Wanted First class female to cook for 15 men. Wages \$50 a month. Inquire Reno Pressed Brick.”

Reno bricks were not just used locally. San Francisco soon placed an order for Reno bricks for finished fronts, at a cost of \$40 per thousand. It is natural

to wonder how many of those Reno brick-adorned buildings were lost in the earthquake that was to occur just three years later. Elko placed an order for a million bricks, and Churchill County wanted Reno bricks for their new courthouse. Soon the demand was far exceeding the supply.

A November 1906 *Reno Evening Gazette* article highlights this great demand. The paper quoted Charles Clough as saying that Reno Press Brick had sold over three million bricks in the past two weeks. Three hundred thousand of these bricks were being shipped to Goldfield, Nevada which was booming during this period. Another three hundred thousand were earmarked for “the new Mackay building on University Hill.” In 1911, the company received its largest contract ever for one million bricks for the Mason Smelter Company in Mason Valley.

In 1914, the company diversified by adding heating oil sales and oil furnace installations to its product line. The officers felt that Nevada builders would benefit from increasing their span of products and services. The first oil was delivered locally by horse-drawn wagons. In later years, air conditioning products were added to the product offerings. In 1924 the plant burned but was quickly replaced by a six-story building on the same site, an impressive height for early-day Reno.

But bricks continued to be turned out over the next 39 years as the company proudly displayed its slogan “A brick-built town is a prosperous-looking town” on its advertising. Local architect Frederic DeLongchamps designed much of his work with smooth, red Reno brick in mind. Many local homes, the Riverside Hotel, and his University of Nevada buildings all distinctively displayed the classic local material. And all of these are still standing today. The El Cortez

Reno Press Brick: A Reno Institution (continued)

Hotel, the Twentieth Century Club and the “new” Reno High School are of Reno pressed brick.

A 1927 advertisement claimed “more than fifteen varieties and colors of brick” were being produced at the plant. However, the local clay was varying shades of red. If buyers wished to use golden brick, they had to have it shipped from Sacramento or Salt Lake City.

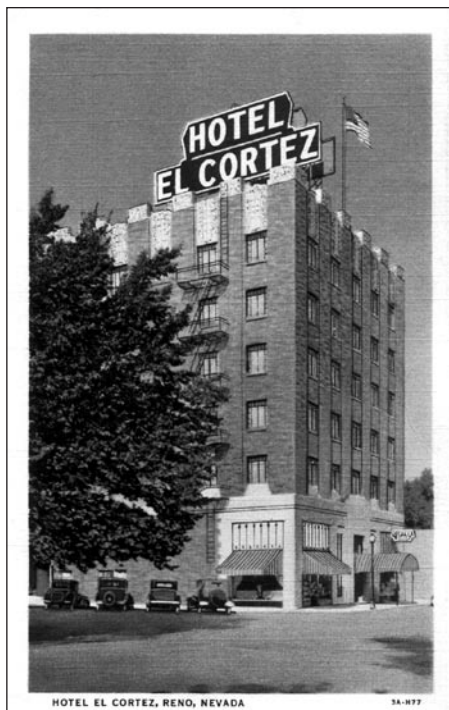
In 1930, longtime associate of the company Albert J. Caton resigned his position with the First National Bank of Nevada (formerly Farmers & Merchants National Bank) to take over as active Manager of Reno Press Brick. Two years later, upon Charles Clough’s death, Caton purchased the company and became president and general manager. Caton was a native Nevadan, whose parents were pioneers of the Comstock. He attended Gold Hill High School, and graduated from the University of Nevada in 1904, where the popular young man had been student body president.

Reno Press Brick had an extensive history of dedicated, long-term employees. Second and third generation workers were commonplace at the company, and a 1953 *Nevada State Journal* article mentions several men who spent their entire working lives at the company, such as foreman Art Frosic, with 42 years.

So devoted were the officials of the company to their featured product, when it came time to add a new office building to the brick yard in 1952, architect Ed Parsons was instructed not to use concrete as a foundation, as that was a competitor product. Parsons attempted to dissuade them but the elder Caton insisted upon brick footings using steel. In his oral history, Parsons relates that not more than six months later, the building began to settle and the foundation had to be redone.

On Nevada Day, October 31, 1952, Caton passed away. His son Albert J. Caton Jr. took over the company. Albert

Junior, or “Bert” as he was called, was a very capable young man who was well-qualified for the task. Like his father, he was a University of Nevada graduate but had also obtained a degree from Ohio State University.



The El Cortez Hotel on Second and Arlington, built in 1931 with brick from Reno Press Brick. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.
Postcard courtesy of Debbie Hinman.

In 1960, Brick No. 250,000,000 was produced for the erection of the new Church Fine Arts building on the University campus. To mark this auspicious occasion, the brick was appropriately inscribed and placed in the cornerstone of the building at a ceremony over which Caton and University President Dr. Charles J. Armstrong presided.

The younger Caton was only to head the brick factory for 11 years. In late 1963, production was ceased, after 63 years and 264,500,000 bricks. Caton estimated that if the bricks were laid end to end, they would form a band one and one-

third times around the equator, or build a four-lane freeway between Reno and San Francisco.

