



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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The People of Nevada's Early Mental Health System

by Kim Henrick

After Nevada became a state, it did not have an adequate facility for its insane residents, so in 1867 the Secretary of State authorized a contract with the Stockton State Mental Asylum in California to provide for these patients. In mid-1871, the California asylum (which was bursting at its seams) refused to accept any more Nevada residents. That four-year period cost the state of Nevada \$30,000 and the pressures from the press and the public to build our own facility began to mount.

THE POLITICIANS

(COMMISSIONERS): In 1871, the Nevada legislature formed the Board of Commissioners for the Care of the Indigent Insane (Board), which consisted of Governor Lewis R. Bradley, Controller W. W. Hobart, and Treasurer Jerry Schooling. The Board promptly entered into an agreement with Drs. Samuel Langdon and Asa Clark at their newly-established Pacific Asylum at Woodbridge, near Stockton, California. The cost to keep Nevada patients at Woodbridge climbed steadily to \$113,021 for the years 1879 and 1880.

In 1879, the Nevada Legislature selected the site for the asylum at present-day Galletti Way and Glendale Avenue in Sparks and appropriated \$5,000 to prepare the property for the asylum building. Roads, fences and farming areas were developed, and finally in 1881, the legislature authorized an \$80,000 bond to construct the asylum and build a superintendent's house. The Board at this time was made up of current state officers: Governor John H. Kinead, Controller J. F. Hallock, Treasurer L. L. Crockett, and two general members W. Huffaker and W. E. F. Deal.

THE BUILDERS: In March 1881, the Board ordered that a building to accommodate 160 patients be "built of brick, the foundation and basement of broken ashlar with stone sills

and caps for doors and windows." The cost of the building was not to exceed \$60,000. In addition, \$1,500 would be allocated to build a "small wooden Dwelling-house" for the resident physician. On April 30, Andrew F. Mackay and Gotth Haist, both from Virginia City, were selected to design the new asylum building and physician's house, for which they were paid \$1,000. (Some accounts, including the Summer 2009 *FootPrints* article on the asylum, incorrectly state that Morrill J. Curtis designed the building—sorry for the error.) A. F. Mackay was best known for designing and building structures in Virginia City; his Piper-

Beebe House at 2 South A Street still stands today. Gotth Haist was involved with mining on the Comstock and also ran for (but lost) the Nevada surveyor general position during the 1874 election.

Morrill J. Curtis was appointed as building superintendent and paid \$6 per day to supervise the project. He would go on to design Morrill Hall (which opened in 1886), the University of Nevada's first campus building. It is interesting to note that Morrill Hall looks strikingly similar to the 1882 Nevada Insane Asylum building (see Summer 2009 *FootPrints*).

The "Reno Citizens," a group of nine Reno businessmen won the contract bid to build the asylum.

John M. Townley says in his book, *Tough Little Town on the Truckee*, that the group was "headed by C. C. Powning. Seven lower bids ranging from \$52,000 to \$58,000, and submitted by reputable builders, were ignored by the state commission delegated to oversee asylum affairs." In Powning's *Nevada State Journal*, he boasted about his group building the asylum with fiscal responsibility and claimed there would be no overruns. Not only were there overruns, but the building was poorly constructed and began to deteriorate immediately.

THE KEEPERS: "Working with the insane in the nineteenth century meant working in an asylum. No specialty known as



Asylum staff in front of the 1882 building (which was demolished in the 1950s). Dr. Henry Bergstein stands on the highest step (back right) with his son. Photo from late 1890s. Courtesy of Nevada Historical Society.

The People (continued)

Continued from page 1

psychiatry existed (the early psychiatrists were known as *alienists*, reflecting the prevailing view that mental illness was outside our understanding.)" (Steve Luxenberg in *Annie's Ghost*)

In 1881, the Board was given total authority to appoint a resident physician as the superintendent at the salary of \$2,400 a year. Ellen Pillard, in her article, "Nevada's Treatment of the Mentally Ill, 1882-1961," published in the Summer 1979 *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, states "...most decisions about care and treatment provided for the mentally ill have been made by one person, the superintendent. With major decisions being made by the agency head alone, it's no wonder the care of our mentally ill was haphazard at best." Pillard notes other problems with Nevada's early health care system, such as "lack of appropriate oversight," and the fact that there was no "public or independent professional review of asylum practices." Five public investigations of superintendents (brought forth by former employees of the asylum) were conducted by the Board in the early years, and not surprisingly, no charges were brought, nor significant changes made.

We include an abbreviated history of the first four superintendents of Nevada's mental health facility. In the next century, many more superintendents would be appointed, and face their own considerable challenges.

Dr. Alson Dawson was selected as the first superintendent of the Nevada Insane Asylum, which opened on July 1, 1882, to 148 patients transferred from California. Dr. Dawson was a likely selection for the Board as he had assisted them on observational visits to the asylum at Woodbridge and had offered the Board sound recommendations as to the design of the facility—small cottage-style buildings to provide a relaxed, enjoyable environment. The progressive cottage design would not

be implemented at the state hospital for another *ninety years*. Dawson's term was quite short, his last day being April 3, 1883. After only nine months, politics won out and according to Townley, "Less than a year after completion, a longstanding and bitter feud in Washoe County's Republican Party between C. C. Powning and William M. Boardman resulted in the dismissal of the asylum's director, Dr. Alanson [sic] Dawson." Dr. Simeon Bishop ("a Powning crony," according to Townley) was appointed in Dawson's place and "there was no reason for the change except political payoff for Bishop's support in local campaigning." Dr. Dawson went back to a thriving private practice. He would be part of a complaint filed against Dr. Simeon Bishop in May 1887.



