

Of Airmail and Shamrocks: The Blanchfield Memorial Tradition

by Cindy Ainsworth

Little did I know that in 1997 I would come upon a Reno tale that would mean so much to me for years to come. I was doing research for the exhibit "Roads, Rails, and Runways," for the National Automobile Museum when I discovered the Blanchfield story. I was assigned the aviation section of the local transportation-themed exhibit. During my research at the Nevada Historical Society, I came across various news clippings featuring the story. Wow, I thought. This is an incredible Reno tale.

It had all the elements that interested me: Reno aviation history, a dashing airmail pilot's fateful flight, and the back story about shamrocks coming from Ireland. There were also a few mysteries along the way. More importantly, I found the story very touching and continued to research this remarkable tale about Blanchfield. I too, in a small way, would become a part of the story, but more about that later.

William Francis Blanchfield was born near Courtmacsherry, County Cork, Ireland in December 1895. His adventurous young life started when he joined the British Royal Flying Corps (later the Royal Air Force, RAF) in 1914, where his aviation career flourished. During World War I he was assigned to bomber and reconnaissance squadrons and specialized in flying many different aircraft.

He left the RAF with the rank of Major. Most remarkably, he made it out with barely a scratch.

Although there is no indication on why Blanchfield came to the United States, you can imagine that the job opportunities in America could have been tempting. Two of his siblings, Michael and Marion, also took a chance and came to the United States. He arrived in New



A photo of William F. Blanchfield at his gravesite with a wreath.
Courtesy Cindy Ainsworth.

York from Southampton, England on April 16, 1920. He immediately applied for citizenship and started his airmail career on January 3, 1921.

The Post Office Department officially took control of the airmail on August 12, 1918. You have to remember that those early mail planes had no lights, reliable instruments, radios or navigational aids. The pilots truly flew by the seat of their pants and one surviving pilot called the group "... a suicide club."

Right away it was the long-range goal of the Post Office Department to have a transcontinental route from New York to San Francisco. Reno would be one of the stations on what was the final leg of the route. As a transportation enthusiast, I was impressed that Reno was located on the transcontinental railroad, the Lincoln Highway, and the airmail route. The Omaha to San Francisco segment, including the Elko and Reno, Nevada route, opened on September 8, 1920.

Many improvements were made by the time Blanchfield entered the airmail service in 1921. At first, the mail was carried by train at night and flown by plane during the day. In order to improve the coast-to-coast airmail time, the Post Office's next goal would be to establish night and day flying. Planes were equipped with better navigational equipment, luminescent instruments, and lights. This was all great, but the pilots still had to face the harsh winter conditions.

When Blanchfield arrived in Reno, he was first assigned the tough Reno to San Francisco route. Can you imagine flying over the Sierra Nevada in open cockpit biplanes in a blinding snow storm? Flying "the Hump," as it was called, was just part of the job for Blanchfield. Not any better was the Elko-Reno route to which Blanchfield was later assigned.

Some of the best accounts about these fearless airmail pilots who flew the Elko to San Francisco line were reported by

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newspaper and magazine journalist Jack Bell. A friend of Blanchfield, his adventurous stories about Blanchfield were popular reading in the *Nevada State Journal*. One such tale tells about flying from Elko to Reno in November during a horrendous blizzard. Even though the thermometer in Elko read 16 degrees, Blanchfield, being the devoted airmail pilot, said “the mail should fly.”

Pilots followed the railines during inclement weather. Telegraph operators could then report the roaring sound of the plane’s engines to the various stations along the airmail route. For hours there were no reports of the possible missing Blanchfield. The storm’s hurricane-force winds increased, creating blinding snow throughout northern and central Nevada. Those along the route thought the pilot was lost.

The Reno station wondered where he had crashed since there was no way he could make it through. The field was covered with three feet of snow and gale force wind caused 20-foot-high drifts. Then, a distant engine could be heard. Was it their imagination, or was it actually “Blanch,” as they called him? A roar of the engine brought everyone to their feet. Miraculously, he landed the plane.

Blanchfield was covered with snow and his cockpit instruments were covered in



ice. He was literally frozen to the seat. The crew wrestled the plane into the Reno hanger and tenderly cut the stiffened belts and lifted him out of his seat. After he thawed out, his first words were, “There are 11 sacks of mail ... the mail will go through on time.”

There were many heroic stories and adventures told about the fearless pilot, but it was the story that took place on that summer day on August 1, 1924 that most people are familiar with. Blanchfield had received permission from the airmail division superintendent to fly in tribute to a fallen airmail mechanic. Little did he know that it would be his final flight.

A hero’s funeral for World War I veteran, airmail mechanic, and native Nevadan, Samuel Gerrans, had just taken place at the Masonic Temple on that fateful August day. As the cortege made its way to the Knights of the Pythias Cemetery, Blanchfield took off from the south from the Reno Airmail field, site of the future Washoe County Golf Course. He circled and gained altitude in his DeHaviland

DH-4 in order to obtain position to drop downward over the grave. He circled lower and lower during the service so he could precisely drop the tribute floral wreath near the grave.

Then tragedy struck. He banked the plane and was nearly in position to drop the wreath when all of a sudden, a gust of wind sent the plane into a flat spin and then into a nose-dive. Reverend Brewster Adams was about to commit the body of Gerrans to the grave while the mourners watched the plane in horror.

The plane dove into power lines and the gas tanks exploded as it came to rest against the porch at the Amos McKinley home at 901 Ralston. Many of the funeral spectators ran to the crash scene, and as they approached, they could see the plane and house were engulfed in flames. They realized there was nothing they could do to save Blanchfield.

The fire damaged most of the McKinley home. Mrs. McKinley, her daughter-in-law and another friend escaped without injury. A story is told by the McKinley family that normally the grandchildren were left to be watched by their grandmother while their mother attended a Friday bridge party. Fate played a part that day as the party was cancelled. The plane would have crashed into the window where the children’s crib was located.