The reason for the closure of the brick plant was the growing concern over the effect of the smoke and by-products generated by the plant. At the company’s inception, the plant was located outside the city limits, and not only were environmental concerns non-existent, but Reno was much smaller and there were few residential neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity of the plant. Residents coping daily with rutted dirt streets and often unsanitary conditions were hardly going to concern themselves with a little smoke.

Though the company is gone, the prodigious output of the factory is evident throughout the city’s older neighborhoods. In a newspaper interview given not long before the closure of the plant, Caton was asked why brick had retained its popularity as a building material. He gave the following thoughtful reply: “Brick is easy to build with, is durable and it cuts maintenance costs to the bone. When you build with brick, you can be sure your building will have a lasting permanency, a minimum of expensive upkeep and beauty that maintains stateliness the year around.” Looking at our numerous existing brick bungalows and downtown classics such as the Riverside Artist Lofts and the El Cortez Hotel, it is hard to argue with this point of view. 📷

Information for this article came from: Numerous articles from the Nevada State Journal and Reno Evening Gazette, dated 1901 through 1978, and the aforementioned assistance of the two generous and knowledgeable ladies Arline Laferry and Beth Miramon.

Debbie Hinman is a member of the HRPS Board, Director of HRPS Walking Tours and on the FootPrints Editorial Board.

Reno's African-American Divorce Trade

by Mella Rothwell Harmon

From 1906 until the late 1960s, Reno, Nevada held the title of Divorce Capital of the World. Before the modern age of no-fault divorce, legal dissolution of marriage could take years or it was simply not allowed. Early in the twentieth century, a number of states were vying for the nation's migratory divorce trade. These states saw economic opportunity in offering relatively quick divorces. Lenient divorce laws were usually centered on a residency requirement and allowable grounds for divorce.

By 1931, Nevada had cornered the migratory divorce market by lowering its divorce residency period to six weeks. Reno, as Nevada's largest city at the time, was the center of the divorce trade. During the 1930s, Reno's Washoe County Courthouse processed more than 30,000 divorce cases, mostly for people from other states and countries.

The Reno divorce trade was known far and wide and was often depicted in film and fiction. From these many contemporary portrayals, however, it would seem that only rich white women arriving in plush Pullman cars partook of Reno's divorce services. In fact, more than a few men came to town to get divorced, and many of both sexes were from lower socio-economic levels and diverse ethnic origins.

Reno was in no way progressive in its dealings with racial minorities, however. From the early 1900s through the 1960s, Reno openly practiced de-facto racial segregation. In November 1904, Reno's police chief ordered all unemployed African-Americans out of the city, reportedly in response to the shooting of a police officer by a black man. In 1907, when the first African-American church was established in town, Reno's African-American population numbered around 225. Bethel AME Church completed construction on its small white

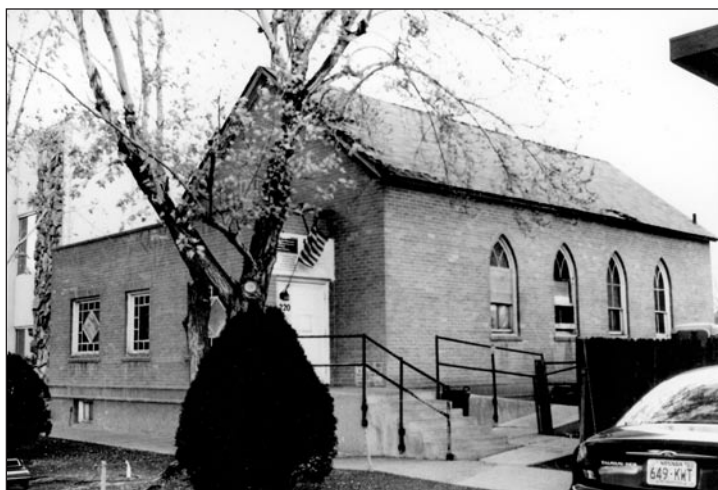
clapboard church on Bell Street in 1910. The fifty or so members who made up the founding congregation would go on to make a significant mark in Reno's history. They were the founders of the first branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Nevada, and the center of community service and culture for Reno's African-American population. The church also played a pivotal role in Reno's black divorce business.

Although not formally legislated, Reno practiced strict segregation. Most minorities were restricted in their housing and employment options, were not served in

As for entertainment, there were a few places on Douglas Alley and along East Commercial Row that catered to a minority clientele. Dixie's Social Club operated from 1943 to 1949. Run by Bill Bailey, Dixie's Social Club served Asians as well as blacks. Bailey also operated the Harlem Club from 1946 to 1958. The Harlem Club served meals and offered a wide variety of casino games. Bill Fong ran the New China Club on Lake Street from 1952 to 1971 specifically for an Asian and black clientele.

Short of distinctively ethnic surnames, or possibly residency addresses, nothing in the divorce records suggested a divorce-seeker's race. Had I not learned of the book *Special Delivery: the Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948*, I would never have considered the existence of a black divorce trade in Nevada.

