by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

"Yerington received its name in the 1800s when residents hoped to flatter Carson and Colorado Railroad director H.M. Yerington into building a station there," wrote Elaine Wilson in Lyon County *Reflections: A Look At Our Historic Past* (1994). "The effort failed, but the name remains."

Well, not exactly! The confusion linking the official naming of Yerington to the original construction of the C&C Railroad has been around for as long as most old-time Nevadans can remember. Even author David Myrick repeated it in his landmark work *Railroads of Nevada* (1962, p. 214). However the real story is much more complex and confusing.

Relying on the recollection of Lyon County Senator Bernard H. Reymers, Florence Bray, a University of Nevada history student, unknowingly promoted the myth in a thesis on Lyon County names published by the Nevada Historical Society in 1913. Actually, the railroad was built through Wabuska in the north end of Mason Valley in 1880-81, and bypassed "Greenfield" as Yerington was then known. The successful effort to change the town's name in 1894 had to do with renaming a post office.

The tale begins in Mason Valley, named for pioneer cattleman Nathaniel A. "Hock" Mason, when the valley was still a part of Esmeralda County. By 1870, a rancher named William R. Lee had settled upon 160 acres adjacent to the Walker River near where Yerington is today. Others soon followed, and the federal post office established on August 15, 1871 at David Cooper's

nearby ranch was named Mason Valley.

At the time, the tiny agricultural crossroads had one store, a blacksmith shop, and a saloon run by James Downey. An Irishman born in Liverpool, England, Downey had recently moved with his family from the Esmeralda mining camp of Pine Grove.

Dayton's *Lyon County Times* of May 22, 1880 published an article on how the village received the curious name of Pizen Switch. "It was named by one James Hayes," according to a correspondent of the *Reno Gazette*. "He got on a terrible drunk there, and he said the whiskey was poison. So he commenced to drink Vinegar Bitters, and read the advertisement about the Railroad from Intemperance to Ruin. This suggested to him the idea of calling the place "Pizen Switch." As reporter and informant, the newspaper correspondence concluded, "I know this to be true, for I have been a resident of Mason Valley, and was there when the Switch was named."

The folklore abounds, and the facts are few. An essay on the history of Lyon County by Yerington attorney Nelson W. Willis published in Sam Davis' *History of Nevada* (1913) seriously confused the issue on the who, what, when, where, and why of Pizen Switch.

Through the 1870s, the rustic little burg grew to include some 200 residents, a one-room school, over twenty businesses, a mail and stage connection to Carson City, and a Methodist Church. It also acquired a new name. An effort beginning in 1879 to find a more suitable name than Pizen Switch culminated on November 20 with a formal christening of Greenfield and its new dance hall. Nevadans from miles around, including Virginia City and Gold Hill, celebrated the new name commemorating the green fields of Mason Valley. According to the Virginia *Evening Chronicle*, "...an organization was formed to be known as the Committee of Vengeance, whose duty it shall be to murder and scalp any and every citizen who shall hereafter call it Pizen Switch..."

However, the Carson & Colorado Railroad bypassed Greenfield in 1881. While the *Lyon County Times* of March 5, 1881 noted that the railroad company had purchased forty acres near "Hock" Mason's ranch for the site of a proposed town of Mason, the C&C abandoned the idea of building the railroad and the town due south of Wabuska and veered eastward before continuing in a southerly direction.

Greenfield still benefited by the nearby rail service and continued to prosper. In 1883, the state legislature extended Lyon County's southern boundary to include all of Mason Valley, as well as Smith Valley. Greenfield's citizens now traveled to Dayton, less than 2 hours by rail from Wabuska, to do their county business instead of remote Aurora (or Hawthorne after 1883).

An effort was made to change the post office name to Greenfield from Mason Valley in 1893, however federal postal authorities informed the petitioners that there were already too many Greenfield post offices throughout the country. In a petition signed by 100 citizens, the name Yerington, as a second choice, was resurrected in early 1894. "Yerington was suggested as a pretty name for our village and post office," wrote the *Mason Valley Tidings* on March 22, 1894 "and also as a compliment to one of Nevada's most representative men, who has been identified with almost every enterprise of importance inaugurated in western Nevada for many years."

The *Lyon County Times* of Dayton wildly speculated that perhaps H.M. Yerington might construct a branch line of the C&C Railroad to the town of Yerington because of the name change; perhaps even lobby to move the county seat from Dayton to Yerington. There is no evidence of any official overture to the railroad baron or that he even contemplated a branch line with Nevada in the depths of a depression and the railroad losing money. The Legislature designated Yerington the county seat in 1911, less than a year after H.M. Yerington died and two years after the Lyon County courthouse in Dayton burned to the ground.

Fittingly, the town of Greenfield and the Mason Valley post office became Yerington on April 1, 1894 -- April Fools' Day. People have been confused as to how Yerington received its name ever since.

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

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