The community was in shock. “Big Bill,” as the tall Irishman was known, was well liked in Reno. Losing two airmail employees within a week was hard to believe, especially for Reno’s Field Manager, Frank Caldwell. Grief stricken, he made an official announcement the next day: “Blanchfield has held the esteem and affection of the entire airmail service ...one of the most brilliant fliers in the



1924 photo of the Reno Air Mail pilots and crew. Blanchfield is second from the right. Photo from *Saga of the U.S. Air Mail Service*.

service..." With full military honors, Blanchfield's funeral took place on August 4, 1924.

On August 11, 1924, Mayor E.E. Roberts made a motion at the city council to change the name of the Reno Airmail Field to "Blanchfield." The motion unanimously passed, while the Washoe County board did likewise. Mail pilot Clare K. Vance suggested the spelling with a capital "F," since the pilot was often referred to as "Blanch."

There are many stories surrounding this sad event, but the most touching is the tale of the shamrocks. Like me, Silas E. Ross, a Reno mortician who handled the Blanchfield arrangements, was touched by the pilot's untimely death. He made a point to contact Blanchfield's mother in Ireland to ask for some shamrocks to plant on the grave. She wrote back saying that "shamrocks can only grow in Ireland!"

Much to the surprise of Ross, a box arrived the following year for St. Patrick's Day with sprigs of shamrock. Blanchfield's mother requested that they be placed upon her son's grave. She continued to send the St. Patrick's Day shamrocks for years. One year, the shamrocks did not arrive. Through Irish authorities, Silas found out that Blanchfield's mother had passed away.

Silas was determined to find another relative in Ireland. He tracked down Blanchfield's sister, Mrs. Geraldine Deasey. Except for a few years during World War II, she continued to send the shamrocks. For years, Silas and a Catholic priest would place the shamrocks on the grave and say a prayer for the fallen pilot.

Silas passed away in 1975, and the last mailing of the Irish shamrocks occurred in 1976. Silas' long-time secretary Paula Bell made sure the tradition continued that year. Blanchfield's sister wrote that "the sprig of emerald green be dedicated too, to the memory of Ross for his dedication to the sentimental custom of so many years."



Blanchfield relatives and SADOE president Willie Puchert place shamrock sprigs on the grave, 2013.
Photo taken by Cindy Ainsworth

This is where I jump in. In 1998, I was determined to locate the Blanchfield gravesite and "resume" in a small way, the shamrock tradition. I found the grave at Mountain View Cemetery and then contacted *Reno Gazette Journal's* (RGJ's) Rollan Melton to notify him that I would be out there on St. Patrick's Day to continue the tradition. He wrote a very nice column, and of course he mentioned me.

At noon, a friend and I proudly went up to the cemetery, and in tribute to Big Bill, his dear Irish mother and sister, and Silas Ross, proceeded to place our "fake" Oxalis shamrocks on the gravesite. Much to my surprise, there on the gravesite were shamrocks and a note to me. The note was from a Barbara McKinley Rabenstine. She stated that she and her former boss had been doing the tradition since 1982. Oops. My enthusiasm for history got the best of me that day.

I immediately called Barbara, and she told me her story. She was very gracious and a delightful lady. For years, I continued to meet Barbara at the gravesite. And as they say, here is the rest of the story: It was Barbara and her sister who would have been playing in that crib at the McKinley Ralston home on that fateful day in 1924!

This is just one of many Blanchfield stories that have followed me through the years. I found it amazing that many of

Blanchfield's relatives lived in Nevada and California, and through the years, I have been fortunate to meet many of them. One year we all met at Mountain View to celebrate the tradition. The highlight that day was a tribute flyover by one of Blanchfield's relatives. We were thrilled when green hearts were tossed from the plane's window.

In 2012, the Sons and Daughters of Erin (SADOE) chose to continue the tradition. Now real shamrocks from Courtmacsheery, Ireland once again arrive to be placed on the grave. This year, SADOE celebrated a century of the Blanchfield memorial tradition. Along with Frances Tryon, I was

honored to be chosen as one of the Irish "Persons of the Year."

For me, the tradition has taken on a more personal, symbolic note. On St. Patrick's Day I still place my fake shamrocks on the grave, but now I say a collective prayer to not only William Blanchfield but to family and friends who have also passed. 

Sources for this article: Nevada State Journal and Reno Gazette Journal articles from 1922 through the 2000s. Jack Bell article, "Hooded Messengers of Sky Who Pack Mail for Uncle Sam," Nevada State Journal, December 3, 1922. Notes and stories from Barbara McKinley Rabenstine and research by Pat Martin for SADOE. "A Shamrock for Blanchfield," by Phillip I. Earl. "Airmail: A Brief History," - United States Postal Service website. "Saga of the U.S. Air Mail Service," Air Mail Pioneers, Inc., 1962.

Cindy Ainsworth is a HRPS Past President and Administrator, Manager of HRPS Reno Heritage Fund, President of the Lincoln Highway Association, and 2024 Irish Person of the year awarded by Sons and Daughters of Erin.

Writing on the Walls

New Historical Plaques Present Stories of the MidTown District

by Alicia Barber

Quiz time! In what Reno neighborhood can you find the spot that first introduced the city to Dr. Pepper soft drinks in 1939; where you could once rent one of 972 lockers to store your surplus frozen food; and where for decades a local business tapped its own artesian well to produce 20,000 pounds of ice per day?

You'd be forgiven if the MidTown District wasn't the first neighborhood that sprang to mind. The district is best known today for its popular restaurants, bars, and shops surrounded by charming single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments. But the vibrant district

centered on South Virginia Street has a long and varied history that has long been in the shadows.

Until now. Today, many of those stories are front and center thanks to new plaques installed on fourteen of the district's historic buildings.

A leisurely stroll through the neighborhood now reveals that the building now known as the Melting Pot World Emporium (1049 S. Virginia) opened in 1939 as the Dr. Pepper Bottling Company, that the Ponderosa Meat Company (1264 S. Virginia) had its start in 1947 as Reno Frozen Food Lockers,

and that the artesian well still utilized by Brasserie St. James (901 S. Center) originally supplied the Crystal Springs Ice Company, which completed its Mission-style building back in 1930.

