

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

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Virginia Street Bridge, The Bridge of Sighs

by Cindy Ainsworth

Author's Note: *In September 1997, Pat Ferraro Klos and Charlotte Jones McConnell were assigned the task of selecting the new HRPS organization's logo. They chose Loren Jahn's rendering of the Virginia Street Bridge. As HRPS' first president, Pat felt that this "historic symbol beautifully links both sides of our city, culturally and emotionally."*

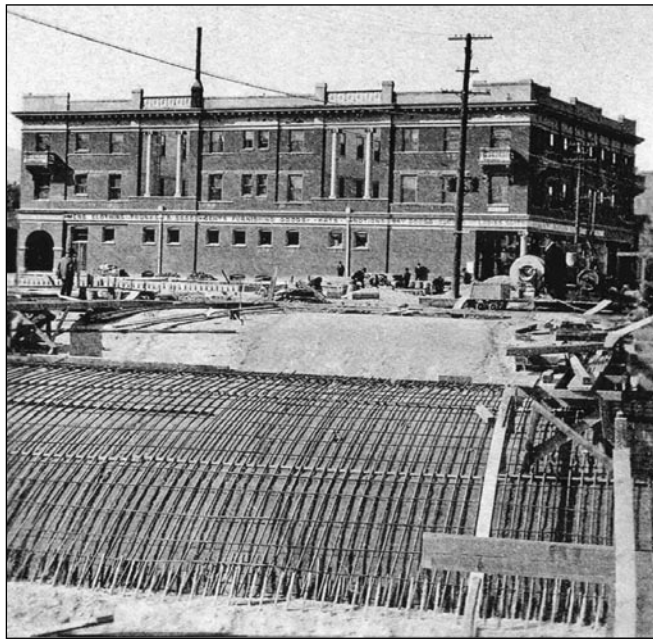
Ten years have passed since HRPS adopted the bridge as its symbol. In celebration, we at FootPrints felt it was time to not only share the stories and myths surrounding the Virginia Street Bridge but to update our readers on its current status. An important decision to refurbish or replace the bridge as part of the Truckee River Flood Management project will come this year. It is a complex and difficult issue and I hope you will find this article to be informative.

Built in 1905, the Virginia Street Bridge has withstood countless floods and the wear and tear of daily traffic of every description from buggies to street cars and bicycles to automobiles. At the center of Reno's early history, Nevada's oldest functioning bridge is a significant part of our city's heritage.

From Fuller to Lake's Crossing and The Bridges In Between

The trickle-down opportunity from the discovery of the rich Comstock Lode helped establish a little outpost along a ford of the Truckee River and with it came the building of our first bridge. A former teamster and storekeeper, Charles

William Fuller, hoped he had found "his silver" in the guise of a primitive road, waystation and bridge. Coming to the Truckee Meadows from Honey Lake, California, in 1859, he claimed land along the Truckee upstream from the established emigrant river crossings and waystations near Glendale. Fuller cleared a road approximately from Panther Valley south to Huffaker, a route similar to the present Virginia Street.



Virginia Street Bridge under construction in 1905. The Masonic Building has not yet been built. The building is probably the Mapes Building, (not the hotel) which housed Gray Reid Wright Department Store. Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

By 1860, he had built a hotel and crude bridge and founded Fuller's Crossing. According to one description, the low bridge was hardly substantial and had to be "fastened down during high water."

But it would be shrewd businessman Myron Lake who would turn Fuller's investments into silver and in the process help establish what would become the Reno township. Lake bought Fuller's Crossing and the road in mid-1861. The lucrative business of travelers from California to the Comstock over Lake's bridge and road contributed to Lake's increasing wealth.

Lake rebuilt the flimsy bridge in 1862, after early spring rain flooded the valley, and he secured a franchise with the Nevada Territorial legislature for the toll road and bridge. Although limited to ten years, the funds from this franchise along with the Lake House Inn and a grist mill north of the bridge, enabled him to buy the property that he would in turn sell to Charles Crocker and the Central Pacific Railroad in 1868 for a train depot and Reno town site.

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Virginia Street Bridge (continued)

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Reno's civic center emerged south of the bridge, when in 1871 the Nevada legislature transferred the county seat from Washoe City to Reno. A new courthouse was completed on land donated by Lake. It was turned over to Washoe County in 1873.

Lake's rickety wooden bridge was replaced by the county in 1877 with a modern trestle-like iron bowstring arch truss bridge, which was said to be painted bright red. The bridge became a centerpiece of civic pride and was a favorite place to take a stroll. The bridge continued to serve the community when it was moved east to Rock Street, following the construction of the present bridge. Ironically, the iron bridge washed away in the 1950 flood.

According to the U.S. census, Reno's population more than doubled from 4,500 in 1900 to 10,867 in 1910. Reno benefited economically from the mining boom in Tonopah and Goldfield by being the wholesale transportation shipping hub for supplies to southern Nevada. A more permanent, influential population of bankers, cattlemen's families and mine owners took up residence in Reno's new housing additions.

