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The Silver State

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Nevada's Heritage Reinterpreted

James W. Hulse

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Reinterpreted

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Preface

MORE THAN twenty-five years ago, when the University of Nevada Press was in its infancy, its founders asked me to prepare a general history of the state for use in the public schools because the only textbook available at that time was a quarter century old and was thought to be inadequate for the needs of that generation. I wrote *The Nevada Adventure: A History* and tried to make it adaptable for various levels of classroom use. About three years ago, the staff of the press convinced me that the time had come to attempt yet another generalized history of the state: one which explores the more remote corners, which tries to do justice to the southern regions that might have been previously neglected, and which puts the events of the last fifty years into a tidy conceptual framework.

The approach of the 125th anniversary of Nevada's statehood (1989) prompted this effort, in much the same manner that the approach of the centennial (1964) encouraged the writing of *The Nevada Adventure*. The work of a score of scholars has surfaced since that centennial year. Among the most impressive is the scholarship of Russell R. Elliott, teacher and colleague to three generations of Nevada students and scholars. He has explored the spectrum of Great Basin history with a thoroughness that no person, with the possible exception of Leonard Arrington of Utah, has ever done; Elliott has pre-empted the western half of the basin, and Arrington the Utah part, for the scholarly audi-

ence. They have, between them, surveyed the vast social landscape in the tradition of the classical historians and have given us a body of excellent historical analysis of Nevada and Utah for this generation. The ambitions of the present work are more narrowly focused.

There has been an avalanche of important new scholarly material on Nevada and its environment within the last few years, which is worth mentioning in a book for the general reader and students in the schools. The excellent series on the natural history of the Great Basin, published by the University of Nevada Press with the generous assistance of the Fleischmann Foundation, should be tapped for use in the historical community. The outstanding volume in the *Handbook of American Indians* series, edited by Warren d'Azevedo and published by the Smithsonian Institution, has brought the cultures of the Native Americans into better focus than ever before. There are also several new social interpretations of the peculiar social organism called Nevada.

It is assumed that there is room for a general updating that will condense the earlier periods into smaller scope and encourage more thorough study of recent developments, since so much has happened in and to Nevada during the past twenty-five years. Our population has nearly tripled, gambling activity has more than quadrupled, and the memory of the early period has faded even further into oblivion in the places that have grown most rapidly. We have drunk more deeply from the waters of Lethe here in Nevada than elsewhere. Our old mining towns, ranches, public buildings, and roads once faded gradually from the scene under the forces of time and weather. Now we bulldoze them. The work of trying to preserve our natural and historical heritage needs more energy and talent than have heretofore been available. Fortunately, there are more hands working these veins than ever before. Interest in the state history has increased within the past quarter century, much of it stimulated and cultivated by the Nevada Humanities Committee, the Nevada Arts Council, the Nevada State Historical Society and museum, the local museums and libraries, and many others.

In the present work, I have assumed that a reinterpretation is in order, one that is careful not to overemphasize the early mining frontier, squander too much time and prose on the politicians, and neglect the burgeoning southern communities. It is also assumed that the time has come for a fresh emphasis on women who have contributed to the social fabric, the changing institutional climate, and the social problems and challenges that emerged in the 1980s.

A state poor in resources but pretentious in ambitions, Nevada has

fashioned for itself an unusual role in the American Union. Things are looser here, and they change more rapidly than in most parts of the country; society is more fluid, moral standards are more easily altered or abandoned, apologies for ethical aberration are more easily accepted. Perhaps this is one reason why the study of history is popular.

The history of this state has largely involved a minority of more-or-less "permanent" residents, who have tried to maintain a political and economic commonwealth in a largely inhospitable land, with a majority of short-term "itinerants" constantly passing through. Thousands of Nevadans of the modern era have something in common with those pioneers who erected trading stations in the early days along the Carson River or in the Las Vegas Valley in hopes of doing business with the emigrants. The commercial resources of the land are meager, yet they have attracted those frontiersmen and speculators who wanted to make their profits as quickly and efficiently as possible—and often have left the social and natural damage behind. Perhaps the new evidence that has accumulated in recent years is worthy of the attention of that growing minority who have chosen to be long-term Nevadans.