C.L.R. James was a noted black Trinidadian Marxist writer and intellectual who came to Reno from New York to divorce his first wife so his marriage to white actress and socialist, Constance Webb, would not be bigamous. The bigamous nature of his marriage was the result of a Mexican mail-order divorce that was not recognized in the United States. In his letters to Webb, James described his experiences as a divorce-seeker in segregated Reno.



Bethel AME Church, shown here following its 1941 renovation, was Reno's first black church. It was the social and spiritual center of the African-American community.
Photo Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

white restaurants and bars, could not enter white casinos, or seek accommodations in white hotels. Churches, of which Bethel AME was the largest, played an important role in the social lives of black residents and visitors alike. Bethel AME held weekly dinners and operated a boardinghouse. The 1951 Negro Motorist Green Book listed two tourist homes in Reno: Carners' at 875 East Second Street and Billie Ross' at 520 Spokane Street. Only one motel was known to accommodate blacks in the 1940s, the Siesta Motel on East Fourth Street. Beyond these limited resources, Jim Crow was alive and well in Reno.

Cyril Lionel Robert James arrived in Reno on August 2, 1948. Asking for a recommendation for a place to stay, a white taxi driver took him to a boardinghouse at 539 Sierra Street that the driver called "a black person's place." Eating out had its limitations, as well. There were two or three integrated restaurants—a Chinese restaurant and a "Negro place." Otherwise, James found "the Jim Crow here in restaurants is powerful." He also found quick acceptance by the small African-American community and he was struck by their solidarity. James tried to find an African-American lawyer to handle his

Reno's African American Divorce Trade (continued)

case. Finding none with the proper credentials, he engaged Charlotte Hunter. Miss Hunter was one of very few female attorneys in Reno, and James found her to be liberal, sympathetic to radicals, and “strong on the Negro question.”

Like many divorce-seekers, C.L.R. James needed to find employment to help finance his six-week stay in Nevada. It was decided that the best place for James to go was the Pyramid Lake Guest Ranch, where Harry Drackert reluctantly agreed to hire him as a handyman. His job was to keep the yard clear, supervise the irrigation system, mow the lawns, help take luggage in and out of the ranch's station wagon, and wash dishes twice a day. In his spare time, James wrote letters to his wife, read French literature, and began an English translation of *History of the French Revolution* by the French Trotskyist historian Daniel Guérin. After about a month of unaccustomed physical labor, Harry Drackert terminated James' employment, but allowed him to stay on as a lodger. This did not help his precarious financial situation, but gave him more time to devote to his demanding writing schedule.

James's letters during his stay in Reno and at the ranch shed light on both the life of an important twentieth-century intellectual and on racial conditions in Reno. As Professor Dennis Dworkin stated in his article on James, “The time that James spent in Reno and at Pyramid Lake is also part of Nevada history. His observations on what it meant to be black in Nevada in 1948 are themselves noteworthy. Equally important, Nevada was not just an abstract backdrop for his intellectual pursuits. James became enmeshed in Nevada life; from divorce and divorce ranches, and lawyers and cowboys, to gambling and the scenic sublime.”

In August 1950, *Ebony* magazine showcased the story of a young woman from Richmond, California who came to Reno for a divorce. The article asserted: “Nuptial knot cut by 500 Negro wives annually in divorce city.” What a surprising statistic that is! The story reveals an image of Reno and a class of visitors whose presence in town had gone mostly unnoticed—or certainly unreported. To be sure, African-American celebrities came to Reno for divorces. *Ebony* noted examples such as Mrs. Bill Robinson in 1944, Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell in 1946, and the wife of Ink Spots star Bill Kenny in 1949. The majority however, the article claimed, were “unpublicized West Coast wives.”



Club Harlem, located on Reno's Douglas Alley, was opened in 1946 by William Bailey. The club was patronized mainly by African-Americans. Photo Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society


Confirming what had long been known, the article acknowledged that black women were barred from the swank hotels, dude ranches, and auto courts, but touted “the Negro-run boarding houses where rates are low.” The article suggests that “if she is careful and stays away from the gambling casinos, the total bill [for a Reno divorce] can be kept down to \$300.”

The *Ebony* article featured a young woman named Emma Allen, who found in Reno a friendly and hospitable community of some 500 African-Americans. She found a room at Doris Needham's

boardinghouse on Elko Street. Mrs. Needham, whose husband was an elder at Bethel AME church, started her business for black divorcees because there were so few decent places for them to stay in Reno. Of her home, Mrs. Needham said, “We keep a neat, clean house and we don't tolerate any monkey business. Women are not allowed to bring any male guests home.”

While in Reno, Mrs. Allen met Reno's leading African-American citizens. Bill Bailey, who ran the only two integrated nightspots in town, and Reverend R.F. Thompson of the Bethel AME Church welcomed the young woman to their

respective establishments. She attended an NAACP meeting and a church social at Bethel AME, which touted itself as the “Biggest Little Church in the World.” All in all, the *Ebony* article painted Reno in a surprisingly good light. Although most restaurants held a strict segregationist policy, Mrs. Allen reported that she could shop in any store in town, including “fancy fashion shops which carry the latest New York and Hollywood exclusives.”