By the 1900s, Reno was moving away from its pioneer roots and into the modern world. The city was taking on a more metropolitan feel. Automobiles took to the dusty streets in their new steam or electric "devil wagons," as one local newspaper called them. The new Carnegie Library popped up on the southern bank of the Truckee, on the east side of Virginia Street. Kitty-cornered from that, to the northwest of the bridge, was the Masonic building,

A beautiful brick Riverside Hotel would soon follow southwest of the bridge in 1906. In conjunction with the new Virginia Street Bridge, the picture of progress was complete.

Beautiful Bridges, "A Sure Indication of a Progressive Community"

Proponents of the new civic improvement movement succeeded in having a bill passed in the 1905 Legislative session in support of building a new Virginia Street Bridge. The Washoe County bridge commissioners chose John Leonard, a civil engineer from San Francisco, to design the steel

pleasing outline and appropriate use of ornament." Beautiful bridges "are a sure indication of a progressive community." This is reflected in the design of the Virginia Street Bridge with Leonard's use of graceful arches and scribed concrete to look like masonry. The Beaux-Arts style lights and railing complimented Reno's new urban awareness.

Construction began in July of 1905. A temporary wooden bridge was erected for traffic over the Truckee. Some of the old heavy timbers from an earlier bridge were found just below the streambed during the excavation stage of construction. According to a 1945

Reno Evening Gazette article, laborers also found on the river bed an old key-winding gold watch that "brought speculation amongst the bystanders about the origin of the timepiece." Some thought it might have been loot thrown over by a robber being taken to jail several years before.

The contractor maintained a tight schedule with only a couple of exceptions. In August, a section of the south-end abutment from the old iron bridge caved

in, damming the water in a construction ditch. Terrified workmen jumped to avoid being caught. Luckily no one was injured.

The concrete work was completed ahead of the November 12th contract deadline, but there was a delay in delivery of the railings and electric light fixtures. Nevertheless, according to the November 15, 1905 *Reno Evening Gazette*, the bridge commissioners threw open the bridge for public use. The entire day, "long wagons, automobiles and pedestrians passed over it," although "earth covering the bridge is yet soft and bicyclists are unable to ride over it." "The new structure pleases everyone



The waters of the Truckee are at flood stage in 1907. Before the newly built U.S. Post Office opened for business in April 1909, livery stables, a tombstone factory, a blacksmith's shop, law offices and a soap works occupied the (Mapes) lot at different times. To the right, City Hall looks like it might be freshly built and maybe not yet finished.
Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

reinforced concrete bridge and the Oakland, California firm of Cotton Brothers and Company to build it.

The reinforced concrete bridge building method was still in its infancy when Leonard was awarded this project. Although this would be his first reinforced concrete project, he would go on to become California's preeminent designer of this type of bridge.

Leonard was a firm believer in the esthetics of concrete bridges and noted in the 1913 publication, *The Concrete Bridge*, "conformity with environment ...

Virginia Street Bridge (continued)

and as soon as it is paved it will be one of the best bridges on the coast.”

Reno’s lucrative migratory divorce trade contributed to one of our most beloved bridge tales—the divorcee’s tossing of the wedding ring from the Virginia Street Bridge. This all started most likely with the 1927 publication of Tom Gilbert’s book *Reno! ‘It Won’t Be Long Now’: Ninety Days and Freedom*. He suggested that the practice was so widespread that fish in the Truckee River sported golden rings on their fins. Colorful phrases like “Bridge of Meditation” and “Bridge of Sighs” can be credited to Gilbert.

For years, national magazines, newspapers and movies perpetuated the tale of the rings. Was it a myth or did the years of publicity actually turn this into a Reno tradition? Did those divorcees pawn their rings at the conveniently located “End of the Trail” pawnshop and then proceed to the dime store to buy a cheap imitation for the ceremonial toss? One can only speculate but those tales certainly contributed to Reno’s national notoriety and to our heritage.

In 1980, the Virginia Street Bridge was nominated to the United States Department of the Interior’s National Register of Historic Places. The bridge was chosen because of its architectural, engineering and transportation significance. The fact that it was Nevada’s first reinforced concrete bridge and was the focal point of the small city during the early 20th century further helped in the selection.

When visitors interested in history or architecture come to town they want to know where to go to have a genuine historical experience. When in Reno, most will head toward history central, the place where Reno started as Fuller’s

and then Lake’s Crossing. It is an area teeming with our most important historical resources such as the Washoe County Courthouse, the Riverside Artists Lofts, the Post Office and the Virginia Street Bridge.

Not only does the bridge stand as a testament to our past civic pride and a fine example of early concrete bridge technology, it is a part of Reno’s unique migratory divorce history. The bridge is also located on what was an important early north/south road leading through

so too is its ability to withstand the sometime raging waters of the Truckee River that have caused major flooding in downtown Reno and Sparks. The Truckee has gone over its banks at the bridge in 1907, 1927, 1950, 1955, 1986, 1997 and 2005. The river will rise, no question. How best to protect the city against flooding is an issue.

Between 1992 and 1996, an environmental study was conducted to evaluate the Center and Virginia Street Bridges. The Center Street Bridge needed to be replaced due to advanced deterioration. The Virginia Street Bridge showed signs of deterioration but according to a Nevada Department of Transportation report, the bridge could be rehabilitated because of the “significant amount of reserve strength,” and at the time it passed the 50-year flood protection level.

