Myth 141: Dead on Arrival
By Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The few presidents of the United States who came to Nevada in its first 100 years included Warren G. Harding. However, Harding was dead when he arrived by train in 1923.

The 29th president left Union Station in Washington. D.C. alive on June 20 with the First Lady and his entourage on a two-month cross-country trip dubbed the “Voyage of Understanding.” The first-term, Republican president’s administration had been plagued by scandal. The tour, in part, was intended to shore up his popularity prior to a reelection bid in 1924. In addition, Harding planned to promote the country’s membership in the World Court in hopes the body would help preserve international peace following World War I.

After being the first president to visit Alaska, and the first to deliver a speech in Canada while in Vancouver, British Columbia, Harding returned to the states where he took ill in Seattle. A scheduled speech in Portland was cancelled and the presidential train traveled directly to San Francisco. Arriving on July 29, 1923, the president stayed at the famed Palace Hotel and was examined by a physician from Stanford University. Running a fever, Harding still insisted he would deliver his scheduled August 1 speech. His advisors overruled him and plans were made to return to Washington, D.C. The 57-year-old president died suddenly on August 2. There was no autopsy and it was later assumed that he had died of a heart attack or a stroke. Vice-President Calvin Coolidge was sworn in as President by his father, a notary public, on August 3 in Vermont where he was visiting.

The Harding Special train carrying the former president’s body that was bound for Washington, D.C. passed through Reno early on August 4. The flag-draped casket elevated on a bier and

surrounded by flowers was in the rail car Superb. An overhead light illuminated the casket and made the honor guard visible through the windows of the last car on the train. The many onlookers bowed their heads and men removed their hats in paying their respects.

The funeral train stopped for ten minutes in the Sparks railroad yard where some three thousand people waited “just as the sun rose broke over the horizon,” according to biographer Francis Russell. Among them were Governor James Scrugham, former Governor Emmett Boyle, former U.S. Representative Samuel Arentz, Reno Mayor Edwin E. Roberts, and Sparks Mayor August Krehmke. Those in the crowd close enough to the Superb filed up and down the steps of the rear platform to get a glimpse of the casket.

The Harding Special spent the rest of the day crossing the state. Nevadans along the way turned out to bid the former president good-bye. The train stopped briefly in Battle Mountain. A scheduled stop in Elko was cancelled because of a mix-up in trying to connect former First Lady Florence Harding with President Coolidge by telephone.

At 5:15 PM, the train made its final stop in Nevada at Montello, near the Utah border where US Attorney General Harry Daugherty, Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace, and House Speaker Frederick Gillett stretched their legs on the station platform. The Harding Special arrived in Washington, D.C. on August 7.

On August 10, 1923, the nation by presidential proclamation observed a “Day of National Mourning and Prayer” for Warren G. Harding, the only president to visit Nevada after he died.

For a more in-depth treatment of President Harding’s post-mortem visit to Nevada, see John Gilbertson, *American History Made in Nevada* (Sparks: Pah Rah Press, 2008).

Photo credit: Harding funeral train stopped in Battle Mountain, Nevada, August 4, 1923. Courtesy of the Special Collections Department and University Archives, Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center, University of Nevada, Reno.

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