These plaques—hopefully just the first of many—are the product of an innovative collaboration involving the City of Reno, RTC Washoe, the MidTown District organization, and more than a dozen business owners and operators. I had the honor of managing the project, and I hope that sharing the story of how it came about might inspire similar partnerships in the future.



A map of the plaque locations can be found on the MidTown Reno website at www.renomidtown.com/about



The Frohlich-DaCosta Corner and the Giraudo Apartments on South Virginia in Midtown. The Giraudo Apartments building (left), designed by Frederic DeLongchamps, and the Frohlich-DaCosta Corner (right) at the corner of S. Virginia Street and St. Lawrence Avenue both have new historic plaques. Photo by Alicia Barber.

MidTown on our Minds

One of the most exciting aspects of researching Reno's history is how we continue to build on earlier projects to reach people in new and exciting ways. Although not envisioned at the time, the MidTown historical plaques are the culmination of a project begun in 2014, when RTC Washoe was laying the groundwork to reconstruct streets and sidewalks throughout the district and alongside the UNR campus—a project formally called the Virginia Street Bus RAPID Transit Extension Project.

In order to help them better understand and appreciate the corridor's historical aspects, the RTC commissioned my firm to research the area's historic buildings and interview community members who could illuminate what other sources could not. All that material provided the content to both inform the RTC project and to create a Historic Midtown virtual tour for the Reno Historical website and smart phone app (Renohistorical.org), now administered by Historic Reno Preservation Society.

The idea to funnel the same content into a series of historic plaques came up in 2019, as construction of the street project was getting underway. The City of Reno offered funds to help enhance the experience of pedestrians walking through the neighborhood, and together with the RTC and the MidTown organization, came up with a number of possible amenities ranging from bike racks and benches to banner poles. I suggested adding historic

plaques to the list, and happily that was one of the final options selected by the district's Design Review Committee. We were off and running.

Bringing History to the Streets

I have always loved historical plaques and rarely come across one without stopping to take it in. I love their power to focus our gaze on something we might never otherwise have noticed, deepening our knowledge and appreciation of the world around us.

You can find historical markers all over town, but the City of Reno only recently adopted a standard design for its own etched stainless steel plaques. Some examples can be found on the former site of Harolds Club and in front of the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts, both on Virginia Street.

The first step for the MidTown plaque project was deciding where to install as many plaques as the budget would allow. My earlier research gave us a head start, identifying dozens of buildings whose stories could inform and entertain passersby. To guide our selection, we

developed a number of criteria. First, the buildings needed to be at least 50 years old. Their origins and early history needed to be clear, credible, and engaging, with all facts to be verified by the City of Reno's Historical Resources Commission. And finally, we needed the property owners' permission.

With an initial wish list in hand, we forged ahead. And then suddenly, in March 2020, everything came to a stop. As the pandemic descended, business owners and operators in MidTown, as elsewhere, understandably had more pressing concerns. We gently moved the project into hibernation for well over a year. When we dusted it off again, the street's construction was nearly complete and business owners were excited to dive back into a project that could help bring life—and patrons—back to their sidewalks and storefronts.

A Place for Stories

A project like this has many moving parts, all driven by the power of stories to illuminate places we thought we already knew. And what a dynamic place this has been. After all, Virginia Street was established even before the founding of Reno, as a rough wagon road connecting the overland trail and points further north to the boomtown of Virginia City, for which it was named. The buildings that make up what we now call MidTown don't date back quite that far, but they do span well over a century, chronicling every era of Reno's development.

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Project director Alicia Barber with Deane Albright of Brasserie St. James, 901 S. Center Street. Photo by Alicia Barber.

Writing on the Walls

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These fourteen plaques help convey that journey, beginning with the expansion of Reno's residential neighborhoods southward after 1900. Mountain Music Parlor (735 S. Center) operates in a 1909 Craftsman bungalow, long home to Martha Wingfield, the mother of prominent Reno resident, banker, and businessman, George Wingfield. The 1920s bungalow now housing Súp restaurant (669 S. Virginia) once served as both residence and office for George A. Carr, where patrons now dine in an addition designed as Carr's dental office by architect Frederic DeLongchamps. Further south, Miguel's Mexican Food (1415 S. Virginia) thrives in a converted 1920s home where Miguel Ribera opened his first namesake restaurant in 1959.

Some of the district's first commercial buildings, most constructed of Reno's signature brick, opened in the 1920s as family-owned grocery stores, shops, and restaurants. The corner of attached buildings anchored by Stella Coffee Company (701 S. Virginia) began in 1926 with a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, followed in 1941 by a second building that opened as Heric's Doughnut Shop.

Just next door is Shea's Tavern (715-719 S. Virginia), designed by Frederic DeLongchamps in 1928 as the Giraudo Apartments. Early ground-floor tenants

included grocers, shops, and, for decades, the popular Penguin's Ice Cream. The family-owned Sewell's Supermarket opened in 1959 in the building now known as Statewide Lighting (1311 S. Virginia). And Ace Hardware (1215 S. Virginia) burst onto the scene in 1948 as a five-and-dime store called Sprouse-Reitz.

The district has long been known for innovation and entrepreneurship. James A. Barnes opened his pioneering Barnes Radio Service in the spacious 1940 structure where you can now find Lasting Dose Tattoo & Art Collective and Extra Touch Upholstery (888 S. Virginia). As the automobile age dawned, Nevada Auto Service took advantage of the corridor's role as the north-south highway through town, opening in 1929 at the home of the current music venue Cypress (761 S. Virginia).

One of Reno's most venerated businesses, Savage and Son, moved out of downtown and into a new building they had constructed in 1940, now Michael's Deli and College Cyclery (628 S. Virginia). Tradition and family pride also reign at Peerless Cleaners (698 Forest), a business in continuous operation since its opening in 1946.

Rounding out this diverse collection are the Ponderosa Meat Company, Crystal Springs Ice Company, and Dr. Pepper Bottling Company, whose fascinating stories, along with all the others, bring enormous depth and richness to a landscape that has endured even while



Elmer Figueroa using a mockup to determine where to place the historic plaque at Miguel's Mexican Food.
Photo by Alicia Barber.

undergoing continuous transformation.