A 1996 agreement known as the Memorandum of Agreement was executed between the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, Federal Highway Administration, Nevada Department

of Transportation, City of Reno and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation that allowed for the replacement of the Center Street Bridge while requiring the rehabilitation of the Virginia Street Bridge.

The Center Street Bridge was replaced by 1998, but work was halted on the Virginia Street Bridge to further study its hydraulic capacity. In the meantime, necessary bridge rehabilitation has been placed on hold while being reviewed as part of the Truckee River Flood Project.

Many of you have no doubt followed the progress of the Truckee River Flood Project. The main goal is



Virginia Street Bridge, 1910. City Hall built in 1906. Post Office built in 1908, opened in 1909. Majestic Theater (see side of building at right) built in 1910. The YMCA would be built in 1911 and would block the view of City Hall. Note the streetcars. Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

Nevada and California. After 1913, the bridge became a part of America’s first transcontinental highway link through Reno, the Lincoln Highway. Losing the bridge would mean losing a piece of our history.

A quote from former Judge Peter Breen from *Scenic Nevada’s 2007 Nevada’s LAST CHANCE Scenic Places* publication sums it up beautifully, “Virginia Street has been the main thoroughfare in the City of Reno. If the Virginia Street Bridge goes, we will truly be burning the last bridge to our past.”

The Bridge’s Fate

The long-term condition of the Virginia Street Bridge is a major concern, but

Virginia Street Bridge (continued)

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“management of flood waters to protect life and property.” This is a joint effort among the cities of Reno, Sparks, Washoe County, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other stakeholders. Ultimately, this project will determine whether to replace or rehabilitate the bridge.

Truckee River Flood Management is made up of staff, working groups, committees and the Flood Project Coordinating Committee (FPCC), which is a coalition of local officials. The community coalition has adopted a Living River Plan as the Locally Preferred Plan (LPP), which includes a more natural realignment of the river. Along with the Army Corps of Engineers’ National Economic Development plan, the LPP will eventually go before Congress for authorization for partial funding of the project.

The good news is the LPP calls for the rehabilitation of the Virginia Street Bridge if at all feasible. The staff and FPCC are looking at alternatives to replacement of the bridge. The bad news is if these alternatives are not feasible due to costs or not meeting flood flow estimates, then the FPCC could recommend replacement.

The Ferrari-Shields Design is one of the alternatives to replacement that the FPCC is reviewing. The design includes bypass channels around the bridge, replacing the aging flood walls at the north bank and widening the river channel at the narrowest part between Sierra Street and Virginia Street. This design offers flood protection to the downtown at the 100-year flood flow level, the level of

protection the Living River Plan has already adopted.

At the March 16, 2007 FPCC meeting the Army Corps of Engineers announced that the Ferrari Shields bypass design, among other things, did not take into account the debris load and therefore was not a viable solution. This was obviously a setback for the preservation of the bridge.

The Army Corps of Engineers will recommend replacement with a clear span bridge but would not replace the




Virginia Street Bridge with the old Riverside Hotel to the right of the bridge and Carnegie Library to the left. Mt. Rose is in the background. Picture courtesy of Mella Harmon.

failing north-bank flood walls. This recommendation is based only on a 40- to 50-year flood event protection level. The Ferrari-Shields Design and the Corps’ replacement alternative cannot be directly compared because of the different levels of flood protection.

At the March 16 meeting the Truckee River Flood Management Project staff presented four Federal-Local cost share options which include the Corps’ clear span design and the bypass design. The FPCC will review these and will take into account other factors such as the level of protection, functionality, hydraulic performance, schedule for completion and the aesthetics of each option.

As a plus, there is still Federal Highway Administration money from the 1996 Center Street Bridge agreement that could be applied to the rehabilitation of the Virginia Street Bridge with the bypass design. On the other hand, the City of Reno would have to return this federal money if they decide to replace the bridge.

According to the Reno Gazette-Journal, on March 28, 2007, the Reno City Council unanimously recommended that the Virginia Street Bridge be torn down and replaced. The final decision by the Flood Project Coordinating Committee will be made April 13, 2007. 

Information for this article came from:

A special thank you to Mella Rothwell Harmon for her assistance; Annie Estelle Prouty, M. A., “Development of Reno In Relationship To Its Topography,” *Nevada State Historical Society Papers, 1923-1924*; John Snyder and Steve Mikesell, “The Consulting Engineer and Early Concrete Bridges in California,” *Concrete International*, May 1994; National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Virginia Street Bridge, 1980; “Virginia St. Bridge Started 40 Years Ago,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, July 4, 1945, p. 7; Various bridge articles from 1905-06 *Reno Evening Gazettes*; John M. Townley, *Tough Little Town on the Truckee*, 1983; Truckee River Flood Project website, www.truckeeflood.us; Virginia Street Bridge report, Nevada Department of Transportation, February 2005; Ferrari-Shields Design.

Cindy Ainsworth is a past president of HRPS. She is a HRPS tour guide and a member of Reno’s Historic Resources Commission.

