by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

For almost forty years after the opening of the Corbett Elementary School on January 4, 1954, teachers and principals told the students attending the Carson City school that it was named after the famed world heavyweight boxing champion, "Gentleman Jim" Corbett (1866-1933). It must be true because James J. Corbett had fought Bob Fitzsimmons and lost his heavyweight crown in Carson City on March 17, 1897. Literally thousands of students, their parents, and others believed that the name of the school honored "Gentleman Jim".

But it was just hearsay! Corbett Elementary received its name by default in 1953 because the school was constructed on Corbett Street in the Corbett subdivision of Carson City. The Chamber of Commerce and school district sponsored a contest for students to name three new elementary schools. The names finally selected were Max C. Fleischmann, John C. Fremont, and Martha Gleason. The widow of the philanthropist and Nevada multi-millionaire of yeast and margarine fame asked that the school not be named after Fleischmann, who died in 1951, because a street in Carson City and other features in the state had already been named for him. She asked that the new school on Corbett Street be given another name from the list produced by the naming contest. Instead, the school district officially adopted the street name, Corbett, for the elementary school.

So how and when did Corbett Street acquire its name you ask? Let's put it this way, when the Corbett Addition was laid out in 1874 with its Corbett Park and Corbett Street, James J. Corbett was a mere child growing up in San Francisco. He embarked on his boxing career at the age of

eighteen, and two years later, in 1886, he turned professional. In 1892, "Gentleman Jim" knocked out the great John L. Sullivan in New Orleans for the world's heavyweight title.

Actually two Canadians of Scottish ancestry from Nova Scotia, Daniel G. and William H. Corbett, were responsible for the naming of Corbett Street. The young brothers arrived in Carson City by late 1860, and the carpenters and joiners rapidly became successful businessmen. They constructed the Corbett House in 1865 and it was among the principal hotels in Carson City, along with the original Ormsby House and the St. Charles Hotel, until it burned down in August 1876. By 1877, the Corbetts were proprietors of the Arlington House, constructed on the site of the former Corbett House, just south of the U.S. Mint Building. The location has served as a parking lot for the Carson Nugget Casino since 1966.

Both men raised large families -- all of the children were born in Carson City -- and they were active in the Presbyterian Church. William was a trustee with Orion Clemens --Mark Twain's brother and Secretary of Nevada Territory -- and instrumental in the construction of the church which still stands today on Nevada Street. William was also a Deputy Grand Master of the Odd Fellows, and Daniel served as a Treasurer. In 1868, William was elected to the State Assembly from Ormsby County.

Daniel Corbett died at his brother's residence in San Francisco on November 7, 1888 and was buried in Carson City's Lone Mountain Cemetery. William died in San Francisco on May 16, 1890. By the turn-of-the-century, all the Corbetts had moved to California where descendants live today in Novato and elsewhere.

So what actually happened that people would claim that boxer "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, and not the pioneer Corbett brothers, was the namesake for the Corbett Elementary School? Clearly, Carson City's institutional memory failed to remember the Corbett brothers. At the same time, there was nobody left in Nevada from the Corbett brothers' family to protest when it was "logically" assumed that the school owed its name to the famous boxer because he fought here. The "George Washington slept here" syndrome had struck again.

Worse yet, when a teacher at the Corbett School discovered the Corbett brothers' connection to the school name during the U.S. Bicentennial Celebration in 1976, she was told to keep silent and not "rock the boat." Rather than expose the fact that "Gentleman Jim" Corbett had no connection to the school and spoil all the fun, a cover-up and fraud was knowingly perpetrated and perpetuated.

In this case, the descendants of Daniel and William Corbett would challenge us to do the right thing. They occasionally visit Carson City and were surprised, and more than a little disappointed, when told of the long-standing myth surrounding the naming of the Corbett School. The Corbett family is quite proud of their family's role in early Carson City -- and they have not forgotten!

Photo: by Cheryl Mathwig

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