*Patients in men's ward of the 1882 building.
Photo taken in the 1940s.
Courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives.*

Dr. Simeon Bishop ran the asylum from April 4, 1883, until February 28, 1891. Dr. Bishop was an enigma. His regular biennial reports to the Board tell of him making the asylum grounds pleasant and removing restraints from patients and yet he readily admitted (in a formal commission investigation in May 1887) to questionable practices such as using hot and cold baths, water from a hose, and electric shock. The complaint against Dr. Bishop was brought by William Thompson and others (some ex-employees as well as Dr. Dawson) and included charges ranging from misappropriating funds to cruelty to patients. Dr. Bishop denied all charges of mismanagement, but admitted

to the listed treatment practices as "appropriate treatment and never as punishment," claiming that his patients always had beneficial results. He was exonerated of all charges, and Dr. Bishop served four more years at the asylum. In Dr. Bishop's defense, he vigorously studied mental institute trends and it can be said that he was not afraid to try new treatment techniques.

Dr. George Thoma took office as superintendent on March 1, 1891. He served until February 1895 and left a record of positive therapeutic ideas involving the diet, soothing baths, regular rest and a cheerful environment. He promoted the use of humane language, changing the words "inmates" to "patients," "paroles" to "leaves," and "furloughs" to "passes." He also recommended (in the 1893 and the 1895 biennial reports), that the asylum name be changed to the Nevada Hospital for the Insane (wanting to remove the prejudicial word "asylum"). Dr. Thoma, a long-time Nevada physician and civic leader died in January 1907.

Dr. Henry Bergstein was the asylum's fourth superintendent, serving from February 1, 1895, through 1898. According to John Marschall's book *Jews in Nevada*, Bergstein contributed to our state's medical profession for half a century. Among many other things, he was instrumental in getting a bill passed in 1875 that prevented the "practice of medicine or surgery by unqualified persons," and he wrote the "Medical History" chapter of the popular book, *The History of Nevada* (Davis).

Bergstein was a controversial character, though, with his personal and political life often overshadowing his professional one. According to Marschall, one year after divorcing his wife Pauline Michelson in 1899, Bergstein married Clare Poor Powning (the widow of Bergstein's good friend C. C. Powning who had died suddenly in October of 1898). His stint as superintendent of the Nevada Hospital for Mental Diseases was also surrounded with controversy. It is interesting to note that Henry Bergstein

The People (continued)

had previously been involved with two complaints filed against Dr. Bishop. On a positive note, Bergstein is credited with ending the practice of allowing “weekend visitors to gawk at the inmates,” and he takes credit for getting the asylum name changed to the Nevada Hospital for Mental Diseases in 1895.

THE KEPT: *“She is so violent that her hands are kept chained into a strong leather muff, yet, only the day before, she succeeded in tearing one of these muffs all to pieces with her teeth and hands. When her hands are free she tears her clothing, made of the strongest cloth into shreds, and demolishes everything within reach.”*

This sad excerpt is about Louisa Piper (wife of John Piper) of Virginia City. The March 1884 account was written by Mary S. Doten (well-known Reno teacher and wife of Gold Hill newspaperman Alf Doten) after she visited the asylum. She praised the “grand building... a credit to the state,” but sadly found Louisa Piper was “one of the worst cases in the institution.” According to Patty Cafferata in her book *Piper’s Opera House*, Louisa was “first admitted to the mental institute in Stockton, California” in 1875. She would then enter the Nevada Insane Asylum three more times and die there in 1900 at the age of 58. The cause of her insanity was listed as “hereditary.” The entry could have included: death of young children, parents with mental illness, lost the family business (Piper’s Opera House) twice to fire, had a blind daughter, and then lost her husband.

Some statistics from the 1800s might be useful here:

- Until 1900, the most common cause of insanity listed was “masturbation.”
- Other causes of insanity listed in the 1879 biennial report were: religion, loss of business, loss of children, indigestion, loss of stocks, hereditary, epilepsy, injury on the head, change of life, jealousy, use of opium, and many others.

- The 1885 biennial report detailed every asylum admission from the first people sent to the California Insane Asylum in Stockton (1867-1871), to those sent to the Pacific Asylum at Woodbridge (1871-1882), and those to our Nevada Asylum through December 24, 1884. It included current patients, those who had been discharged, those who eloped (escaped), and those who died. There were 249 entries on the list and only two of those patients had been born in Nevada (one was 11 years old and one was 14 years old). Most were from Europe and a few were from states in the eastern U.S., Mexico and Canada.



Dormitory-style patient room in the 1882 building. Photo taken in the 1940s. Courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives.

In Patricia Chanslor’s thesis “History of the Nevada State Hospital,” she states, “Early commitments were made by a complaining witness, examining physicians, and a District Court Judge.” So imagine: a spouse, parent, child or neighbor could commit you to an asylum. One could even self-commit, as in the case of 11-year-old Mary Pendegast (also spelled “Prendergast”) from Virginia City, who was listed as the “complaining witness” and was committed on January 10, 1882, by Judge J. A. Stephens of the Second District Court of Storey County. Twenty-seven questions would be answered by the complaining witness to determine pertinent details about the patient’s personal life and information about the supposed mental illness—

questions such as, “Is there homicidal, suicidal, or incendiary disposition?” and, “Been intemperate in the use of ardent spirits, wine, opium, or tobacco in any form?” and “Any relations including grandparents and cousins, been insane?” A review of the early commitment records reveals many that did not include information about an examining physician—inconsistencies were regular.