My intellectual debt to colleagues and friends grows ever larger as the years pass. The community of scholars and amateurs has undergone a quantum expansion in recent years. It is of course impossible to name all the librarians, members of the Westerners' Corral, journalists, writers of bureaucratic reports, curious and thoughtful "buffs," and others who have contributed to the expanding reservoir of data and ideas. But in the evolution of this effort, the greatest responsibility goes to my long-term colleagues Russell R. Elliott, Wilbur Shepperson, Elmer Rusco, Jerome Edwards, and William Rowley, who are always ready with suggestions, arguments, and data when they are needed. Elmer and Mary Rusco have been most generous with information and suggestions about Native Americans. The recent book by Eugene Moehring from Las Vegas, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, is the most important new addition to Nevada history in many years and has been indispensable.

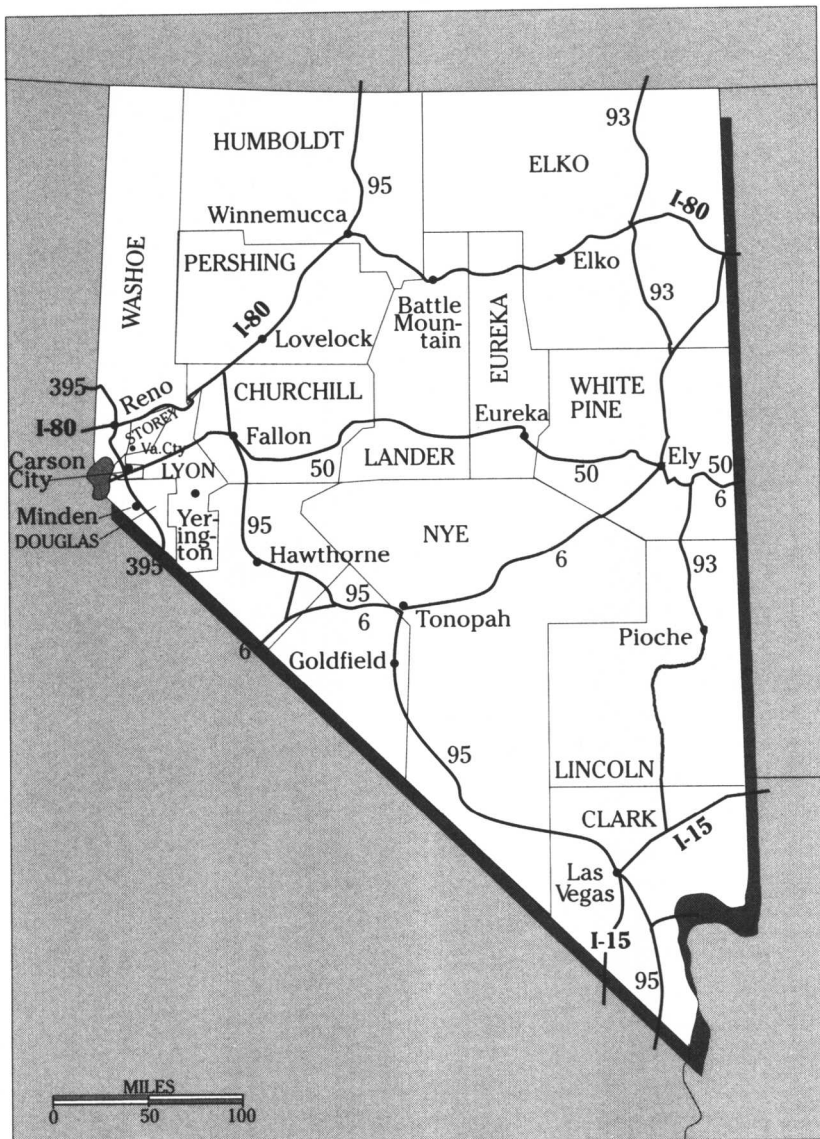
Special thanks are due also the Alan Bible Center for Applied Research, and especially to Lorena Stookey, who did much to improve the prose of this text. With commendable diligence, Chris Ryan carried out the cartographic research and Nancy Peppin prepared the maps in their final form. Richard Adkins helped locate and select the photographs with his characteristic energy. Several other readers, some unknown to me, provided excellent criticism as referees for the University of Nevada Press. Cindy Wood of the press has applied her high professional stan-

dards as copy editor, to the great benefit of the manuscript. Tom Radko and Nicholas Cady, the press's director and editor in chief respectively, have shepherded the manuscript to completion with fine professional care. My former colleagues, Bob and Paule-Colette Fricke, provided the hospitality and facilitated the quiet hours for final editing in the Île de France, for which I will always be grateful.

Finally, my wife Betty has endured not only the long silences but also the frequent readings and re-readings with almost-saintly patience. And in this instance I have also had the kind help of our daughter, Jane Hulse Dixon, who has been an excellent proofreader and troubleshooter. No author is entitled to so much kindness.