It Is Not Just a Stump

by Carol Coleman

I live in a house in a forest (with my husband and a dog). It's off the Mt. Rose Highway on the east side of the Sierra Nevada (Guy Rocha says I should say Carson Range) at the 6,000-foot level. We have beautiful, tall, three-needle pine trees called Ponderosa and Jeffrey Pine. In the early morning and late evening you can smell the Jeffrey Pine—it's a lovely vanilla, butterscotch-like smell. Do hug a Jeffrey if you visit us. And, yes we love it here.

Among the trees around us, there are stumps. Some of the stumps are cut off at ground level. Others are tall, straggly and weathered looking. When we have visitors, my husband asks them, "Why do you suppose some stumps are tall?" They make all sorts of guesses, but when they note the stumps are *weathered* and *old*, with prompting, they ultimately reason that the stumps have been there for a long time. The stumps are tall because they were cut down with a two-man saw, not a power saw. A two man saw typically left a stump at the three to four feet height, depending on the comfort level of the saw.

Beginning in the 1860s, booming communities such as Virginia City inspired lumbering in the Sierra Nevada. Mines required wood for building, to fuel furnaces, and to assemble support systems underground.

Philipp Deidesheimer, a Comstock mining engineer, exacerbated the problem with his 1860 invention of the square-set system, which dramatically increased demand for timber. To support the excavations previously, timber sets consisting of vertical members on either side of the diggings were capped by a third horizontal member. The Comstock ore bodies, however, were too large for this method. Instead, as ore was removed it was replaced by timbers set as a cube six feet on a side. Thus, the ore body would be progressively replaced with a timber lattice. By this method of building up squares of framed timbers, an ore vein of any width could be safely worked to any height or depth.

Nevada Historical Marker 193, near Hwy. 395 and the south end of Carson City, marks the spot where Carson-Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company, the greatest of the Comstock lumbering combines, operated in the Lake Tahoe Basin during 1870-1898. A twelve-mile V flume ran from Spooner Summit to the lumberyard, where the V&T Railroad transported timber to the Comstock. The operation ceased due to depletion of timber and the decline of mining on the Comstock.



A Comstock stump in the forest near the Mt. Rose Highway. The tree was probably cut down in the 1860s. Note the wide base at the stump. What we see of the stump today is just the heartwood.

Photo courtesy of Sam Coleman.


In the Lake Tahoe Basin, a railroad was built from Glenbrook Bay to Spooner Summit. By 1895, 47,000 acres of timber had been cut. Barely 950 acres of usable pine stands remained. During 28 years of logging activity, it is estimated that more than 750,000,000 board feet of lumber and 500,000 cords of wood were logged. In the words of Dan DeQuille, "the Comstock lode was the tomb of the forests of Tahoe."

Archaeologists have identified nineteenth-century lumber camps throughout the Sierra Nevada along with systems of roads, flumes, and narrow-gauge railroad right-of-ways.

The forest around our home was clear-cut back in the late 1800s. Lumber cut on these hills was transported down the mountain in V-flumes to V&T Railroad cars for shipment up to Virginia City.

We have a few of the stumps on our property and more in the 15-acre open space behind us. We have a stump that had fallen over in the open space—we saved it and brought it into the front of the house as "décor." The stump is now standing again in a place of honor. The stumps are antiques and I collect antiques.

Besides the trees, we also have sage and bitter brush and cheat grass and Manzanita. These are low growing shrubs and grasses that are very flammable. With the fire risk in the West, our Homeowner's Association has applied for grants to assist with clearing brush and dead trees in our open areas. This year, courtesy of a grant, a lot of the brush and dead trees were cut down by hand and/or chopped up with a machine called a masticator.

What has happened to our precious stumps? Despite my husband's instructions, the crew clearing brush and trees cut down many of the Comstock stumps. They perhaps didn't understand about and certainly didn't appreciate our "Comstock stumps." The Comstock stumps are part of our history and they are all around us if we take care of them. So, my husband is bringing the injured and impaired stumps back to our house, and placing them around the property. We're doing our bit in historic preservation by saving the Comstock stumps. A Comstock stump is not "just a stump." 

Information for this article came from:

"Comstock Lode," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comstock_Lode; "Lake Tahoe, California and Nevada," http://www.geog.psu.edu/vegdyn/lake_tahoe.html; http://www.onlinenevada.org/early_lumber_industry;

Carol Coleman is the Managing Editor of FootPrints.

2007 HRPS Historic Preservation Month Walking Tours

Historic Reno Preservation Society will present nine historic walking tours and one bike tour during Historic Preservation Month this May. All tours are \$10 per person; they generally last about 2 hours. No dogs, please. *Helmets are required for the bike tour.* If you would like to attend, please call 747-HIST (4478) to reserve space.

Tuesday,
May 1, 2007
6 p.m.

BRICKS AND STONES - A walk in the vernacular Humboldt and Lander Streets Neighborhood. Discover the architectural treasure trove of this area, a mix of bungalows, Tudor and mission revivals and cottage styles. Begins at My Favorite Muffin, 340 California Avenue. Tour guide, Tracy Soliday.

Saturday,
May 5, 2007
10 a.m.