Chanslor explains that “the care of the past was primarily custodial. The irrational person was hospitalized, not with the idea of helping him return to a normal life, but merely to restrain him from doing harm to himself or others until such time as he appeared to be again rational, or died.”

Although Nevada’s early mental health history was adversely influenced by politics, a lack of adequate public oversight and professional review, a large geographical area (resulting in huge transportation costs), a small population to support those costs, and alienists (like all alienists) who had to invent patient care as they went, all early asylums faced enormous challenges and Nevada’s overall experience, although different, was not unique—it was better than some and worse than others. 

Sources for this article (not identified previously) were various newspaper articles, Nevada Historical Society (NHS) files (primarily those summarized by NHS Docent Arline Laferry), various Nevada biennial reports and statutes, formal investigation transcripts (on Drs. Bergstein and Bishop) from the UNR Special Collections Department, National Park Service website (Piper-Beebe House), and Board of Commissioners meeting minutes (Nevada State Library and Archives).

Kim Henrick is a HRPS member and a member of the HRPS Editorial Board. She is a volunteer at the Nevada Historical Society.

Reno's Historic Wells Avenue Neighborhood

by Barrie Schuster

The Wells Avenue Neighborhood has a unique and colorful history. The Wells Addition, which covers the area from Holcomb Avenue to Wells Avenue, between Ryland and Cheney streets, was developed around 1900 when agricultural land belonging to sheep rancher Sheldon O. Wells was subdivided. Future subdivisions such as Meadow View, McCormick's, Southern and Burke's Additions would eventually come together like pieces of a puzzle to form what is now commonly known as the Wells Avenue Neighborhood. The Virginia & Truckee Railroad ran along Holcomb Avenue until 1950. Holcomb Avenue is the neighborhood's western boundary and trolley cars once ran from downtown, along Moran Street and down Wells Avenue.

The neighborhood's first homes, constructed along Holcomb Avenue and Moran Street, were mostly Queen Anne and Queen Anne cottage styles. By 1910, Arts and Crafts homes with wide porches were more common, and by the 1920s, the classic bungalow was prevalent, often utilizing local brick. The Mission Revival style, which typically features stucco, arches and parapet roof lines, was also popular during the bungalow period. Some of the area's most unique homes are recognized as being built in the vernacular style and add an eclectic touch to the overall character of the neighborhood. By the 1940s, small World War II-era cottages without basements began to appear on the remaining vacant lots between the area's older homes and on blocks of undeveloped land to the southeast.

The 1960s and 70s saw many of the original residents of the Wells Avenue Neighborhood moving to the expanding suburbs, leaving their old homes behind as rentals. During this time, the city rezoned the Wells Addition for high density infill and before long, large apartment buildings began to pop up where homes had been demolished. While the residents were busy fleeing to the suburbs, new and modern shopping

centers lured consumers away from the retail environment of Wells Avenue.

The extreme change that this era brought had an influence on the neighborhood for years, but now the cycle has come full circle and the area's historic homes along with the pedestrian-oriented shopping experience of Wells Avenue are back in style.

Most of the original residents of the Wells Avenue Neighborhood were from the working class and many were from Italian-American families. There were musicians, landscapers, stone masons, teachers, lumber mill workers and small business owners. They made their small



*Nevada Humanities Director Christina Barr was drawn to the Wells Avenue Neighborhood for its architecture and strong sense of community.
Photo courtesy Barrie Schuster.*

homes beautiful and were proud of what they had.

There were a few well-known residents who chose to make the neighborhood their home. Nightclub owner Philip Curti lived in the large brick Mission Revival home at 137 Burns. Jazz musician and El Patio Amusement Company owner Tony Pecetti owned three small brick cottages on top of Wonder Street hill and lived in a one bedroom home in the Wonder Street alley for almost 45 years. Model Dairy founder Charles Brooks lived in the famous two story, wood shingled home at 331 Moran Street and author and educator Buck Wheeler grew up in the home at 911 Wheeler Avenue.

In many ways, the current residents of the neighborhood are full of the same pioneering spirit as the original residents. With the neighborhood's convenient location near downtown and the Truckee River, the Wells Avenue Neighborhood has attracted new owner occupants who have moved into the old bungalows that were rentals for so many decades. The current residents are rebuilding the neighborhood both physically and by reestablishing the community.

Local architects Jack Hawkins and Baron Hershberger and steel artist Paolo Cividino transformed a block on Cheney Street by redesigning and rehabilitating the original brick homes and constructing new, modern, energy-efficient townhomes on the back of the lots. Their design features shared outdoor spaces, a community garden and an aesthetic that combines old and new in an unconventional yet complementary way. Photos and stories of the Cheney Street Project were featured in *Las Vegas Architecture* magazine and *Reno Magazine*. Jack has won numerous awards for his work on this block including two honor awards from the American Institute of Architecture, a national award for kitchen design and a City of Reno property improvement award.

The Wells Avenue Neighborhood Plan, an element of the City of Reno Master Plan, was adopted by the Reno City Council in 2008. It contains important changes for the area including architectural and landscaping requirements to ensure that the character and scale of future infill development is compatible with the established neighborhood. It also contains a Neighborhood Action Plan with steps for increasing public safety and reducing nuisances, increasing the presence of trees, pedestrian amenities, lighting and public art. It addresses the need for a façade improvement plan for Wells Avenue businesses as well as the need for historic preservation.