Reno, July 28, 1990

J. W. H.



Nevada Counties and Principal Highways

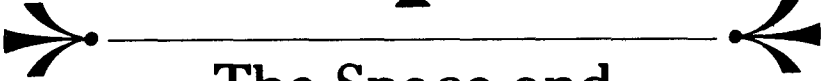
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1



The Space and the Natural Setting

HISTORY IS primarily a record of the tug-of-war between people and their environment. Half of their environment—the social milieu—humans construct for themselves. The other half they come to accept after settling in a particular locale. This chapter concerns Nevadans and the uses they have made of the state they have created.

The elemental components of the Nevada heritage are land, water, and the habitat that nature has provided. Since the days when Jedediah Smith and Peter Skene Ogden first probed the edges of this region in 1826, our predecessors cursed the desert and mountain terrain; they feared the blistering heat of summer and the blizzards of winter. But also, by steps as slow as those of the earliest pioneers, Nevadans have come to realize that the geology, the ecology, and the atmosphere of Nevada and the surrounding area are, in combination, greater treasures than all the precious metal of the Comstock Lode or the wealth of the gambling casinos.

Nevada is part of a new world that is still being explored. Columbus did not finish the work of discovery in those famous voyages he made five hundred years ago. He and his half-forgotten seamen simply advanced a quest as old as history—the search with new techniques for new opportunities somewhere beyond familiar terrain. Christopher Columbus was the first prospector and the first gambler of the New

World. His work continues in a land that would have been too strange for his imagination to contemplate, but in a place that now bears many names taken from the Spanish landscape from which he set sail—names such as Sierra Nevada (snow-capped mountains), Colorado (red), and Las Vegas (the meadows).

Nevada, with its 110,000 square miles, would cover more than half of Spain if it were moved across the Atlantic and laid down on the Iberian peninsula. Nevada is not the largest state in the Union, but it is big enough to inspire awe in its visitors. If one could pick it up and transport it eastward across the United States, its southern tip could touch South Carolina, and its northern boundary would reach the Great Lakes and include all or parts of seven or eight states. Or, we could fit all of Great Britain within it and still have room for most of Ireland.

Yet Nevada is not like Iberia, or the American East, or the British Isles from which it has drawn so much of its culture—the language, the system of justice, and several place names. It is part of one of the world's most extensive and diverse desert regions, into which have come explorers and adventurers from many lands. Like desert dwellers of other ages, Nevadans and their predecessors have shaped a special type of society, one which has adapted to a harsh environment. This book describes the efforts that people have made on behalf of a province named Nevada—a land of little water, much alkaline soil, and barren mountains that rise like giant sentinels in the landscape.

The story begins in the ancient past, long before there were written records among the people who lived here; it continues through the age of atomic testing and space exploration, in which the writings and the mathematics are so sophisticated that few can understand them. Nevada's desert terrain resisted the explorers and emigrants longer than most other parts of the United States because it seemed so harsh and barren in the early years of the American Republic. For the same reason, it has become a unique science and sociology laboratory for contemporary America.

Nevada has a short history. The Native Americans did not write chronicles to communicate their values to later generations. The majority of its present inhabitants arrived from some other part of America. Most are descendants of people who came during the span of this century, or only two or three generations ago. In their haste to make a living, they thought little about the local ecology or history until only recently. People often tend to think of the world in terms of the use that they make of it *now*. The Nevada topography does not yield many crops or

provide many opportunities for manufacturing. Nevadans of the modern era, like the aboriginal inhabitants who preceded them, had to develop special skills for their livelihoods.

About 86 percent of the land in Nevada was still under the control of the federal government at the beginning of the 1990s. It was mainly managed by Washington because it had been largely unpopulated and unclaimed since the days of the pioneers. The land has been utilized by Indians, miners, livestock owners, sportsmen, and tourists with special interests, but otherwise Nevada has offered little of commercial value to the nation's marketplaces. There are more than 230 mountain ranges within its boundaries, all flanked by valleys that run in a north-south direction, and many of them are virtually unknown even to longtime residents of the state. Most Nevadans seldom stray from their valley cities, and when they do, they usually follow the roads in an east-west direction, crossing the mountain ranges or following the river valleys without exploring them.

