
THE HISTORY OF WASHOE COUNTY

The Washoe, Paiute and Shoshone tribes occupied northwestern Nevada for centuries. The Washoe tribe inhabited this area including the shores of Lake Tahoe for millennia, before the first recorded sighting of Lake Tahoe by non-Native Americans, John Fremont's exploration party led by Kit Carson. Named for this Tribe, Washoe County is 6,600 square miles in northwestern Nevada bordering California, Oregon and Lake Tahoe.

The first territorial legislature created the county in 1861, shortly after the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859, which bought swarms of gold seekers. The Gold Rush tapered off by 1861 but a silver rush began with the discovery of one of the largest silver strikes in the world at Virginia City. That year Myron Lake built a bridge over the Truckee River at what is now Virginia Street in Reno.

In 1864, during the Civil War, Nevada became a state on the Union side. The North was eager to acquire the state's silver reserves. As the Comstock silver played out in the latter part of the decade, the transcontinental railroad was built from Sacramento thru northern Nevada by the Central Pacific Railroad. Myron Lake sold his land north of the Truckee River to Charles Crocker of the Central Pacific and that land was surveyed and sold in 1868, becoming the town of Reno.

Reno was designated the county seat for Washoe County in 1871, taking over from Washoe City to the south. During the 1870's the Virginia and Truckee Railroad was built between Reno and Carson and up to Virginia City. When the Comstock finally played out in the 1880's Reno surpassed Virginia City as the pre-eminent city in Nevada. Also in the 1880's the Sierra Nevada Wood and Lumber Company built a railroad to and a company town at Incline.

In 1885 the University of Nevada was moved from Elko to Reno and the new campus was started with the construction of Morrill Hall. The late 1880's saw very harsh winters and the following decade continued an economic depression throughout Nevada, but Washoe County grew due to its function as a transportation hub and a university town. During the 1890's Lake Tahoe became a popular retreat for the wealthy from San Francisco, Sacramento and Virginia City.

In the 1900's a mining boom started in southern Nevada, which ended the state's nearly twenty-year depression and contributed to Reno's growth. Reno,

named after Civil War General Jesse Reno, was incorporated as a city in 1903. The Southern Pacific Railroad (which succeeded the Central Pacific as the owner of the main line across northern Nevada) straightened the route and moved its repair shops from Wadsworth to a new town east of Reno. Sparks, named for the then governor of Nevada, was incorporated in 1905. The railroad offered its Wadsworth employees each a tract of land 50 feet by 140 feet and also offered to pack up every house in Wadsworth and ship it to the new town of Sparks. The railroad sold the lots to its employees for a dollar each.

In 1906 the wife of US Steel president William Corey came to Reno for a notorious divorce, starting an industry that helped support Reno for the next half a century. But in 1910 gambling, which had been legal in Nevada, was banned by the Progressives.

In 1917 twenty acres were set aside for the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. In 1927 the State Highway Department finished grading and graveling Highway 40, which would eventually become Interstate 80.

In 1931 the State Legislature removed all restraints on gambling – in hopes it would boost the economy during the Great Depression - and the residency requirement was dropped from three months to six weeks, further facilitating divorces. In that decade both Harold Smith and William Harrah came to Reno and opened casinos. In 1942 Bill Harrah added slot machines, a crap table and a blackjack game to his downtown gaming parlor.

World War II and the presence of air bases at Stead and Fallon brought many American soldiers and other members of the armed forces to Washoe County. In 1949 Edwin Bender promoted a bill which became known as the Freeport law, exempting all personal property in transit though the state from personal property tax. This led to a thriving warehouse industry in the county.

There were major floods on the Truckee River in 1950, 1952 and 1953 and the Army Corps of Engineers built flood control structures in downtown Reno. During the same decade a coffee shop called the Nugget Café, which later become John Ascuaga's Nugget, opened in Sparks.