Reno's Historic Wells Avenue Neighborhood (continued)

A group of eight residents came together after meeting at the public hearings for the Wells Avenue Neighborhood Plan and eventually formed a group called the Wells Addition Neighborhood Group. This group evolved into the Wells Addition Neighborhood Watch that focuses on the neighborhood west of Wells. The group has met once a month for the past two years and now has a large membership. They have embraced community involvement and have been successful at reducing crime and blight by partnering with local law enforcement and code enforcement.

The group worked with the Public Works Department of the City of Reno to create a special assessment district for new sidewalks, have done a lighting study to facilitate the installation of thirteen new streetlights and worked with Reno City staff to legally limit the number of liquor stores allowed within the Neighborhood Plan boundaries. They even have their own newsletter. The West of Wells neighborhood e-newsletter is a collaboration with neighborhood watch members that features current events, meeting updates and history.

Over one hundred trees were planted in the neighborhood by volunteers last spring during the Roots for Wells tree planting project. Grants were obtained to purchase trees that were planted along the residential streets in the landscaping strips. The City of Reno Urban Forestry Commission oversaw this project to ensure the best planting locations and tree species were selected. On April 24, 2010, fifty more trees will be planted.

The International Fiesta on Wells, a family-oriented festival and parade, is in its third year and will happen again on June 13, 2010. The Wells Avenue Merchants and Property Owners Association is one of the most organized and active merchants groups in the city; they have met regularly for many years.

Anyone who has not been down Wells Avenue recently should come see the

transformation. The Reno Little Theater (RLT) is currently constructing their new theater on Pueblo near Wells. El Mundo Latino western and bridal wear store purchased and restored the building on Wells at Arroyo (recently owned by RLT for theater storage) that formerly served as a furniture store and grocery store. Taco John's, located at Cheney and Wells for the past 30 years just constructed a brand new building, reaffirming their long-standing commitment to Wells Avenue. Other new additions to the neighborhood include the Rainshadow Charter School and Paul Mitchell Hair Academy.



*Scott and Rosalie Powell have enjoyed researching the history of their century-old Queen Anne cottage on Moran Street.
Photo courtesy Barrie Schuster.*

We are lucky to have many long-time residents and business owners who can share their firsthand experiences with the neighborhood. This mixture of old and new has helped the residents appreciate the connection of past, present and future. There are numerous businesses that have been open along Wells Avenue for more than 25 years including Rapsallion's, Pettin' Place, Truckee Meadow Herbs, Reno Antiques, Bill Glazer Hair Salon, PJ's Restaurant, Lucke's Saloon, Ryan's Saloon, Corrigan's Pub, Juicy's Hamburgers, Lee Joseph Pool Supply, Mr. Barber and others.

The Wells Avenue Neighborhood is in the process of being surveyed for possible designation as the city's next

conservation district. The City of Reno, through its recently adopted Historic Plan, has identified the steps for this process, which includes an architectural survey of all structures within the boundary of the proposed district. A conservation district does not regulate what a property owner can do with his property, but is intended to recognize an area's unique architecture and history and foster a sense of community pride. The city's only other officially designated conservation district is Powning's Addition.

Members of the Wells Addition Neighborhood Group began the survey last year and continued this spring; the UNR Planning Club will continue to work on it. Architectural Historian Mella Rothwell Harmon will provide training to help the group recognize and identify the various architectural styles found in the area. The survey will focus on a four-by-ten block area that contains some of the neighborhood's most beautiful homes. The proposed boundaries will be Ryland and Vassar from north to south and Holcomb and Locust from west to east. This establishes Wells Avenue as the central axis of the district.

The residents hope to include as much history as possible with the survey. Anyone with any memories, stories or photos of the former residents of the Wells Avenue area are encouraged to contact Barrie Schuster at junipersage@hotmail.com or 775-544-6744 so that the legacy of the Wells Avenue Neighborhood can be preserved for future generations to appreciate.

If you would like to subscribe to the West of Wells neighborhood newsletter, please email dagnyck@gmail.com. 

The author, Barrie Schuster, a local realtor and history enthusiast, moved to the Wells Avenue Neighborhood six years ago.



Historic Preservation Month

May 2010

HRPS Walking Tours

Tour cost is \$10 per person, free to HRPS members. Walks generally last from 1½ to 2 hours. No dogs please. **Reservations are required and space is limited.** Please visit www.historicreno.org or call 747-4478 for information and reservations. HRPS is dedicated to preserving and promoting historic resources in the Truckee Meadows through education, advocacy and leadership.

Saturday,
May 1
10:00 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 4
6:00 p.m.

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

Saturday,
May 8
10:00 a.m.

NEW TOUR - HISTORIC NEVADA STATE HOSPITAL TOUR - Visit the site of Nevada's first state hospital (originally the Nevada Insane Asylum) at Galletti Way and Glendale Avenue in Sparks, one of the state's oldest institutions. The tour will include a look at the remaining Frederic DeLongchamps buildings, a walk through the approximately 106-year-old "Stone House," and a visit to the hospital cemeteries. Park in the circular driveway on the Galletti Way side. Tour guides: Rosie Cevalco and Kim Henrick.

Tuesday,
May 11
4:00 p.m.