Of course, the MidTown District boasts many more historic buildings than these, and it is my hope that even more of them (and others throughout town) can be commemorated with future plaques. By bringing these stories directly to our streetscapes, they can serve a vital role, reinforcing our communal appreciation for these lovely historic buildings and for the generations of people who built, worked, and lived in them, in whose footsteps we are privileged to walk.

A map of the locations of the MidTown historical plaques can be found on the MidTown District website at renomidtown.com/about. And be sure to check out the full Historic MidTown virtual tour on Reno Historical at renohistorical.org/tours.

Writer and historian Alicia Barber, PhD, is the owner of the historical consulting firm Stories in Place LLC and the manager and editor of the Reno Historical website and smart phone app.



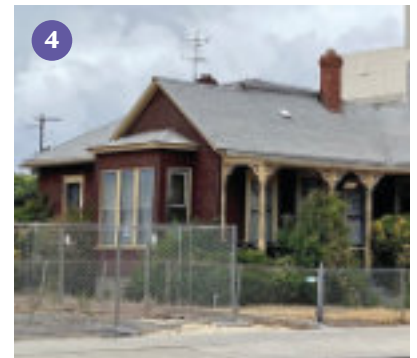
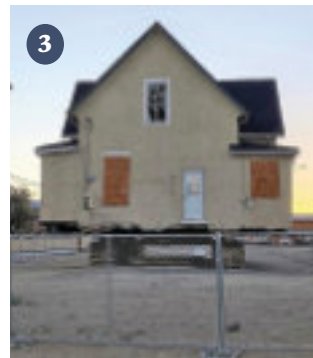
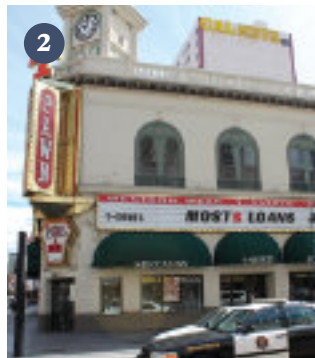
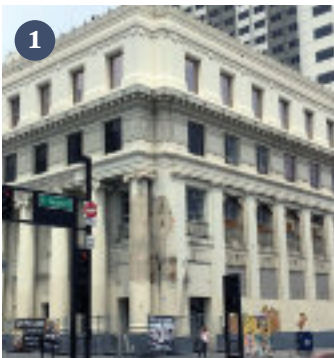
The plaque outside Mountain Music Parlor at 735 S. Center Street.
Photo by Alicia Barber.



HRPS presents this list of historic properties not to point fingers or to raise alarms, but to generate awareness and appreciation. We want their owners, whether public or private, to know that we care about these places and that we consider them highly significant to Reno's history and worthy of preservation. Lastly, we want to offer our support to help ensure that they can remain safe and protected for years to come. You can find full entries for each property listed below on Reno Historical at <https://renohistorical.org/>.

1. **Reno National Bank (1915)**, 206 N. Virginia Street
2. **I.O.O.F. Lodge/Reno Savings Bank (1877)**, 195 N. Virginia Street
3. **Nystrom Guest House (1875)**, Formerly in 300-block on Ralston Street, now up on blocks off 4th Street, between Washington and Vine Streets

4. **Benham-Beltz House (likely 1868/1869)**, 347 West Street, to be purchased from Jacobs Entertainment for \$1 upon condition of moving and preserving the home. Contact Chris Manzanec: christopher@jacobsinvestmentsinc.com
5. **Piazzo Building (1925)**, 354 N. Virginia Street
6. **Southern Pacific Railroad Depot (1926)**, 135 E. Commercial Row
7. **Freight House (1931)**, North side of Greater Nevada Field on Evans Avenue
8. **Regina Apartments (1941)**, 260 Island Avenue
9. **First Church of Christ, Scientist/Lear Theater (1939)**, 501 Riverside Drive
10. **El Reno Apartment Homes (1937)**, 1461 Lander Street





Historic Reno Preservation Society and Artown

Historic Walking Tours



The Historic Walking Tours are HRPS' longest running educational service. Come celebrate their 27th anniversary with this mix of oldies but goodies, revised and resurrected tours. **Reservations required. Space is limited.** If the tour is full, you will be waitlisted and emailed if space opens. Please cancel if you make a reservation and cannot attend. Visit the HRPS website, www.historicreno.org, for reservations.

Tours are free for members and \$10 for nonmembers. **Consider membership to save money.** For example, three tours are \$30, whereas a membership is only \$25 and earns free access to all the tours. Visit the website to become a member. Please arrive 15 minutes early to check in and sign the required liability waiver. Walks generally last 1.5 to 2 hours. Wear comfortable shoes, a hat, sunglasses and bring a water bottle. **No dogs or baby strollers allowed due to space and safety reasons.** Some neighborhoods have uneven surfaces and sidewalk barriers which may make walking difficult for those with mobility issues. Bathrooms are not always available along the routes.

Tuesday
July 2
6 pm

COUNTRY CLUB ACRES – With the growing popularity of the Washoe Golf Course and the newly created Virginia Lake, the early 1940s saw the rise of a new neighborhood created for suburban living. The sale of lots rather than homes ensured an eclectic mix of architectural styles and homes of all sizes. Hear about the original Reno Golf Club, Reno's first airfield, and the luxurious, ill-fated Country Club. Meet at the corner of Bonnie Briar Place and Lakeside Drive. **Tour guide: Debbie Hinman**



Saturday
July 6
9 am

TRUCKEE RIVER ALL THE TIME – Learn about Reno's relationship with the Truckee River over time, hear about the great floods and of Reno's architectural heritage, listen to the Voice of the City, observe how the HRPS' walks in July relate to the Truckee and the history of Reno. Meet at the Wild River Grille at the Riverside Artists' Lofts, 17 South Virginia Street. **Tour guides: Jim & Sue Smith and Bradley Carlson**



Tuesday
July 9
6 pm

POWNING'S ADDITION II – Discover one of Reno's earliest and most delightful vernacular neighborhoods, predominantly settled by Northern Italian immigrants. This neighborhood is the first City of Reno Conservation District. Meet in front of the McKinley Arts & Culture Center, 925 Riverside Drive. **Tour guides: Amy Burton and Stasia Mata**