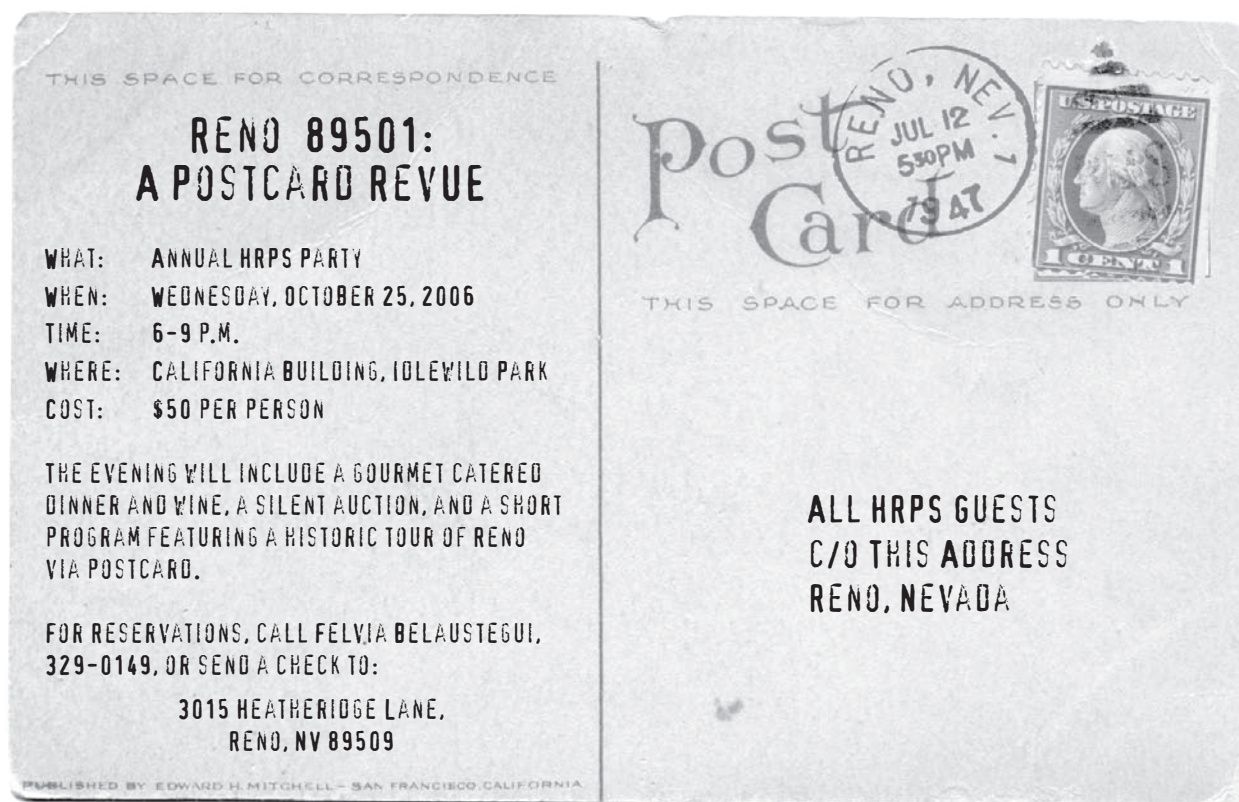
Despite what would seem like paralyzing discrimination, Reno's African-American community embraced the divorce trade as vigorously as did white Nevadans. It functioned as a nearly invisible microcosm of the bigger divorce scene, as Reno's black population opened their homes to temporary visitors and made them welcome in a town that was not welcoming of their race. 

Mella Harmon is Curator of History at the Nevada State Historical Society and a HRPS member. Ms. Harmon holds a master's degree in land use planning and historic preservation from the University of Nevada, Reno.

2006 Fall Historic Walking Tours

Historic Reno Preservation Society will present six historic walking tours and one bike ride during the fall 2006 season. Walking Tours are \$10 per person; tours are free to HRPS members. Tours generally last 2 hours. No dogs, please. If you would like to attend a walk or bike ride, please call Headquarters at 747-HIST (4478) to reserve space.

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| Tuesday, September 5,
6 p.m. | WELLS AVENUE NEIGHBORHOOD – Take 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. |
| Tuesday, September 12,
6 p.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, Ed Wishart. |
| Tuesday, September 19,
6 p.m. | UNIVERSITY HISTORIC DISTRICT (CAMPUS) - 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, September 23,
10 a.m. | EL RENO APARTMENT HOMES – Visit the original site of these charming and unique homes, and view seven of them at their new locations. Other examples of the Sierra Vista Addition architecture will be seen. Meet at the Statewide Lighting parking lot, 1311 S. Virginia. Tour guide, Debbie Hinman. |
| Tuesday, September 26,
6 p.m. | POWNING ADDITION AND LITTLE ITALY - Discover one of Reno’s earliest and most delightful vernacular neighborhoods, predominantly settled by Northern Italian immigrants. Meet at McKinley Arts & Culture Center. Tour guide, Felvia Belaustegui. |
| Saturday, September 30,
10 a.m. | NEWLANDS NEIGHBORHOOD - An architectural walk through one of Reno’s oldest and most prestigious neighborhoods. Meet at My Favorite Muffin, 340 California Avenue. Tour guide, Scott Gibson. |
| Sunday, October 1,
10 a.m. | BIKE TOUR THROUGH OLD RENO – Ride along quiet streets under a canopy of trees in Reno’s oldest neighborhoods. Meet at My Favorite Muffin, 340 California Avenue. Tour guide, Glee Willis. HELMETS REQUIRED! Limit of 20 riders. |