Because of its vast, semi-arid expanses, Nevada has often been described as a "desert waste." Yet the state's economic history provides numerous examples which illustrate that the land unwanted by one generation will prove valuable to another. The history in these pages will reveal that people have been able to extract valuable minerals, raise animals and crops, devise commercial enterprises, and find opportunities for advanced technology within the same "desert waste" that previous generations regarded as useless. The land offers many advantages as a recreation center in a country where open space is becoming increasingly difficult to find. In addition, it is a laboratory for space exploration and high technology military experimentation. It is both a backwoods and a scientific frontier.

Mountains, Deserts, and Precious Water

Geologists use two terms to describe the region of North America of which Nevada is a part: (1) the Great Basin, and (2) the Basin and Range province. The Great Basin is the "land of interior drainage," embracing most of northern Nevada, half of Utah, and fragments of California, Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming, where the streams run inland toward sinks or lakes rather than flowing toward the sea. The Basin and Range province includes the Great Basin, but it also extends across southern Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, and into Mexico—where some of

the waters move southward to the ocean and where the terrain and flora resemble that which surround the Las Vegas region. As the geologist Bill Fiero wrote:

The hydrologic Great Basin, then, is that portion of the geologic Basin and Range with no drainage to the sea. The two great rivers of the West, the Colorado and Columbia, are gnawing away at the flanks. But the rainfall is too sparse, the rivers have too little energy, and the uplift of the inverted bowl is too recent for the big rivers to breach the defenses of the Great Basin—yet. (Fiero, *Geology of the Great Basin*, p. 7.)

The rugged highlands are the result of eons of geologic change. Everywhere there is evidence of nature's turbulence in past ages. Jagged mountain peaks are the legacy of gigantic earthquakes that occurred millions of years ago. Black volcanic rocks testify to smoking mountains of lava that once scorched the earth. Broad, fan-like masses of dirt and rubble, stretching out onto valley floors from canyons, give evidence of relentless erosion over hundreds of centuries.

Nature played violent games with the American West in the millennia before humans appeared on the scene: mountain ranges rose and disappeared several times; massive seas or lakes formed and evaporated; and the giant ichthyosaur swam, prospered, and perished above the lands that are now central-Nevada deserts. On a few occasions over the years, there have been startling reminders that this is a land that is still shifting. Small "seismic events" happen every day; the big earthquakes have seldom occurred in recorded history. Yet the evidence of such events is abundant in about two hundred north-south mountain ranges within the state. As Alvin R. McLane wrote:

When viewed from afar, the surface of the Great Basin appears like a sea gone mad, the tumultuous waves roll east—from the Sierra Nevada to the Wasatch Range. (McLane, *Silent Cordilleras: The Mountain Ranges of Nevada*, p. 11.)

Within the past few decades, geologists have developed new theories about how the land of the great interior basin and the Colorado plateau was formed. It is now commonly believed that a process known as "plate tectonics" is operating, which accounts for gradual movements in the earth's surface. The plates form an eggshell-like crust around the core of the globe, and they virtually float around and across the inner core, colliding at times to form mountain ranges. The process is still

highly active in the Far West, and it was graphically described by James McPhee in his popular book *Basin and Range* (see the list of Suggested Supplementary Readings at the end of this chapter).

Nature holds several reminders of past eons in her bag of tricks. Until recently, there were many people still living who remembered the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. In Nevada, several times during the summer and autumn of 1954, huge forces within the earth's crust twisted and moved, shaking the towns of the central Great Basin, doing damage that could hardly be measured in dollars. Had these occurred directly beneath a city or town, many lives might have been lost.

These seismic events have stimulated intensive research, in which the University of Nevada has been an active partner. It is now known that a massive fault zone exists between Susanville, California, and the Spring Mountain Range west of Las Vegas, and another zone lies beneath the Reno-Carson City area. The possibility that heavy earthquakes could occur, similar to the ones that have damaged California cities, is taken for granted by scientists who work in this field. This concern is now reflected in Nevada's standard building codes.

Beneath the earth's surface in the Great Basin are huge reservoirs of hot water, which are accessible when they either boil to the surface or are tapped by deep drilling. Several hot springs in northern Nevada have long been known as desirable places for health and recreational uses. Between 1975 and 1985 an important geothermal industry began to emerge when companies started testing the possible uses of this energy to generate power. Seventy wells were drilled, and the prospects for beneficial use in the future were realized.

One need not look far into the paleontological or archeological records to realize that many species of plants and animals were temporary tenants in this region before *Homo sapiens* established wickiups, subdivisions, public domain, and real estate. At one time huge mammoths walked in the valleys, probably in a semi-tropical setting. Large pieces of petrified wood indicate the presence of giant trees that once flourished in the northern ranges.