BEYOND THE ARCHES - Learn Reno history with a walk through old and new downtown noting the historic banks, the railroad depot and the oldest existing commercial building. Meet at the National Automobile Museum parking lot (far southeast corner), 10 Lake Street. Tour guide, Sharon Honig-Bear.

Tuesday,
May 8, 2007
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,
May 12, 2007
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.

Tuesday,
May 15, 2007
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.

Saturday,
May 19, 2007
10 a.m.

FOURTH STREET CORRIDOR - Rediscover the historic origins of Highway 40 and the Lincoln Highway, stopping to appreciate the Barengo building, Flanigan Warehouse, and other vestiges of the corridor's heyday. Meet at Louis' Basque Corner, 301 E. 4th Street. Tour guide, Cindy Ainsworth.

Sunday,
May 20, 2007
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. HELMETS REQUIRED, NO EXCEPTIONS. Limited to 20 bikers. Tour guide, Glee Willis.

Tuesday,
May 22, 2007
6 p.m.

UNIVERSITY NEIGHBORHOOD - A walk through an historic and possibly endangered neighborhood at the foot of the campus, with vintage Queen Anne homes, charming bungalows and intriguing stories. Meet at the base of the 9th Street university steps. Tour guides, Debbie Hinman & Jack Hursh.

Saturday,
May 26, 2007
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 local architects, Edward Parsons and Russell Mills. Meet at the corner of Marsh and LaRue Avenues. Tour guide, Anne Simone.

Tuesday,
May 29, 2007
6 p.m.

MONROE STREET NEIGHBORHOOD - Stroll along Monroe and Joaquin Miller Streets, savoring the history and architecture of this lovely residential area south of the Newlands Neighborhood. See the Hart House, the Patrick Ranch House, Greystone Castle, and other distinctive homes. Meet at the corner of Monroe St. and Manor Dr. Tour guides, Elsie Newman and Anne Simone.

Created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1971, Historic Preservation Month celebrates historical preservation efforts and historical landmarks. The annual event showcases state history and preservation through lectures, open houses, walking tours, exhibits and much more. From the 2006 Reno City Council proclamation on Historic Preservation Week: Historic preservation is an effective tool for managing growth, revitalizing neighborhoods, fostering local pride and maintaining community character while enhancing livability. Historic preservation is relevant for communities across the nation, both urban and rural, and for Americans of all ages, all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds; Historic Preservation is important to celebrate the role of history in our lives and the contributions made by dedicated individuals in helping to preserve the tangible aspects of the heritage that has shaped us as a people.

The Mapes Hotel and Casino, Reno's Landmark Hotel

by Patty Cafferata

When the Reno City Council demolished the glamorous Mapes Hotel on January 30, 2000, a significant era of Reno's history and culture was destroyed. From December 1947 to December 1982, this hotel was the site where Renoites and tourists celebrated important family and community occasions, shared meals, conducted business meetings, and were entertained.

The historic Mapes Hotel was the forerunner of later casino/hotel operations built specifically to offer gaming, rooms and suites, restaurants and bars, and entertainment all under one roof. A magnificent building, the twelve-story Mapes Hotel was the tallest building in Nevada and the first major high rise hotel built in this country after World War II.

The story of the Mapes Hotel can only be told by describing the Mapes family who built the opulent structure. The family was among the earliest settlers in the Reno area. The family patriarch George W. Mapes and his brother Ira were running cattle through the Truckee Meadows as early as the 1860s. Later, George was active in Reno's business and banking communities. He even owned the Palace Hotel on Commercial Row in the early 1900s.

After he died, his son Charles Mapes Sr. planned to build an elegant hotel as a monument to his late father, at the southeast corner of N. Virginia and First streets, on the north bank of the Truckee River. Charles Sr. mistakenly believed that his father had previously owned the land and operated a grain store there.

Charles Sr. and his wife Gladys purchased the property from the City of Reno in 1937. At that time, the white columned, red brick federal post office stood on

the property. Unfortunately, Charles Sr. passed away months later due to complications from an infection in his leg. His leg was broken when his horse slipped in the mud and fell on Charles. Because of World War II, his family was forced to delay the construction of the hotel.



The Mapes Hotel and Casino with the delicate railings and balconies of the Sky Room. Circa mid-fifties, a major remodel included the backwards "7" sign announcing the "Sky Room."

Note the fisherman in the river.

Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

After the war ended Charles Mapes Jr. returned home and the family discussed building its dream hotel.

When the hotel was built, it was considered not only the most elegant and luxurious hotel in Nevada, but also one of the finest in the country. Gladys Mapes, a New York native, envisioned that their family hotel would look like

the buildings she was familiar with, such as, the Art Deco Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. The Art Deco architectural style was developed at the Exposition Des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France in 1925.

Gladys and Charles retained the experienced hotel design architect F.H. Slocombe from Oakland, California, to design their hotel and they hired Theodore P. Moorehead, Civil Engineer, to manage its construction. The building plans were frequently changed, and construction was delayed due to the lack of materials in the post-war economy. The building was erected using reinforced concrete in a curtain column-and-plate-floor style of construction. None of the exterior walls was weight bearing.