Roberts: A Whiskey Barrel on Every Corner

by Debbie Hinman

Editor's Note: *This story represents a new feature for FootPrints. We will feature an historic Reno person—artist, politician, educator, businessman/woman or other significant resident. The staff hopes you enjoy this new element of our newsletter.*

There is no dearth of colorful individuals in Reno's history. In its early days, the city attracted many unique people who came here for the promise of wealth, a fresh start in a young town, release from an unhappy marriage, or adventure. Some moved on, disappointed, but many more felt the attraction of the Truckee Meadows pulling them in like a siren's song and they stayed and contributed to the growing town. One of these significant contributors was Edwin Ewing Roberts, one of the best-known local political figures of the first three decades of the 20th century.

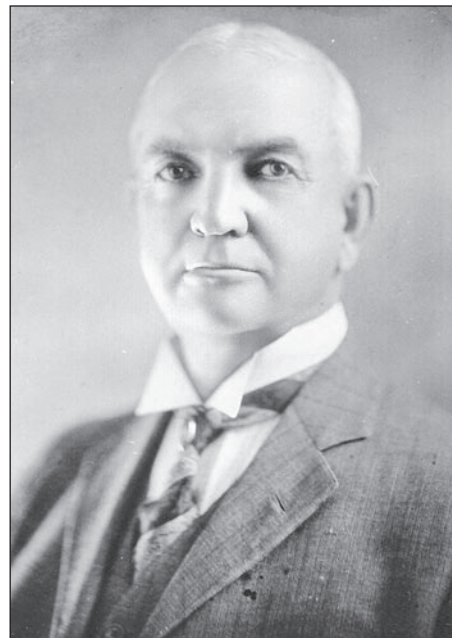
Born on December 12, 1870, in Sutter County, California, Roberts was educated at Howe's Academy in Sacramento and went on to become certified as a teacher. He taught in Hollister, California from 1891-1897. In Hollister, he met and married a fellow teacher named Nora Range in 1893. The couple had one child, a daughter, Hazel Lee. During that period, Roberts became the clerk of a committee of the California State Legislature and began studying for a law degree. Becoming intrigued by politics, he soon enrolled in the California School of Elocution and Oratory.

All of these pursuits prepared him for the life he was to lead but as often happens in life, it was one chance decision that brought him to Nevada. On March 17, 1897, Roberts made the trip to Carson City to see the state's first legally-sanctioned boxing contest, Fitzsimmons vs. Corbett. Many caught their first sight of Nevada because of this fight, and Ed Roberts had found his new home.

He took a teaching post at Empire, a mill town on the Carson River. In 1899, his night studies paid off and he was admitted to the Nevada bar. Following

his growing interest in politics, he was soon elected Ormsby County District Attorney, a position he held for five two-year terms. But Roberts had his eye on a loftier prize.

In 1910, he succeeded George Bartlett as Nevada's lone congressman. Roberts always directed his energy toward issues impacting his adopted state, such as land reclamation through irrigation, public buildings and highway construction. His four terms in the House of Representatives gave Roberts many opportunities to speak out on national issues as well.



Edward E. Roberts 1870-1933.
Photo courtesy of Nevada Historical Society.

Possibly the best-known of his positions was that against the declaration of war against Germany and the closely-related issue of the draft. In an impassioned address to the House, Roberts declared "True patriots have no need of conscription. If all the people in the country who have been yelling their heads off for war...during the last three years would now come forward and volunteer their services like real men, there would be no need for conscription." He proudly continued: "As for the state I have the honor to represent, it will not be necessary to

resort to conscription. Nevada is the first state in the Union to come forward with its full quota of troops."

On a personal level, probably the most noteworthy occurrence of Roberts' Washington tenure was the introduction of his beloved daughter Hazel to her future husband, Walter Perry Johnson, also known as "Big Train." Johnson, ace pitcher for the Washington Nationals, later the Senators, went on to a stellar baseball career, and was later one of the first inductees into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936. The two married in 1914 and although they continued to live in the East, they made frequent trips to Reno to visit Roberts after he moved back to Nevada.

Johnson and popular Baptist minister Brewster Adams became great friends and hunting companions. In his oral history, newspaperman John McDonald reported that all of the boys living in the vicinity of the Roberts' residence on S. Virginia Street would converge on the home when the news came that the Johnsons were in town. "Big Train" would come out into the yard and pitch to the boys, much to their great delight.

In 1918, Roberts declared for the U.S. Senate. Although he won the Republican nomination, he was defeated in the general election by incumbent Charles B. Henderson of Elko. Roberts returned to Nevada, opening a law office in Reno in the E. C. Lyons building on Second and Center Streets. He did a lucrative divorce business, no doubt assisted by the numerous contacts he made in Washington.