The Nevada that stretches beyond the cities and towns is mainly the product of very recent natural change. Mt. Charleston, Wheeler Peak, the Rubies, and the Sierra Nevada are young, as geologists reckon things—only about a million years old. They are even now eroding, surrendering inch by inch to the lands below.

The traces of dry lakes and shorelines that are so prominent in many places are infants by comparison; their waters covered the land only

tens of thousands of years ago. The Pleistocene epoch was the era when the great ice sheets covered much of the northeastern United States, when the Pacific Coast was a zone of volcanic activity, and when much of the Grand Canyon was cut away by the waters of the Colorado River. The shorelines in northwestern Nevada are the remnants of Lake Lahontan; in northeastern Nevada they are reminders of Lake Bonneville. This body of water covered 20,000 square miles—most of western Utah—and Lake Lahontan covered some 8,600 square miles of northwestern Nevada. During the wettest period of the Pleistocene era, at least a dozen lakes in central and northern Nevada grew larger than present-day Pyramid Lake or Lake Mead.

The Northern Basin

With the climatic changes of the last several thousand years, the Great Basin assumed the appearance that now greets the hiker, motorist, or airline passenger. Not far from any city or town in the northern region is the familiar sagebrush and grassland terrain, or the “gray ocean,” as James A. Young and B. Abbott Sparks called it in their book *Cattle in the Cold Desert*. The “ocean” is broken by those hundreds of mountain ranges, scores of which are sprinkled with the Utah juniper, piñon pine, firs, aspens, and dozens of lesser-known varieties of trees.

The motorist who speeds along the interstate highways isn't always aware of the splendid flora and fauna hidden in the mountains. The free-ways do not bring us near the five million acres of national forests that exist in Nevada. Ronald M. Lanner, a Utah author and forester, described the region's hinterland in *Trees of the Great Basin*:

No apology is necessary for our Great Basin forests and woodlands. On the whole, their trees are smaller and less varied than those to the west of our region, and less numerous than those to our east. But, forming a welcome cover of green and gold on our high ground, they serve us well. They give us relief from the relative treelessness of our low-lying lands. They provide us with a modicum of wood, forage, and game, and with most of our water. And they inspire us. We have, after all, the oldest trees known to man; and trees that persevere under a variety of stresses. Trees that cling to precipices above the timberline, trees that withstand devastating droughts, trees that tolerate the sterile soils just above the salt flats: the Great Basin has examples of them all. (Lanner, *Trees of the Great Basin*, p. xiv.)

A companion volume in the Nevada series on the life-forms of the Great Basin was prepared by Professor Hugh N. Mozingo, who has described more than sixty species of small plants that appear on the local deserts. In his studies of the life-forms that now exist in Nevada, Mozingo reached conclusions that complement those of scientists in other fields. He wrote:

The Great Basin has a large number of very successful herbaceous forms, annual as well as perennial, but the really conspicuous and characteristic plants on our enormous vistas of both desert and steppe are the shrubs—so much so that we talk about the shade-scale desert, greasewood association, or big sagebrush community. Shrubs are our constant companions here; basically, this is because the major factor limiting plant growth is the relative lack of water. Trees take in more water and evaporate more, and except for our mountain ranges, towns, and waterways there is simply not enough water to allow them to survive, let alone grow. From an airplane, in fact, many of our cities appear to be the only forests at low elevations. (Mozingo, *Shrubs of the Great Basin*, pp. 5–6.)

Another important contribution to the scientific and ecological understanding of the Basin and Range has come from University of Nevada, Reno, biologist Fred A. Ryser, one of Nevada's foremost ornithologists. Ryser writes:

Whether seen or not, numerous kinds of birds frequent these desert shrublands and woodlands. This is magnificent country for raptors, and during the winter eagles, hawks, and falcons often concentrate in such numbers as to apparently defy the limitations imposed by a pyramid of biomass. . . . The shrublands are also the natal home of an array of distinctive birds, including the Black-throated Sparrow, Sage Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, House Finch, and Burrowing Owl. In sagebrush-dominated shrublands, the courtship displays of Sage Grouse are performed on ancestral strutting grounds. Some of the finest bird actors in the world—a troupe of corvids featuring the Black-billed Magpie, Common Raven, and Pinyon Jay—are on stage in the shrublands and woodlands. (Ryser, *Birds of the Great Basin*, p. 1.)

Despite its status as the most arid state in the American Union, Nevada has a rich variety of fish species, ranging from the rare and endangered cui-ui of Pyramid Lake and the Devils Hole pupfish to the