Saturday
July 13
9 am

MANSIONS ON THE BLUFF/CALIFORNIA – Walk past historic Reno homes located on California Avenue. Learn about the senators and merchants who made early Reno *The Biggest Little City in the World*. Be sure to bring water and wear comfortable shoes for this uphill tour. Meet at the corner of Nixon and California Avenues. **Tour guide: Matt Magaletti**



Tuesday
July 16
6 pm

MANSIONS ON THE BLUFF/CALIFORNIA II – This tour was cancelled last year due to street construction, so it is being offered twice in 2024. Walk past historic Reno homes located on California Avenue. Learn about the senators and merchants who made early Reno *The Biggest Little City in the World*. Be sure to bring water and wear comfortable shoes for this uphill tour. Meet at the corner of Nixon and California. **Tour guide: Matt Magaletti**



Saturday
July 20
9 am

LITERARY RENO – Reno, “the city of trembling leaves,” is a mythical magnet for outsider writers and characters: divorcees, misfits, outcasts and seekers. Let your imagination and your feet roam Reno’s downtown streets used as settings for traditional writers such as Will James, Robert Laxalt, and Joanne deLongchamps. Then walk the haunts of contemporary authors like Michael Branch, Bernie Schopen, Willie Vlautin, and Susan Palwick. A bibliography will be provided. Meet on the north side of the Riverside Artists’ Lofts, 17 South Virginia Street.

Tour guides: Anne Benoit and Amy Burton



Tuesday
July 23
6 pm

DELONGCHAMPS RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE – This walk takes you on a neighborhood tour of homes both large and small designed by Reno’s notable architect Frederic DeLongchamps. Hear about his life and what made him unique to this area. Meet outside the Giraud/Hardy House, also known as Arte Italia, 442 Flint Street. **Tour guide: David Sholtz**



Saturday
July 27
9 am

HISTORIC NEVADA STATE HOSPITAL – Visit the site of Nevada’s first state hospital (originally the Nevada Insane Asylum) at Galetti 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 by the approximately 100-year-old Stone House, and a visit to the hospital cemeteries. Park in the circular driveway on the Galetti Way side. Meet at the Nevada Historical Marker. **Tour guide: Brett Banks**



Sunday
July 28
9 am

RENO PARKS’ HISTORIES BY BIKE – Please note this tour is held on Sunday. Enjoy a leisurely seven-mile (one-way) bike ride on the Tahoe-Pyramid Trail, with frequent stops, to discover the rich history of Reno parks along the Truckee River. Learn about pioneer settlers and more recent residents including Mayberry, Dorostkar, Caughlin, Newland and Wingfield, who have been immortalized in Reno’s history through their contributions to its city’s parks. Meet at Idlewild Park in front of the California Building, 75 Cowan Drive. The tour will conclude at Mayberry Park, 101 Woodland Ave. Bring your own bike and helmet (required). **Tour guide: Jill Richardson**



Tuesday
July 30
6 pm

MONROE STREET – Savor the history of this lovely residential area south of the Newlands Neighborhood. Stroll along Monroe and Joaquin Miller Streets. Included are the Sewell, Hart, and Patrick Ranch houses, Greystone Castle, the Jack Dempsey house, and other interesting properties. Meet at the corner of Monroe and Manor Drive. **Tour guide: Amy Burton**



Other Artown Offerings in History and Culture

In Reno, July is Artown. Be sure to check out the offerings at <https://artown.org/>. You will find On-Going Exhibits & Events, Workshops & Summer Camps, and a Calendar of programs for you to enjoy.

- On Wednesdays in July, at 1:00 pm, the Lake Mansion, 250 Court Street offers guided tours (pre-registration required).
- On Saturdays in July, at 10:00 am and 1:00 pm, Nevada Historical Society, 1650 N. Virginia, gives talks and the museum galleries are open.
- On Saturday July 20, starting at 9:00 am, enjoy the Reno Basque Festival at McKinley Arts & Culture Center, 925 Riverside Drive, in Reno.
- In July, Sparks Heritage Museum, 814 Victorian in Sparks is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Tours of the train (engine, business car, caboose) are offered at 1:00, 2:00, and 3:00 pm.

Early Pioneers in the Truckee Meadows: Peleg Brown

by Diane Crowne

My interest in Truckee Meadows history began in 2009, when as an avid hiker with The Osher Life Long Learning Institute (OLLI), I began little trailside talks about the pioneers who formerly owned the land where favorite trails were located. Because of the interest generated, I began spending time in the Nevada Historical Society's research library, where I discovered old family files and newspaper reports of local pioneers.

We know a lot of the details about Peleg's life in 1857 as he was preparing to leave Rhode Island with his brother Joshua. We know what was going through his mind on the long journey west. We have a pretty good idea what he was thinking, and what he was doing as he arrived in the Utah territory.

We know these things because of a mysterious event some time and some place in Cleveland, Ohio, where a crew of men were tearing down a very old house. To the surprise of the workers, there within the walls of that old house was a box of letters. The letters were written by Peleg Brown and his two brothers to his father and mother in Rhode Island, telling them day by day the details of his adventure west. The mystery is that no one seems to know how the letters got to where they were found nor who put them in that wall. By some lucky chance, the Nevada Historical Society in Reno now possesses them.

Peleg Brown's lineage goes back well before the settlement of the place we call Rhode Island where Peleg Brown was born. It was called Providence Plantation in 1639 when Peleg's ancestors signed the original Compact creating that settlement. Peleg's impressive family story is laid out in a history of Rhode Island entitled *Old Families and Representative Men of Rhode Island Vol III*, and *Lineages of the Sons and Daughters of the Pilgrims Vol II*. These books were written in 1908 and in one of them, Peleg Brown's birth was the final entry. His father's name was Pardon Brown and his mother was Sara Sanford. He had siblings: Joshua, James, George, Pardon Jr, and Lydia.



Courtesy of Nevada Historical Society: MSNC 572, Brown family papers, Box 1, Folder 11.