But presumably Roberts missed the public life, and decided to run for Reno mayor in 1923. One of the big issues of the day was prostitution. The city had closed down Reno's red-light district the year before (which, of course, did not end the trade); the ladies of the night just moved to different areas around town. Roberts' position was to establish a segregated area which would be policed for safety. Roberts handily won the elec-

Continued on page 8

Roberts: A Whiskey Barrel on Every Corner (continued)

Continued from page 7

tion and established “The Stockade,” or “The Cribs,” which was a Reno landmark until military officials forced the city to close it in 1942.

Roberts’ “live and let live” approach to government seemed to sit well with most inhabitants of Reno during that time period, as Roberts went on to be elected to two more terms as mayor. He often said that people should be allowed to do as they wish, as long as they weren’t hurting anyone else. In addition to his liberal views on prostitution, he believed gambling should be legalized so that it could occur out in the open, and that the graft and corruption surrounding prohibition could be resolved by making alcohol production and sales legal as well.

In his 1931 speech from, of all places, the pulpit of the Methodist church, Roberts delivered his cure for the ills of prohibition, which gained him nationwide press. Proclaimed Roberts, “The only way to put the bootleggers out of business is to place a barrel of good corn whiskey on every downtown street corner, with dippers attached, and signs inviting



*The California Building as it looked during the Transcontinental Highways Exposition in 1927. Roberts persuaded the State of California to have the building constructed for the event while he and his City Council worked tirelessly to transform Idlewild Park into a lovely setting.
Photo from Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno Library.*

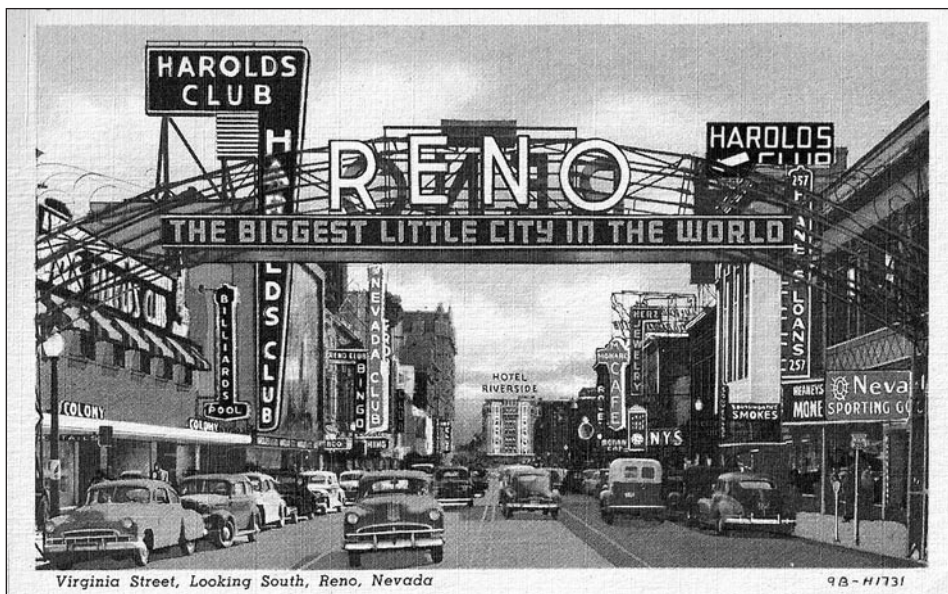
passersby to help themselves to all they want, free of charge. The only condition is that they’d have to drink it there, and couldn’t take any away. That is the way to eliminate the problem of whiskey and graft, and it is the only way.”

In spite of Roberts’ laissez-faire style and his habit, according to newspaperman McDonald, of starting every day with a

slug of whiskey and a glass of milk, much for the good of Reno was accomplished during his tenure as mayor. The Reno Arch was placed and dedicated in 1926, with Roberts as the featured speaker at the ceremony. Two years later, he sponsored the contest to select the slogan to be placed on the arch.

Several of the parks that Renoites so greatly enjoy today were a product of the Roberts’ administration. The city beautified and completed Whitaker and Wingfield Parks during this period. George Wingfield’s bank had acquired Belle Isle through bankruptcy, the island currently incorporated into the portion of Wingfield Park on the east side of Arlington Avenue and a former amusement park. Wingfield gave the island to the city for use as a city park. Upon the death of Elizabeth Evans in 1924, the grounds surrounding the Evans home were named Evans Park and added to the system.

The last park added during Roberts’ tenure was a wild and barren stretch of land west of town, on the river. A “name the park” contest was held for this property and out of the submissions, Roberts chose local suffragette Bessie Eichelberger’s suggestion, “Idlewild.” At the City Council meeting



Postcard of the first Reno Arch, installed on Virginia Street. The arch was dismantled and stored when it was replaced by the second arch in 1964. It was reconstructed and placed at Mill and Lake Streets in 1994 to film the movie Cobb. Postcard courtesy of Debbie Hinman.

Roberts: A Whiskey Barrel on Every Corner (continued)

to select the name, Roberts declared "This is the best one! That's certainly wild enough, and I never saw a soul ever do a tap of work up there."