INSIDE DELONGCHAMPS' DOWNTOWN - Go behind the scenes in some of downtown's most notable buildings designed by Reno's most celebrated architect, Frederic DeLongchamps. The tour's highlights include the interiors of the historic courthouse, the downtown Post Office and the Vacchina Apartments on California Ave., along with visits to several artist lofts at the Riverside. Meet at the Washoe County Courthouse front steps. Please note that this walk starts at 4:00 p.m. Tour guides: Sharon Honig-Bear and Anne Simone.

Saturday,
May 15
10:00 a.m.

BEYOND THE ARCHES - Witness downtown Reno as it has reinvented itself over 150 years. This tour links the downtown Reno arches with stories of the forces that shaped the town: railroad and mining, immigrants, as a notorious divorce and gambling mecca, and now as a livable cultural hub. Walk in the footsteps of Bill Harrah, Myron Lake, Baby Face Nelson, Frederic DeLongchamps and others. Meet at the National Automobile Museum parking lot, 10 S. Lake St. Tour guide: Sharon Honig-Bear.

Tuesday,
May 18
6:00 p.m.

WELLS AVENUE NEIGHBORHOOD - Take a stroll through a working-class neighborhood along the path of the Wells Avenue streetcar, across the V&T tracks, and past the homes of the "Thoma Street Gang." Meet at Southside School Annex, Sinclair and Liberty Streets. Tour guide: Mark Taxer.

Saturday,
May 22
10:00 a.m.

MONROE STREET - Stroll along Monroe and Joaquin Miller streets, savoring the history and architecture of this lovely residential area south of the Newlands Neighborhood. You will see the Hart House, the Patrick Ranch House, Greystone Castle and other homes. Meet at the corner of Monroe and Manor drives. Tour guides: Elsie Newman and Anne Simone.

Tuesday,
May 25
6:00 p.m.

HISTORIC TRUCKEE RIVER WALK - A relaxing stroll along the Truckee River reveals eclectic architecture grounded in rich political histories and spiced with colorful anecdotes. Meet at McKinley Arts and Cultural Center, 925 Riverside Drive. Tour guide: Joan Collins.

Saturday,
May 29
10:00 a.m.

WESTERN ADDITION - Visit vestiges of one of Reno's earliest residential neighborhoods, dating from the mid-1870s. Hear the stories of its early "movers and shakers," such as Fire Chief George Twaddle, businessman Frank Humphrey and banker Charles Bender. View the varying architectural styles, from the Carpenter Gothic Clifford House to the modest brick bungalows of the Smith-Petersen subdivision. Meet at the Northeast Corner of 5th and Bell Street by JJ's Pie Co. Tour guides: Cindy Ainsworth and Debbie Hinman.

Online Reservations for HRPS Walks Now Available at www.historicreno.org

HRPS Goes to the Movies: *Hilda Crane* A Divorce, Yummy 50s Clothes and the UNR Campus

Once again it's cinema time. HRPS is pleased to present the 1956 romantic drama *Hilda Crane* on Wednesday, May 26. Based on a 1950 Broadway play, the cast includes British actress Jean Simmons and Guy Madison. The film's synopsis is: a divorcée returns to her hometown to find happiness with her ex-boyfriend, only to have the mother-in-law derail their marriage.

Film scenes include the University of Nevada, Reno. Some 100 to 150 students were hired as extras including a very young Senator Richard Bryan. According to Gary DuVal's publication, *Nevada Filmography*, when the filmmakers needed extras to portray the Faculty Wives Club, UNR President Minard Stout suggested they use the actual club members. The ladies spent a day walking back and forth in front of Lincoln Hall for the scene. They donated their salaries as extras to the Wives Club for campus projects.

The online blog site, Clothesaholic, comments about *Hilda Crane*'s marvelous 50s clothes from costume designer Charles Le Maire. The blogger



states "while Hilda's life-choices may have been less than perfect, her wardrobe choices were not. In 1956, the twice divorced Hilda couldn't wear white at wedding number three, so instead she was wearing the most divine pale yellow full-shirted dress with a surplice bodice and dolman sleeves. To die!"

HRPS invites you to check out *Hilda* and all her fabulous 50s clothes (and the 1956 UNR campus) on May 26, 2010. Please note, we have changed our venue this year. The film will be shown at 7:00 p.m., doors open at 6:30 p.m., at Studio on 4th, 432 East 4th Street, Reno.

Tickets for this HRPS fundraiser are \$10 and will be available at the door but reservations are required. Please call HRPS voice mail line at 747-4478 or make a reservation on-line at www.historicreno.org.

HRPS would like to thank Steve Savage and Great Basin Film Society for providing the film and projector and Mike Steedman for the venue use of the Studio on 4th. 

New Partnership Formed with Nevada Humanities

We're pleased to report that Historic Reno Preservation Society was selected as a recent recipient of a Nevada Humanities grant for \$2,203. Funding is designed to meet three objectives:

- to support the 4th Grade Education Project
- to enhance the HRPS website
- to provide research support for HRPS-related projects and the public

Nevada Humanities provides matching grants to support public humanities programs that encourage informed discussion and



critical thinking, and that preserve and make accessible Nevada history and heritage.

That is where HRPS can step in! It is essential to educate about Nevada's history, in a state that is the nation's most "magnetic" state: fully 86% of its adult residents were born in a different state and drawn here. This holds true in Washoe County (population 383,453) too. Guy Rocha, retired Nevada State Archivist, has said, "We are a state of newcomers and have been for quite a while. Much of Nevada's history has all been about people coming from somewhere else." The outreach, tours, newsletters and special events produced by HRPS helps educate our ever-changing population.