Building materials and labor were supplied by local businesses. For example, Alpine Glass furnished the windows; Flanigan Warehouse supplied the cement; Earl Games excavated the property; Tom Joyce installed the composition floors; Osborne & Kitchen delivered the kitchen equipment; Camille Solari & Sons grained the metal doors; Yancy Roofing built the roof; Ready-Mix Concrete, Saviers Electrical Products, Reno Press Brick and Commercial Hardware contributed materials.

In constructing the hotel, Charles sought the maximum in fire safety, so the rooms were built without transoms, and all moldings, window sashes and baseboards were of aluminum. The grained hollow metal doors and the plaster-covered terra cotta column walls were intended to contain any fire to a single living unit with a four-hour fire resistance rating. The design was successful; of the three

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The Mapes Hotel & Casino (continued)

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fires that broke out in the building, all were contained to the rooms where the fires began. No deaths or serious injuries were reported.

The hotel/casino building contained about 147,500 square feet with the basement and first two stories larger than the upper floors. The smaller top 10 stories were shaped like a J along the river, North Virginia and First streets.

The townsfolk watched while workers covered the first two floors of the exterior of the hotel with what appeared to be four by four cream-colored terra cotta tiles. Actually, concrete was used for the tiles to save money. Rough textured red brick columns rose between the windows of the upper stories.

The estimated costs to complete the deluxe hotel ranged from \$2,500,000 to \$3,000,000. The construction was financed by the Bank of America, First National Bank of Nevada and the Reconstruction Finance Agency (RFC), a federal government agency.

The hotel catered to overnight guests and long-term residents. The eight residential floors were advertised to contain 300 rooms as well as 40 suites, each with a living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom and tiled bathroom. Three of the suites on each floor were located at the three outside rounded corners, while the other two suites had a bay window for guests to gaze at the blue waters of the river. The corner suites were unique because the corridor could be closed off and up to five additional bedrooms added. (Marilyn Monroe stayed in one of these suites during most of the filming of *the Misfits*.)

The standard guest rooms were about the size of a single car garage. The tiny rooms were designed to accommodate a single twin bed that served as a couch

during the day. In every room the guest could pull back the white sheers covering their window for a glimpse of Reno. Because bathtubs were nearly impossible to procure after the war, many of the hotel rooms had only stall showers. The rest of the rooms and all suites contained a combination tub and shower unit.



The 1946 Rodeo Parade. Note the Mapes Hotel and Casino under construction on the right of the picture. Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

Using five different color schemes for the guest rooms and suites, Gladys Mapes and her daughter Gloria shopped for the furniture in a San Francisco showroom. In addition to the French-style pieces they purchased, they furnished some suites with a few of the family's Victorian antiques.

Construction began in January 1946, and when the hotel officially opened on December 17, 1947, the Mapes family invited everyone in Reno to attend in either full dress or cowboy boots and attire. As people swarmed into the hotel lobby, they saw across from the hotel registration

desk the three elevators with operators. (The elevators were automatic, but the Mapes family preferred to employ operators during most of the hotel's life.) No other structure in Nevada had as many elevators as the Mapes. The coffee shop was located off the lobby in the north side of the building, but it was not serving food during the Gala Grand Opening.

The cosmopolitan night club, known as the Sky Room, located on the top floor was a must see on every guest's list. At the time only a few hotels in the country offered dining on their top floors, and most of them had been remodeled to add this exciting feature. Glass windows surrounded the top floor on the east, west and south sides of the building. The top floor also featured Art Deco aluminum railings embedded in a concrete balcony that jutted out over the building like a hat brim.

The Sky Room was tastefully decorated following the Art Deco structure of the hotel. The floral carpeting harmonized with the wall and pillar coverings of stylized leaves and flowers in muted blues and greens. The tables were covered with crisp white damask tablecloths and matching napkins, and were illuminated by small table lamps or metal cylinder shades over flickering candles. Indirect lighting lent an air of romance to the room. The food was served on fine porcelain plates; the guests ate with hollow handled silverware.

The guests could dance on the inlaid hardwood floor or watch a floor show on the stage at the north end of the room. The Sky Room kitchen was capable of serving as many as 400 people at one meal; lunch and dinner were served daily. The hotel contained three kitchens that were equipped with stainless steel fixtures, electric ranges, charcoal broilers and the latest in modern dish washing and sterilizing equipment.

The visitors had an opportunity to gamble in the casino area either along the

The Mapes Hotel & Casino (continued)

river side of the main floor or on the top floor outside the Sky Room. The guests also had a choice of two bars for liquid refreshments, either in the cocktail lounge on the main floor between the casino and dining room or in the Sky Room bar on the top floor. Huge mirrors hung over the back bar in the main floor cocktail lounge. Diffused lighting reflected on the guests, carpeted floor and mirrored pillars. A long curved bar that snaked along the pillars was outside the Sky Room on the west side of the building. Instead of a back bar, the patrons had an unobstructed view of the southwest sections of Reno, the rippling blue river, the foothills and the Sierra Nevada.