Washoe Valley and Truckee Meadows had been settled by Mormons as early as 1846, but by the time the Browns arrived, Brigham Young had called all Mormons back to defend Salt Lake City. In 1857, Salt Lake City was a thriving Mormon village and stopover for migrants in need of supplies. Its citizens were expecting a raid by the United States government under President Polk, who had declared that he would eliminate "all those polygamous Mormons." It was an anticipated "war" that never happened.

Many of the prime pieces of arable land on the eastern slope of the Sierras suddenly became available. When called back to the Great Salt Lake, the Truckee Meadows and Washoe Valley Mormons sold their homesteads, sawmills and pastures for pennies on the dollar, and

often traded not for money, which was in short supply, but for supplies to carry them east across the Great Basin. They were none too happy about it.

As the story of Peleg Brown's journey west unfolds through his 1857 letters home, we find him first negotiating with cattle salesmen in Kentucky. He is pleased to have found a source of prime, well-bred cattle, and he makes sure that his father, who loaned him the money, is informed of the quality and number of these purchases. He bought 211 head of fine cattle. Only 170 survived the arduous journey across the plains and through the Great Basin to the Utah territory.

Peleg was 21 years old and his older brother, Joshua, was 29 when they came into Washoe Valley in September 1857. In the spring of 1858, Peleg moved his cattle to the Truckee Meadows not far from the great hot springs and towering geysers (now called Steamboat Springs).

In a letter to his father, Peleg gives us the amounts of cash and equivalents needed to pay for the properties he and his brother purchased from the fleeing Mormons. Joshua paid \$250 for three parcels of land amounting to about 1,000 acres;

one parcel in Washoe Valley and two in Truckee Meadows. Peleg bought Truckee Meadows land for \$6.50 and 12 heifers which he mentioned in a July 28, 1858 letter.

In his first spring season in the Truckee Meadows, Peleg set about planting a large garden that must have been fruitful because he tells us that he drove his wagon all the way to Downieville, a mining town about 98 miles from the Truckee Meadows in California, where he sold his first harvest.

He may have gotten information about the mining town of Downieville from Orrin C. Ross who operated a freight business out of Downieville, which he later moved to Glendale on the Truckee River.

In Peleg's letters, he tells us he made that first long trip to Downieville in about a week. Other more local travels were also long and arduous. His letters tell us that he had to drive his wagon 45 miles to Genoa to use a gristmill and to buy seed grain, beans, coffee, milk, and butter. His best meals while in Genoa were Lahontan trout, venison, and wild sheep, most likely harvested by Paiutes or Washoe natives. The trip to Genoa took him six days round trip.

Peleg was alone on all his early trips because his brother, Joshua, had left for Rhode Island to eventually bring his wife and children west. Peleg complained about his loneliness that first year. No books, no newspapers, no women, no Joshua! He lost cattle to Native Americans. He tells us that he used to tie his dog, Roam, to the front door to scare off the indigenous people. Peleg was also alone in his second year in the Truckee Meadows. His brother had become ill while on his journey back west, and their father had to leave Rhode Island to rescue his son somewhere in the Kansas territory.

By 1860, there were only 97 men, 8 women, and 22 dwellings in the Truckee

Meadows. There was an Indian uprising in 1860 that kept Peleg Brown in Genoa longer than he may have wanted to stay that year.

The winter of 1858-59 was a particularly hard winter. It was reported that many indigenous people died of starvation and bitter cold. The following winter of 1859-60 was another one of unprecedented severity. In an article in *The Territorial Enterprise*, Isaac Roop mentions that "the natives of Truckee Meadows were freezing and starving to death by the



The homestead of G.W. Huffaker, on Henness Pass Road, (later known as Virginia Street) where bachelors often gathered. Courtesy Nevada Historical Society WA-05226

scores." Attempts to feed some were made by the pioneers, but wary Indians had known about the poison meat set out by settlers to kill wolves; they refused the offers.

Another Truckee Meadows pioneer, G.W. Huffaker, had come into the area in 1858. After a time, Huffaker gathered all the lonely bachelors to meet together at his homestead where they played music, read plays, and shared news of home from newspapers that were hoary with age and carried west by travelers to California. Huffaker's guests also ran horse races up and down the Henness Pass Road (that much later became Virginia Street.). Peleg Brown was one of Huffaker's early guests which certainly eased some of his loneliness. Huffaker's gatherings later became known as the Athenian Literary Society.

Peleg had planted a five-acre garden in

the Spring of 1859, much larger than his first, probably anticipating a more bountiful income in Downieville. But he didn't have to travel to dispose of his harvest. Boarding and feeding the avalanche of miners and their animals headed to the Virginia City hills became the original source of Peleg Brown's wealth. Fortunately, by this time Peleg's brother, Joshua, and his younger brother, Pardon Jr., had managed to get to the Truckee Meadows, and together the three brothers ran a room and board and animal feeding operation. Feeding gold seekers was lucrative.

For twenty years the Comstock not only set the industry standard for invention and success, a legendary international status, but also created a workforce that at times exceeded 5,000 people.

During that time, Peleg engaged in several enterprises that enhanced his wealth: gathering tolls on the road to Virginia City; selling wood from one of his land acquisitions; building an irrigation canal; and even originating the use of alfalfa with his neighbor, Irvin Crane, which created a cattle feeding

operation in the Truckee Meadows that sustained his income long after the excitement of the Comstock ebbed. Peleg also operated a stage station that later became a train station for the V&T.

Peleg's life changed radically for the better after he met and married Elizabeth Gill of Fort Wayne, Indiana. They met in Washoe City, and were married there in 1863. Then a very wealthy man, Peleg harvested lumber from his own wood lot up Cox canyon, and with an added \$4,000, he built a lovely Greek Revival house, which was rare for its time, and certainly a monument to his financial success. It was located eight miles south of the Truckee River on the old Virginia Road. His holdings included 620 acres of land in south Reno.

To Elizabeth Gill and Peleg Brown were

continued on page 12

Peleg Brown

continued from page 11

born five children: Albert, Julia (who died at age 6), Laura, Charles, and Nellie.