HRPS is pleased to enter into this new partnership with Nevada Humanities and looks forward to furthering our mission with this influx of appreciated funding. 

Read about the May Preservation Month Lunch on page 10 and the new McKinley Exhibit on page 12.

The V&T's McKeen Motorcar No. 22

by Lloyd Shanks and Carol Coleman

On Sunday, May 9, 2010, the Nevada State Railroad Museum (NSRM) will have a V&T McKeen Motorcar Celebration on the 100th birthday (to the day) of the delivery of the McKeen and the completion of restoration of the motorcar. See details at <http://museums.nevadaculture.org/dmdocuments/2010McKeen.pdf>.

In the late 1800s, railroad passengers traveling the Reno-Carson City-Minden route on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad (V&T) rode in wooden coach cars pulled by a steam locomotive. This was the customary mode of rail passenger travel throughout the United States at the time. In the early 1900s, a new form of conveyance for rail passengers was invented—the gasoline-powered motorcar. The first of these was a combination of a small trolley car-like coach attached to the front half of a truck (in many cases a model T Ford). Motorcars were intended for use on lightly-traveled branch lines. The advantage of a motorcar was obvious; its gasoline engine could be started (and stopped) in an instant and the car could be operated with only a motorman and conductor/baggage man. To operate a steam train, however, required an engineer, fireman, conductor and brakeman.

In 1905, in response to the demand for more economical passenger cars, William R. McKeen Jr., then Superintendent of Motive Power and Machinery for the Union Pacific Railroad, designed a 55-foot-long, all-steel motorcar powered by a 200-horsepower water-cooled

gasoline engine. The car had an unusual design with a pointed front end and rounded back, which was in keeping with ideas about streamlining at that time. The roof was curved to eliminate sharp angles and the exterior sheet steel of the cars was riveted to the frame. The large windows on both sides of the car were round, just like the portholes on a ship. In 1907, the McKeen Motor Car Company offered the railroads two motorcar lengths, one 55-foot long and one around 70-foot long, each with a 200-horsepower engine. There were approximately 160 McKeen motorcars built and sold between 1905 and 1917. Many were sold to the Union Pacific and the Southern Pacific and the V&T bought a McKeen motorcar in 1910. The V&T's McKeen motorcar No. 22 was 72 feet 9 3/4 inches long, 10 feet 2 3/4 inches wide and 11 feet high. It had a gross weight of 68,000 pounds and was capable of carrying eighty-four passengers in comfort. The seats were upholstered in imitation leather of dark green, the interior walls were a beautiful mahogany and the round "porthole" windows ringed with tightly fitting electro-plated brass frames.

As the automobile became more popular in the 1920s, passenger revenues from the McKeen motorcar began to decline. As such, the V&T began to operate smaller motorcars on its line, reserving the McKeen for specials and extras when a heavy traffic demand was anticipated. Beginning with the stock market crash of October 1929, the V&T decided to remove their McKeen motorcar from passen-



First operation of the McKeen, Minden, NV, 1910.
Photo courtesy Nevada State Railroad Museum.

ger service and it was laid up at the V&T shops in Carson City.

In 1930, the railroad began a campaign to utilize the McKeen as a Railway Post Office (RPO) and Railway Express Agency freight and baggage car. (In 1838, the U.S. Congress had officially designated all railroads in the country as official postal routes. This allowed the transport of mail to all points along their rail lines and the money the companies earned from their government contracts helped offset the costs of their passenger train service. In 1912, the Railway Mail Service standards were revised to require steel cars and No. 22 met this requirement.) Finally, in 1932, the U.S. Post Office Department accepted conversion of the McKeen for its mail services and conversion work was conducted during that summer at the Carson City shops.

By the end of the World War II, the V&T had been in receivership for many years. Since the 1920s, the railroad had faced increased competition from trucks and autos (due to improved highways), and this resulted in steadily declining revenues. These conditions only worsened with the economic hardships of the Great Depression. During the span of World War II, the McKeen No. 22 made fewer and fewer trips between Reno and Minden, partly due to the increased requirement for freight cars and partly due to its age. In 1945, it was in the Carson City shops for an overhaul for the first five months of the year. Spare parts for the car had not been available



The V&T's McKeen motorcar as a mail car.
Photo courtesy Nevada State Railroad Museum.

The V&T's McKeen Motorcar No. 22 (continued)

for more than seventeen years. The car had the last operating McKeen engine in North America.

The year 1945 saw significant changes for our country as well as for No. 22. President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, and was succeeded by Harry Truman; the Japanese surrendered on August 14, 1945; and the McKeen motorcar made its last run on Nevada Day, October 31, 1945. The V&T's McKeen No. 22 had been in service between Reno and Minden from June 2, 1910, until 1945. When it was retired it had logged more than half a million miles during the thirty-five years it was in operation. On August 29, 1946, the motorcar along with its trucks (wheel assemblies) and appointments were scrapped and the body sold to Carson City restaurant operators for the sum of \$1,000. In 1950, the Virginia and Truckee Railroad ceased operation.

When they were "retired," the majority of the McKeen motorcars were scrapped and No. 22 is one of only three or four that still exist. The survival of No. 22 is largely due to the fact that it was sold, taken off its trucks and mounted on a foundation near the corner of Carson and William streets in Carson City where it went into service as Denny's Diner. This diner lasted only a few years and then the

car was moved to various locations as the V&T Diner and the Super Chief Diner. In 1955, it was moved again and was used for offices and storage as part of the Al's Plumbing and Heating operation until 1996.