Charles Mapes promoted the hotel in various ways. Provocative entertainment and famous showbiz people drew guests to the hotel. The Sky Room shows were more lavish in the 1940s and 1950s than in the 1960s. Not all the entertainers were known stars, but singing, dancing and comedy were often part of the floor shows and casino/lounge acts. A few of the better-known entertainers included the Marx Brothers, who were comedians, singers Vic Damone, Judy Garland, Tony Bennett, pianist Liberace and burlesque dancer Gypsy Rose Lee.

In addition, Charles Mapes resorted to other types of activities to fill the Mapes, frequently these activities involved a sport or sporting event, such as a golf tournament or a hydroplane race. And Charles continued the Mapes family's sponsorship of the Reno Rodeo that his grandfather helped to found in 1919.

Regrettably, the good times did not last forever. In the summer of 1978, several major hotels/casinos opened in Reno, such as the Sahara Reno, Circus Circus, and MGM Grand Hotel/Casino. About that time Charles unwisely borrowed heavily for a major expansion of his Money Tree Casino. Without parking or hotel

rooms, the Money Tree could not compete. He was forced to close not only the Money Tree Casino but also the Mapes Hotel on December 17, 1982, owing the bank \$15,000,000. At the foreclosure sale, First Interstate Bank, the only bidder, paid \$6,000,000 for the hotel.

Over the years, there were many proposals and prospective buyers for the hotel.




1954. The locals called the "crosswalk" the "scramble system." You could cross north, south, east, west or diagonally. On the marquee, "The Szonys, Dancing to the Music of Eddie Fitzpatrick's Orchestra." The Szonys were Ferenc Szony's parents and were professional dancers. Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.

Some of the proposals were for condominiums, apartments, hotel with a casino, hotel without a casino, and combined multiple uses of offices, restaurants, shops, apartments and parking. Although the building was structurally sound, the plate and column construction of the building prevented any extensive remodeling of the structure. Unfortunately, most of the guest rooms were too small for modern expectations.

Finally, in June 1988 George Karadanis and Robert Maloff, partners in the Sundowner Hotel, bought the Mapes Hotel for an alleged sum of \$2,350,000. During their ownership, they sold the furnishings and the fixtures for salvage. As a result, the building fell into disrepair with broken windows, dust and dirt blowing inside and a leaking roof that caused the parquet floor in the Sky Room to buckle.

That was the condition of the building when they sold it to the Reno Redevelopment Agency in 1996 for \$4,000,000.

In September 1999, the Reno City Council voted to demolish the hotel, and gleefully discussed who would "push the plunger" to bring down the building. Thousands of the 180,480 Reno citizens watched either in person or on television as Clauss Construction demolished the hotel on that wintery Super Bowl Sunday morning of January 30, 2000. Charles Mapes was not present to witness the demise of his hotel; as he had died the previous year, on May 13, 1999 in California at age 78.

Unbelievably, the council blew the hotel up with no plans for the future of the property. Now, Renoites are watching hopefully to see if the Reno City Council will create an elegant location that draws people to the heart of town for a new chapter in Reno's history. 

Patty Cafferata is the author of the book, *Mapes Hotel: The History of Reno's Landmark Hotel*, on sale at Sundance Bookstore,

the Nevada Historical Society and Borders. She is also the author of *Lake Mansion: Home to Reno's Founding Families*; *The Goldfield Hotel: Gem of the Desert* and co-authored *Barbara F. Vucanovich: From Nebraska to Congress and Back Again*.

Ms. Cafferata is a life-long Reno Resident, attended her high school Senior Prom in the Sky Room of the Mapes Hotel in 1958. An attorney, she represented the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the lawsuit to prevent the demolition of the Mapes Hotel. She is a former Treasurer of the State of Nevada and a past president of Historic Reno Preservation Society (HRPS).

Historic Maps Online — Next Best Thing

by Kim Henrick

I recently received an exciting email from Linda Newman, the Geoscience and Map Librarian in the Mary B. Ansari Map Library at the University of Nevada, Reno. Linda invites HRPS members to visit UNR's *Nevada in Maps* website. I jumped on the attractive website and within seconds (I have DSL now, obviously), I was immersed in a colorful visual Nevada history tour. Over 500 historic maps and atlases of Nevada (with mining, geologic and topographic themes) were scanned and made available online to map lovers everywhere. These high resolution map images are the next best thing to working with the exquisite but fragile originals.

I found the *Nevada in Maps* website to be extremely user-friendly. Come with me on a few quick tours so you too will get hooked on these incredible maps. First, type this internet address into your computer's internet browser: <http://www.delamare.unr.edu/maps/digitalcollections/nvmaps/> to get to the *Nevada in Maps* website home page. Now select *About the Collections* and read the short introduction, then select *View the Collections* (in the upper right of your screen). Here we go.

Select the second item called *Historic geologic and mining maps and atlases (1848-1950)*.

Next, select *Washoe County* and *GO*. This will bring up 13 thumb-nail sized maps. Browse through them for your own enjoyment, but for this exercise, select the map called *Peavine Copper Mines (1867)*. This map shows a flurry of mining notes and designations on Peavine Mountain. (Note: At the top of each map you'll see directional arrows you can click on to move up, down, right or left on the map, and you'll also see a magnifying glass so you can zoom in (+) on a spot or zoom out (-) for a larger view.) Find Section 12, near the center of the map, and you

might find the note that says, "Springs, surrounded with wild PEA VINES, from which The District takes its name." The map also shows a large area called "Lemmon's Valley," and the rich bird nature study area at "Swan Lake," in the present-day Lemmon Valley area.