This was soon to change, however, when it was announced that the Transcontinental Highway Exposition was to be held in Reno. Roberts had the City Council park commission work round the clock to get the park ready for his grand plan. Next Roberts went to the California legislature and convinced them to come to Reno and construct a building in honor of the Exposition. The legislature agreed, and today we have the lovely California Building thanks to Mayor Roberts' efforts.

By all reports, Roberts cut a dapper figure around the young city of Reno in the 1920s. He wore a morning coat, a gold watch with a chain and a derby hat as he strolled through the town. Reporters who criticized him in print found that Roberts never took such criticism personally; they were as likely to be asked to join him for a drink as any loyal supporter.

Roberts always maintained a residence in town during his tenure as mayor. He and Nora had a large house on South Virginia Street, south of California Avenue, but he spent his weekends and free time at his beloved Spanish Springs ranch. After Roberts' death, this ranch was purchased by George Wingfield.

The latter part of Roberts' life was beset with personal tragedies. In 1926 he lost his wife of nearly 33 years to illness brought on by acute high blood pressure. In August of 1929 he married Sadie Tomamichael. Just one year later, he received the tragic news that he had lost his only child Hazel to illness. Friends said he never recovered from this loss. In December of 1933, just one day before his 64th birthday, Roberts died, having lapsed into a diabetic coma days earlier. He had six months left on his final mayoral term.

Though Reno may have had more distinguished mayors in its 138-year history, it is hard to imagine that it had any who were more colorful, or in turn, as admired and reviled as Ed Roberts. He was a man of his time, and a grand time he had. 🍷

Information for this article came from: Oral History of John McDonald; Oral History of John Sanford; Philip I. Earl, "This Was Nevada: Early Reno mayor not afraid of controversy," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 2/25/96; David W. Toll, "E.E. Roberts and the Politics of Personal Liberty," *Nevada Magazine*, Nov-Dec. 1982; "Mrs. W.P. Johnson Dies Suddenly in Hospital at Capital"; Obituaries from: *Reno Evening Gazette*, 8/1/30; "End Comes to Mrs. Roberts," *Nevada State Journal*, 1/3/26; "E. E. Roberts," *Nevada State Journal*, 12/12/33 "Walter Perry Johnson," *Wikipedia*, online encyclopedia.

Debbie Hinman is a member of the HRPS Board, Director of HRPS Walking Tours and on the FootPrints Editorial Board.

Outstanding Accomplishments of the ROBERTS' ADMINISTRATION

The following is a list of the major undertakings instigated by and accomplished during the administration of Mayor E. E. Roberts in the City of Reno.

- The completion and beautification of Idlewild, Wingfield and Whitaker Parks
- The purchase of Evans Park
- The removal of the Southern Pacific sheds on Center Street
- The erection of Center Street Bridge
- The connection of Center Street with South Virginia Street
- The establishment of a Zoo and Aviary in Idlewild Park
- The fish hatchery in Idlewild Park
- The opening of Elko Avenue
- The opening of Ryland Street
- Widening of Pine Street
- Obtaining of the State Building
- Installation of Lawn Tennis Courts on Stewart Street, Wingfield Park, Whitaker Park and Evans Park
- The connection of Second Street with State Highway
- Illuminated dam and electric lighting of the Truckee River
- The widening of First Street
- Wigwag signs at Lake, Virginia and Sierra Streets
- Acquisition of Municipal Airfield.
- Establishment of Municipal Swimming Pond
- The Memorial to Soldiers in Idlewild Park
- The extension of paved streets from 15 miles to 35 miles
- During the Roberts Administration assessable valuations have increased from \$17,049,070 to \$21,186,190; an increase of \$4,137,115
- Establishment of Skating Pond
- The extension of sewer systems to all parts of the city
- The opening of Pine Street to Willow Street
- The extension of the White Way from Court to Cheney on South Virginia Street
- The extension of the White Way on Sierra from First to Fourth Streets
- The extension of the White Way on Fourth Street from Sierra to Virginia, and from Sierra to West, and on Chestnut from Second to First
- The removal of pollution from the Truckee River and the installation of sewage disposal plant
- The establishment of an eight-hour day for all workers
- Retired pension law for all employees
- Increase of wages for all city employees
- Completion of University Terrace
- Completion of many miles of macadamized streets and sidewalks
- Elimination of the street car system from the city
- The official naming of our city "The Biggest Little City in the World"
- Erection of electric arch over Virginia Street
- Establishment of the go-stop signals at Second and Virginia Streets
- The lowering of insurance rates
- Winning of the fight to keep the water meters out of the City of Reno
- The purchase of a plot for the burial of Spanish American War veterans
- The extension of the sewage system from 30 miles to 76 miles

From Your Board: HRPS Historic Preservation Priorities


Sometimes it's the simplest questions that provoke the most thought. At a recent Board Meeting, members pondered the very basic question "What is HRPS' role?" Our mission statement declares the organization to be "Dedicated to Preserving Reno's Rich Past with Education, Advocacy, and Leadership." But how do we do this, given our limited span of influence and resources? How can we reap the most benefit from our efforts and make a difference in our community?