When the Nevada State Railroad Museum opened in Carson City, the staff started collecting pieces of V&T rolling stock and what remained of the McKeen motorcar was on their wish list. After ten years of negotiation, Al Bernhard of Al's Plumbing and Heating agreed to donate the McKeen to the museum on the condition that it be restored. On April 22, 1996, the car body was moved off its foundation and trucked to the museum, where restoration work began as soon as was practical.

Acquiring adequate funding and locating, and/or fabricating parts necessary for full restoration made this work time consuming, but early in 2009 the exterior restoration was nearly complete and finishing touches on the interior were taking place. The huge 200-horsepower gasoline engine for this car was never located and would have been impractical

to operate in any case. It has been replaced with a modern 200-horsepower Caterpillar diesel engine.

In 2007, co-author Lloyd Shanks was working as a volunteer painter at the museum and was asked to wire brush and prime the underside and frame



*The McKeen motorcar as Denny's Diner ca 1950.
Photo courtesy Nevada State Railroad Museum.*

members of No. 22. This was quite a physical undertaking for a 72-year-old, but like the other painting done there, it became a labor of love. The staff completed painting of the undercarriage and trucks with an attractive shade of green. The car body was spray-painted a dark plum color and highlighted with "VIRGINIA AND TRUCKEE" in gold lettering, a prominent body accent stripe and the number 22. Loren Jahn, another HRPS member, spent many hours painting intricate designs on the inside ceiling of the car. The entire restoration project is one in which the museum and its staff and volunteers should be very proud!

On September 26, 2005, the McKeen motorcar at the Nevada Railroad Museum was added to the National Register of Historic Places, because of its association with nationally significant developments in rail transportation in the early twentieth century. 

Sources for this article were: NSRM *Sagebrush Headlight* Summer 2006 and Winter 2009; www.Carsonpedia.com/McKeen_Motor_Car_No_22; SHPO National Register nomination document; and www.Onlinenevada.org.

Lloyd Shanks is a member of HRPS and the National Automobile Museum. Carol Coleman is Managing Editor of HRPS *FootPrints*.



Above, the V&T's McKeen motorcar prior to restoration, May 2005, photo by Lloyd Shanks; below, the restored McKeen motorcar in 2009, bottom photo courtesy www.aroundcarson.com.

Black Springs: The Legacy of the Westbrooks

by Debbie Hinman

Helen Townsell-Parker stood in her grandfather's tool shed, hands on hips, eyeing the towering stacks of cardboard boxes lining the back wall. Since his death the summer of 2005, she had been dealing with her grief but it was now time to deal with the sad business of sorting through years of accumulated belongings. Assuming that the boxes contained who-knew-what kinds of old papers, bills or receipts, she was half-tempted to just start pitching the boxes into the dumpster. However, she decided she owed it to the memory of her grandparents to sort through the items first—a chore she was facing with some amount of dread. A neighbor helped her move the boxes to the house, where she could tackle them in more comfort.

Helen was totally unprepared for what she found in the dust-covered boxes. She found her grandparents' lives.

Helen's grandparents were Ollie and Helen Westbrook, who settled in Black Springs in 1952 and purchased land with an old shack from realtor J. E. Sweatt. These Black Springs pioneers overcame a lack of water, sewers, paved streets, streetlights and other amenities that Reno residents, just six miles down the road, enjoyed without a thought. They faced racial discrimination and apathy from local government agencies. Yet they were so honored in their community that a major street bears their surname and the community center, the name of Helen Westbrook.

In these boxes were letters, newspaper clippings and photographs telling the story of their lives and by extension, 53 years' worth of Black Springs history. Helen enlisted the help of friends and

family to sort and organize the boxes' contents. It took weeks. "Now what?" Helen asked herself.

With a quiet certainty, Helen realized that this was a story that needed to be told. This was not just her grandparents' story; it was the story of 75 families who fought to be able to turn on a faucet and feel water running over their hands. It was about families who fought to allow their children to play up and down the street, without



Helen Townsell-Parker, granddaughter of Helen and Ollie Westbrook and author of the soon-to-be published book, A Cry for Help. Photo courtesy Cindy Ainsworth.

the threat of having them fall into an open cesspool. It was the story of a man named Sweatt who willingly sold land to blacks, when no one else would, who admitted, "The only color I care about is green." It was the story of organizations like the

League of Women's Voters and local activist Maya Miller who fought for the same rights for these residents as for others in Washoe County. It was the story of a group of Black Springs youths known as POWER (People Organized to Work for Equal Recognition). It was the story of a young VISTA worker named Andy Gordon who was assigned to Black Springs in early 1969 and became a beloved honorary member of the community.

Helen has written the story, entitled *A Cry For Help*, that she completed in January 2010. The title of the book was taken from the title of a poignant and elegantly-written appeal to the County Commission from Ollie Westbrook in the 1960s, seeking assistance for the community. She has been talking to publishers and feels she is close to a contract. On Sunday evening, February 28, she gave a reading at the Hug High School Theater where a supportive crowd reacted appreciatively to selected readings from Helen's book. A donations box was set up in the lobby to assist with publishing costs. There could be no finer tribute to Helen and Ollie Westbrook, who did so much to improve the lives of their family and neighbors, than this labor of love on the part of their granddaughter.