Along with wealth and marriage, as they say, comes responsibility, and Peleg Brown was up to the task. When Mormon pioneers were called back to The Great Salt Lake, in 1857, they took their theocratic government with them. In the absence of any vestiges of government or laws or enforcement, what transpired was the rule of law created by vigilantes and sometimes disorganized, unruly mobs. Barns owned by Truckee Meadow's pioneer landowners were numbered. When an issue came up, a circuit rider would visit known vigilantes' homes and call out a number, which indicated the location of a vigilante meeting. Among the issues that were resolved by vigilante groups were a matter of squatters on a ranchers' land or the theft of cattle. It was reported among Truckee Meadow ranchers that the era of vigilante law was one of peace, and that none of the perpetrators "were ever awakened by the leaden messenger of death from their morning slumbering into the realms of the dark unknown," to use an expression typical of newsman of the Comstock silver mining era. Peleg Brown was most likely to have been among those anonymous "peacekeepers."

Between 1867 and 1876, Peleg Brown was

active in newly formed governmental affairs: he served on a grand jury; was a delegate to the Republican State Convention; was an election inspector; won a seat on the county commission; was a juror for a circuit court; was a charter member of the Agriculture, Mining and Mechanics Society in 1874; and served again as a Republican delegate in 1876. No one was more surprised than Peleg Brown when he was first asked "to make laws," as he expressed it to his family in one of his letters home. But as history must record it, Peleg was merely following a long-established line of family values that began in 1639 with his ancestors' establishment of the Rhode Island Plantation. Adding to his accomplishments, Peleg Brown donated land for a school.

Peleg Brown died young, too young. He had just passed his forty-second birthday. The attending physician, Dr. Berman, reported in the *Reno Evening Gazette* on September 9, 1878 that Peleg Brown had "probably died of Lung and Heart disease."

Many years after his death, Peleg's granddaughter and the daughter of Albert Brown, Dorris B. Reed, a Reno school teacher, revealed that he had died of a knife wound delivered a year before his death. We'll never know the circumstances of that knife wound nor whether it may have been the ultimate cause of Peleg Brown's early death. Ms. Reed did not give details, but it would seem likely in those rough, pioneering times before penicillin, or any antibiotics, that the knife that

punctured Peleg's body may have delivered a bacterial load that might have given Peleg sepsis or some other slow-moving, lethal infection.

And so, from whatever curious cause, the year 1878 marked the end to one of Truckee Meadows' pioneer's life, and an illustrious life at that. Peleg Brown brought to the Truckee Meadows a legacy of outstanding,

ambitious, accomplished, colonial pioneering spirit dating to the era of this nation's founding fathers.

The old Peleg Brown school building is long gone, but the name of a local elementary school in South Reno lives on. The Peleg Brown 1864 home still exists. It is located on Old 395 in South Reno and is occupied by the Damonte family, whose predecessor, Louis Damonte, bought the property in 1940 after the death of Laura Wilcox, who was Peleg and Elizabeth's oldest child. In 1994, the property qualified for the National Register of Historic Places based on three criteria: its association with the development of agriculture and irrigation in 19th century Truckee Meadows; its association with Peleg Brown, a locally prominent rancher who was among the first to introduce alfalfa to the region; and its being a rare example of Greek Revival architecture in Nevada. The property now consists of 4.5 acres and five buildings. 

Sources I perused. First, I'd thank the Nevada Historical Society and the UNR Special Collections for leading me to resources. The letters of Peleg Brown and his brothers. Myra Saur Ratay wrote "Pioneers of the Ponderosa" and a history of Washoe Valley available in the Washoe Public Library. Thompson and West, 1881, for general impressions. LDS Genealogical resources for Brown family genealogy. Al Doten's writing. Four Virginia City 1864 newspapers: The Enterprise, the Union, the old Plute and the Gold Hill Daily News. N.A. Hummel "General History and Resources of Washoe County", 1888. George Peckham's newspaper column in the Reno Gazette. Many more.

Diane Crowne's early education was in Maryland. In California she earned her B.A. at the University of California Long Beach and well after the age of 50, she pursued a Master's Degree in East Asian Medicine in Washington State. Life Long Learning is her fundamental passion.



The family of Peleg Brown with Peleg on the left, son Albert, wife Elizabeth, and daughter Laura.
Courtesy Nevada Historical Society MSNC 572.

HRPS Lifetime Member Joyce Cox Passes

by Cindy Ainsworth

On Tuesday, May 14, 2024, HRPS Lifetime member Joyce Cox passed away at the age of 75 from brain cancer.

Joyce was born in Baker City, Oregon on August 12, 1948. She was technically the youngest of three sisters, being one minute younger than her twin sister.

Joyce graduated from Baker High School and then Oregon State University where she met her future husband, Greg Cox, now deceased. They have one son, Alex.

Joyce spent most of her professional career as a research librarian. She has lived in Washoe County off and on since 1974, working in libraries in Nevada, California, and Washington State.

Uncomfortable with retirement life, she used her passion for history and storytelling and turned to writing. She was a prolific writer and wrote several articles and books on the history of Nevada, including *Washoe County* (2011) and *Sparks* (2017) for



Arcadia Publishing. More recently she wrote, *Behind the Arch: The Story of Reno, Nevada's Unique Chamber of Commerce and the Making of "The Biggest Little City in the World."* This latest book was the subject of a Nevada Historical Society's Writer's Wednesday seminar. Joyce was the recipient of the 2023 Nevada Women's History Project (NWHP) Women of Achievement award. She was very proud of her books and her work.

Outside of writing, Joyce was a fantastic cook who reveled in trying new recipes and whose kitchen was a veritable library of cookbooks. She was an avid reader who went to the library weekly. When she wasn't reading or cooking, she joined her

husband Greg on sailing adventures and traveling.

Joyce was an amazing woman who led an amazing life. We will all miss her kindness, her humor, and her infectious smile.