The Board decided that our roles of advocacy and education are exemplified in our monthly programs, our quarterly newsletter, our walking tours and our visibility in the community. We play an active educational role with our seven monthly Programs on fourth Wednesdays at Mt. Rose Elementary School. Our newsletter, *FootPrints*, supports all our efforts in historic preservation with timely and interesting articles. The walking tours not only educate participants but also strive to alter perceptions and encourage appreciation of examples of early architectural features that may have never been noticed before. In addition, they introduce participants to some of the early residents of the area.

Our advocacy role is in lending our support to assist other groups and individuals in saving buildings. We work with the City of Reno Historic Resources Commission in areas of common concern. As HRPS Board members, we individually attend City Council meetings and write letters to support preservation. Since 2000, HRPS has given an annual Historic Preservation Award to a local individual or organization for their efforts in restoration and adaptive reuse.

While the Board guides the organization, it is our members who act as the engine, carrying us forward. At the April Board meeting, attendees were asked to create a "Top Ten List" regarding priorities for future preservation. Here is the list:

1. Longley/Capurro House (Longley Lane)
2. DeLongchamps family home on Mill Street
3. Virginia Street Bridge
4. Nev/Calif./Oregon RR Building on 4th St.
5. Masonic Temple (Reno's oldest commercial building)
6. Freight House
7. Old Slot Machines (this was prior to the Liberty Belle auctions held in July)
8. The Borland/Clifford House {339 Ralston St.}
9. 2 Queen Anne houses on Washington and Jones Streets
10. "Open Space," i.e. Ballardini Ranch

HRPS would like to thank all of you, our members and friends, for your concerns about protecting the charm and character of Reno's older neighborhoods. With your help, we will do our best to achieve this goal. Famed local architect Ed Parsons said "Somebody has to say there is something worth keeping. If you can't go and see something – if all you have are photographs – you lose a sense of your place in life." We of HRPS wish to retain this sense for all of us, and our generations to come. 

The Department of Cultural Affairs
Division of Museums and History
and

The Nevada Historical Society
Present an exhibition in the Changing Gallery

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF FREDERIC J. DELONGCHAMPS

September 15 through December 31, 2006

Please join us for the Opening Reception
Friday, September 15, 2006 at 5:30 P.M.

This exhibit is a collaboration between the Nevada Historical Society and the Special Collections Department of the University of Nevada, Reno Library and is sponsored by the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority.

The Nevada Historical Society is located at 1650 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89503

For more information, please call 775-688-1190.

Galleries are open Monday – Saturday, 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM

Research Library is open Tuesday – Saturday, Noon to 4:00 PM

Gallery admission: \$3.00 for adults, \$2.00 for seniors, and free for children under 18.

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

☐ New Member
☐ Renewing Member

Name(s) _____
Mailing Address _____ City _____ State _____ ZIP _____
Phone (H) _____ (W) _____ Best time to call: _____
Occupation: _____ Employer: _____
Fax _____ E-Mail: _____

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?

**FOR OFFICE
USE ONLY**

PAID: ☐ Check ☐ Cash Amount: _____ Membership # _____ Renewal Date: _____

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Membership Report February 22, 2006—July 1, 2006

Renewals:

Patti & Carson Adams
Lynn Allen
Jim Carlton & Michelle
Attaway
Robert & Sandra Backus
Carrol Baird
Alicia Barber
Karen Barber
Trip & Margaret Barthel
Diana Beggs
Karen Benna
Dana Bennett
Patricia Blanchard
Allen Blume
Fred & Marilyn Bonnefant
Jane Bowden
Anna Bridgman
Sarah Britt
Sue Broderdorf
Robert H Broili
Larry & Betty Brown
Diane & David Buckman
Linda Burke
Tosca Byars
Darrel & Jackie Cain
Vernon Campbell
Esle E Cann
Wanda Casazza
Tom & Phyllis Cates
Neal Cobb
Carol & Sam Coleman
Joan Collins
Len Crocker

Terry Cynar
Becky Czarnik
Al Delmue
Tom Dinkel
Judy & Steve Dollinger
Beverly A. Drake
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Peter & Sherry Dunn
Tim & Joan Luchetti-Elam
Sharon Elorza
Sheila Erlach
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FALL 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, September 27

The More Things Change will be the feature when Don S. “Snoshu” Thompson shares his photographs (on slides) which span from a century ago up to the present. You will see Reno as a vacant lot, a structure, back to a vacant lot and how it looks today. The audience will be challenged with “what was this before it was that?”

Thompson is the great-great grandson of Mark Coats, who began with a restaurant in Washoe City in 1862 and ended with a large hotel in Reno in the 1900s.

Wednesday, October 25

It's our Annual Party at the California Building. The party theme is Reno - 89501, A Postcard Revue. Join us for a fun evening of enjoying old Reno postcards.

Wednesday, November 15

(note this is the third Wednesday): Helen Handy and Marilyn Fuetsch Turville give us a glance back into the divorcee period with the shenanigans of the five O'Donoghue sisters of Fourth, West, and Chestnut (now Arlington) streets.

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