Helen has donated all of the Westbrooks' papers to the Nevada Historical Society.

Helen has set up a foundation in her grandparents' name. If you would like to help or to know more, you can contact her at Westbrookfoundation@yahoo.com.

Debbie Hinman is a HRPS Board Member, HRPS Tour Guide and a member of the HRPS Editorial Staff.

HRPS Preservation Month Luncheon

HRPS would like to invite you to the Historic Preservation Awards Luncheon on May 12, 2010, at 12:00 p.m. at McKinley Arts and Culture Center.

The luncheon follows the City of Reno's Historical Resources Commission (HRC) preservation awards ceremony held at the City Council Chambers at 10:00 a.m. The

awards honor those who have contributed to the preservation and history of Reno. The ceremony and luncheon are held in conjunction with local Preservation Month festivities which are celebrated state and nationwide. Doors for the luncheon will open at McKinley at 11:30 a.m., with the Italian-themed lunch being served at 12:00 p.m. Cost for the

lunch is \$15.00. To RSVP, please call Felvia Belaustegui at 329-0149 by May 7.

Attendees will be able to view a new exhibit at McKinley called *An American Dream in Little Italy: Work, Play and Geography in the Powning Addition*. See details about the exhibit in the Program section on page 12.

HRPS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Join HRPS or 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

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Name(s) _____

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- | | | |
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| ☐ Business Contribution \$50.00 | ☐ Supporting \$100.00 | ☐ HRPS Angel \$250.00 |

Additional donation: _____

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

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

RV 04.07.08/FO-DCD

As of July 1, 2008, HRPS converted its membership to a fiscal year cycle. All memberships will run from July 1 through June 30 of the following year. Have you renewed your membership? Check the website www.historicreno.org for a membership form.



Cindy
Ainsworth, HRPS
Administrator.

From Your HRPS Administrator, Cindy Ainsworth

I am filling in this quarter for HRPS president Felvia Belaustegui who had hip surgery in February 2010. Felvia is on the mend and will be up and leading the Powning Addition Little Italy tour very soon.

And speaking of the luncheon, in conjunction with HRC, HRPS is pleased to once again sponsor the Preservation Awards luncheon on May 12. I am hoping you make plans to attend this special event at McKinley Arts and Culture Center. HRC recognizes home and business owners, historians and preservationists during the month of May for their work in preserving our historic resources. HRPS has partnered with HRC to help celebrate these deserving individuals with this special luncheon.

HRPS is proud to announce that it is the recipient of a Nevada Humanities grant. Grant funding will be used to conduct outreach beyond our membership and connect with larger audiences using technology and media. Funds will be used to help support our newly established 4th Grade History and Preservation Outreach Program, research projects, as well as website content enhancements. HRPS would like to thank board member Sharon Honig-Bear for her work on this grant application.

Member Anne Simone has graciously donated photocopies of the architectural drawings of Frederic DeLongchamps and Edward Parsons from the University of

Nevada's Special Collections archives. Anne researched and identified the building dates and addresses and whether the building was built and if it still exists today. The drawings are located at the HRPS office and will be invaluable for future researchers.

I would like to close by mentioning that the HRPS office at the historic Hawkins House on Court Street is up and running. While not yet open to the public, the office is home to our archives. All copies of *FootPrints* are housed there and a small library of Reno and Nevada publications has been established. We also have cataloged all *FootPrints* articles courtesy of HRPS member Kim Henrick. Thank you Kim!

Let us know if you have any local interest books you would like to donate to our growing library. In the future, HRPS is hoping to organize a research office that will be open to the public

Thank you for your support and I hope to see you on one of our May walking tours.

— Cindy Ainsworth, HRPS Administrator

HRPS would like to thank Felvia for her many years of service as a commissioner on the City of Reno's Historical Resources Commission (HRC). Her term expired this past fall. HRC acts as the official advisor to the City of Reno on matters relating to the preservation of cultural resources and buildings. I served with Felvia on HRC and along with commissioner Paul Ferrari we worked on forming the Powning Conservation District, the first such city district. Felvia was also instrumental in establishing the May Preservation Awards luncheon. Next time you see Felvia, congratulate her on her service to the city.



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SPRING 2010 PROGRAMS

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 28, 7:00 p.m.: Join Kim Henrick and Rosie Cevalco as they share the interesting and under-appreciated history of our state's mental health system. Find out where patients were cared for before the first hospital was built in 1882 and what behaviors were indicative of insanity in the early 1900s, among many other facts.

Wednesday, May 26, 7:00 p.m.: HRPS Goes to the Movies to see *Hilda Crane!* See write-up on page 7. The film will be shown at Studio on 4th, at 432 East 4th Street, Reno. Tickets for this HRPS fundraiser are \$10 and will be available at the door, but reservations are required. Call HRPS voicemail at 747-4478 or make a reservation online at www.historicreno.org.

May 3 to 31, weekdays 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.: View a new exhibit at McKinley called *An American Dream in Little Italy: Work, Play and Geography in the Powning Addition*. The exhibit is being curated for a class project by University of Nevada, Reno history major Drew Gerthoffer. This free exhibit in the Atrium of the McKinley Arts and Culture Center celebrates and explores the Italian-American community in Reno's historic Powning Addition, through the jobs they held, the games they played, and the long-lasting impact they had on the look and feel of this distinct ethnic neighborhood. There will be an opening reception on Thursday, May 6 from 5-7 p.m. Light refreshments will be provided.

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