This map is called "Washoe Silver Region 1862" from the "Historic geologic and mining maps and atlases (1848-1950) collection." It shows the traditional Comstock area and Washoe area, but it also shows Galena on the upper left.

Courtesy of the Mary B. Ansari Map Library, UNR.

Now, at the extreme top left of your screen, select *home*. (You can do this any time you get lost or just want to start fresh.) Select *View the Collections* again, but this time choose *Plats of Nevada State Lands (1867 to 1927)*. According to Linda, there are over 3,000 historic plat maps now on this site. Read the short introduction and now let's select the plat map for this tour. (To view a plat map you need to know the range and township numbers designated for that area, but for this tour I'll provide the correct numbers to view the plat map

for downtown Reno in 1889.) Where you see *Mount Diablo Meridian plats* on the right of the screen, scroll up and select *Range 19 East*. When that range map appears, scroll down on the left side of the screen and select *Township 19 North*. This map shows the Truckee River running west to east through downtown Reno. Find Section 11 (below the bold name "RENO") at the Virginia Street bridge and you'll see "Lake's Bridge" and "Lake's Hotel," both important structures in the history of Reno. You can find range and township numbers for your own areas of interest by consulting topographical maps and atlases, which are readily available at some libraries and for purchase at some local stores. Select *home* again and you're ready to venture through the rest of Nevada's map history on your own.

Don't forget to visit the collections titled *Nevada History in Maps and Highway maps (1917-2003)*.

You are welcome to download and print these maps, but be sure to give the appropriate credit with wording such as: "This digital map image is from the Mary B. Ansari Map Library, University of Nevada, Reno." Good luck. Enjoy. I'm off to see if any wild PEA VINES still surround the springs on Peavine Mountain. 

All information for this article came from the University of Nevada, Reno, "Nevada in Maps" website. I would like to thank Linda Newman, her staff, and the various Nevada maps archives, for bringing these exciting Nevada atlases and maps to the general public.

Kim Henrick is a member of FootPrints Editorial Staff.

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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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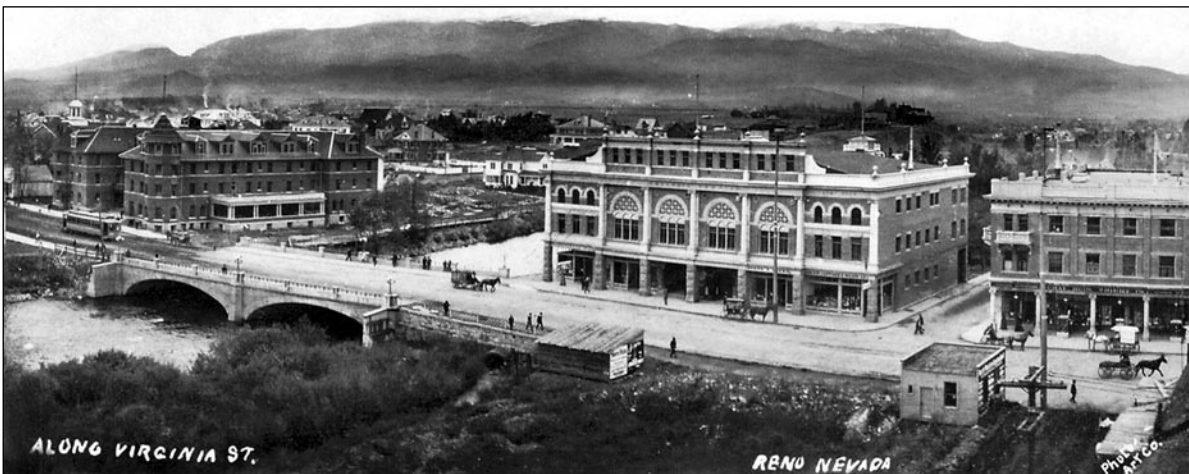
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Virginia Street at the bridge, about 1907. From the left, the old Riverside, the bridge, the Masonic Building, the Mapes Building with Gray Reid Wright Department Store on first floor. Post Office not yet built. Courtesy of the Neal Cobb Collection.



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SPRING PROGRAMS, 2007

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 25:

917 American LaFrance fire truck, first motorized hook and ladder truck for the City of Reno. Jon Wagner, president of the Reno Fire Antique and Classic Apparatus will make a presentation on the history of this vehicle's use with the City of Reno. He'll discuss finding the vehicle still in existence in Portola Valley, California, the reacquisition of the vehicle and the ongoing attempts to restore the vehicle to be put on display for the public as an artifact of Reno's history.

Wednesday, May 23:

Redfield coins. The Reno Coin Club will share with us the history and rarity of a collection of coins found with the Redfield estate.

March 23 through December 14, 2007:

The Nevada State Railroad Museum and The Nevada Historical Society present an exhibition in the Nevada Historical Society's Changing Gallery: The Central Pacific Railroad and the Comstock.

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