Donations in Joyce's name may be made to the Nevada Historical Society, 1650 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89503, Attention: Catherine Magee 

Seven HRPS Past Presidents in 2024



Seven HRPS Past Presidents at the 25th Anniversary Celebration in April 2024 (See President's Message on page 14): Pat Ferraro Klos, Cindy Ainsworth, Kathryn Wishart, Joan Dyer, Sharon Honig-Bear, Byllie Andrews, and Carol Coleman.

A Message From Your HRPS President

Hello HRPS Members
and Friends,

Our 25th Anniversary Gala was a huge success, bringing together seven of our nine past presidents in a celebration of our founding in 1997 and becoming officially recognized as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in 1999. The setting, the National Automobile Museum, couldn't have been a more fitting place to reflect on the importance of remembering and preserving our history.

The evening kicked off with a private reception for Lifetime Members in honor of outgoing president, Carol Coleman. With a collage of historic Reno photos rotating on a giant screen in the background, and music from the 1940s playing, attendees enjoyed canapes and sparkling wine surrounded by a selection of specialty motorcycles and autos.

City of Reno Vice Mayor, Naomi Duerr, who is liaison to the Historical Resources Commission, read a proclamation from the City of Reno, and shared the importance of historic preservation in her own life.

Former HRPS president and founder of the Lifetime Members, Sharon Honig-Bear, described the Lifetime Membership as a way to provide long-term support for HRPS and also encouraged Lifetime Members to continue their generosity.

The main event followed, with attendees given free range of the museum to visit the various galleries, drinks and appetizers in hand, and to peruse the silent auction tables. The highlight of the auction was dinner for six at the former Redfield Mansion! Museum streets were filled with the joyous sounds of friends reconnecting and renewing old acquaintances.

The evening concluded with a program in the Museum Theater. As attendees filtered in to find a seat and pick up a bite of dessert and coffee, they were treated to another rotating video collage of vintage



Reno postcards. Both displays were created by longtime HRPS member, Debbie Hinman.

Debbie treated attendees to a clever history of the origins of HRPS, then invited Founding President Pat Ferraro Klos to the stage to make a few remarks. Pat was then joined by past presidents Cindy Ainsworth, Kathryn Wishart, Joan Dyer, Byllie Andrews, Sharon Honig-Bear, and Carol Coleman. Each was presented with a bouquet of flowers and rousing applause in gratitude for their leadership. In addition, Carol was presented with an original watercolor painting of the Lear building as it would have looked in the 1930s, painted by local artist, Loren Jahn. Loren also made a personal gift of a painting to Pat Klos, his former teacher and mentor, saying it was she who inspired him to take an interest in history. Unable to attend were past presidents Patty Cafferata and Felvia Belastegui, but they were honored in spirit.

Joan Dyer then asked for a moment to remind attendees that the legendary Harrah's automobile collection almost went away when Bill Harrah died. His estate intended to liquidate his entire collection of several hundred vintage and specialty cars. Those of us who grew up visiting the collection off of Glendale Avenue or delighting in their display on Virginia Street during the annual Rodeo Parade (long before Hot August Nights!),

know what a loss that would have been. Thanks to Joan and her late husband, Lloyd Dyer, along with other community supporters, a foundation was formed, and some 100 automobiles were donated to create the National Automobile Museum, The Harrah's Automobile Collection.

As I stood on stage alongside my predecessors and looked out into the audience, I was struck by the vast amount of living memory represented in that room. It's not enough to preserve our historic buildings and homes, unless we also preserve the memories of the people and events that happened there, and keep those memories alive by sharing them.

And isn't that what HRPS does best? Through our feature stories in *FootPrints*, our summer walking tours, our Harvest of Homes Tour, and our monthly speaker programs, we strive to keep those stories alive, passing them along from old timers to newcomers and younger generations alike.

We owe a great debt of thanks to Pat Klos and other founding members, and to those leaders who took the helm to keep the organization moving forward. Your membership dues, donations, and participation in our events is a vote for keeping our history alive. Thank you!

LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

We are pleased to welcome Deborah Nelson as a new Lifetime Member. HRPS Past President Kathryn Wishart also is a new Lifetime Member. Deborah and Kathryn join 100 other HRPS members who have dedicated themselves in support of our education and advocacy efforts.

Joy Orlich
joyorlich@sbcglobal.net
775-544-0686



HRPS Lifetime Members

Darleen R Azizisefat
Sharon Honig-Bear
Sandi Bitler
Jacqueline Black (*)
Lynn Bremer
Holly Walton-Buchanan
Florence Ann Burgess
George Burke
Linda Burke
Tom & Phyllis Cates
Jan & Phil Chik
Press & Delores Clewe
Karalea Clough
Neal & Mary Cobb
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Betty J. Watts
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Reg & Shelley Willison
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(*) deceased

HRPS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

By joining **Historic Reno Preservation Society**, you are a member of a community group that celebrates Reno's history by sharing information and advocating for our endangered properties.

HRPS offers Walking Tours during the summer, Speaker Programs during the winter, and a Home Tour in fall as a fund-raiser to support our Reno Heritage Fund grants. As a member, you receive our monthly email newsletter and our quarterly publication, FootPrints, to keep you informed about HRPS events, places of historical interest as well as items of concern. HRPS information is on our website, Facebook and Instagram.

☐ New Member ☐ Renewing

Membership Levels:

- ☐ \$15.00 Student
☐ \$25.00 Individual
☐ \$45.00 Family
☐ \$100.00 Supporting
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☐ \$250.00 Preservation Patron
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My Additional Donation:

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HRPS Quarterly FootPrints

Preference (Please check one):

☐ Hard Copy ☐ Email Only

Name(s) _____

Mailing Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

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HRPS respects your right to privacy. We will **NOT** share your email address.

PD LIKE TO VOLUNTEER TO WORK ON:

- ☐ Home Tours ☐ Walking Tours ☐ Board ☐ Research
☐ Other _____

Ways to become a member or renew your membership in HRPS:

- 1) Join or renew on HRPS website historicreno.org using credit or debit card
- 2) Fill out the above form and mail with a check to address below
- 3) Fill out the above form and credit/debit info below and mail to address below

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Historic Reno Preservations Society, P.O. Box 14003, Reno, NV 89507
<http://historicreno.org>

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