In 1960 Alex Cushing brought the Winter Olympics to Squaw Valley and Harold Smith's father, "Pappy" Smith, campaigned for a four lane all-weather

highway to California to bring tourists from the games to Reno. Interstate 80 was finished in time for the Olympics. In 1965 the Centennial Coliseum opened, today this facility is called the Reno-Sparks Convention Center.

In the 1970's county-wide cooperation led to the creation of the Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District to cover the suburban areas of the county and a District Health Department was established by an interlocal agreement between Reno, Sparks and Washoe County. In 1976 Washoe County issued its first economic revenue bonds for ten million dollars to finance water facilities to be used by Sierra Pacific Power Company to provide water to the public. Later in the 1970's the MGM Grand – at that time the world's largest hotel-casino - was opened near the Reno-Tahoe Airport.

In 1980 a compact between Nevada and California to control development in the Lake Tahoe basin created the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (the TRPA). In 1981 the Sierra Pacific Power Company allocated the last of the available water and stated that future water rights would need to be purchased.

On August 1st, 1986 the very first Hot August Night took place at the Reno-Sparks Convention Center, something that would grow to become over a weeklong annual event bringing more tourists to the area than any other. This tourist draw was followed by others including the Air Races, the Balloon Races, the Rib Cook-off and most recently a Blues Festival.

The 1990's came with severe drought and by 1992 Washoe Lake completely dried up. The County investigated acquiring water from Honey Lake Valley northwest of Reno in California. This water importation plan was stopped the US Department of interior in 1994. (But by 2007 a pipeline was under construction to bring water from the aquifer under Honey Lake and the project had been renamed as the Fish Springs Project.) In 1995 the County declared a agricultural drought emergency but by the next year flooding over New Year's weekend inundated downtown Reno, parts of the warehouse district in Sparks and the Reno-Tahoe Airport.

During the 1990's a new federal court house and the National Bowling Stadium were constructed and the Diamond Ranch Estates project was approved on 12,000 acres south of central Reno, opening the way for thousands of new homes.

The new millennium brought several factors which had significant negative effects on the county's economy and Washoe County's revenues including

the terror attacks on 9/11, which drastically reduced tourism; the advent of Indian Gaming in northern California, which siphoned Bay Area business away from Washoe's casinos; and a national recession.

During that first decade Reno, Sparks, and Washoe County opened the Regional Dispatch and Emergency Operations Center. Washoe County completed the Jan Evans Juvenile Justice Center in 2004. In 2005 the Regional Animal Services Center opened, operated by Washoe County under an interlocal agreement with Reno and Sparks. And the Truckee River Flood Management Fund was set up and staff hired. Reno and Washoe County completed the Mills B Lane Justice Center in early 2006. During the summer of that year the Reno ReTrac project was completed, lowering the Union Pacific Railroad right of way into a 33 foot deep 54 foot wide trench running over two miles thru downtown Reno, eliminating 11 at-grade crossings. Costing nearly \$300 million, this project was funded by a combination of federal and local dollars, and managed by the City of Reno and built by Granite Construction.

Meanwhile both Reno and Sparks had established Redevelopment Districts under state law in attempts to revitalize their downtowns. As the decade wore on both cities established second Redevelopment Districts. Reno's consisted of seven non-contiguous areas including Boomtown which is becoming the location of the first Cabella's Outdoor Sports store in Nevada. Spark's new district is located around the Marina, a former gravel pit accidentally filled with water during the flood of New Year's Day, 1997, and is planning to become a retail and restaurant center anchored by a Scheel's All Sports Store. At the same time Reno's efforts to revitalize its downtown – hampered by declining casino property values occasioned by 9/11, Indian Gaming and the recession - found some success with the opening of high-end high-rise condominiums located in the remodeled Comstock Hotel Casino (now the Riverwalk) and the all new Palladio. The former Phoenix (previously the Flamingo Hilton Hotel Casino) was purchased by Fernando Leal and gutted with plans to create the Montage condominiums, townhouses and shops.