

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



"The claim to being Nevada's first settlement has caused a number of debates between residents of Genoa and Dayton," wrote Nancy Dallas, former Lyon County Commissioner, in the *Nevada Appeal* (September 19, 1997), "but any true Daytonite knows the correct version of this part of Nevada's history."

The communities of Genoa and Dayton are longtime rivals competing for this distinction. While the definitive answer will probably never be agreed upon, the article prompted me to wade into the long-standing controversy.

Bill Dolan's column in the July 28, 1997 edition of the *Nevada Appeal*, "Past Pages," noted that in 1947 Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* published a news story on "the first white man's cabin in Genoa." According to Dolan's synopsis of the article, Hampton Sidney Beatie and some companions established "Mormon Station" in 1849 as a trading post along the California emigrant trail. Today, thanks to Professor Russell Elliott of UNR and noted Utah historian Juanita Brooks, we know the 1849 date is wrong.

Actually Hampton Beatie and his party arrived in Carson Valley at the base of the Carson Range, in the spring of 1850. Brooks pointed out that the Mormon convert first came from the eastern United States to Salt Lake City in September 1849, and wintered there. Although the Mormon party had initially planned to settle in Carson Valley in 1850, with the approaching winter Beatie and his associates decided to sell Mormon Station. In September, according to San Francisco's *The Daily Alta California*, some of the group left for California and others for Salt Lake City. The last documented activity at the station was in October. So where does that

leave us in the way of a permanent settlement?

Now if we believe pioneer John Reese's memoirs, dictated to historian Hubert Howe Bancroft in 1884, the distinction of the first permanent, non-Indian settlement in western Utah Territory (now Nevada) could go to the mouth of Gold Canyon, the precursor of Dayton. Abner Blackburn, a member of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, had discovered gold in Gold Canyon near the Carson River in 1849; however he did not stay long. Emigrant accounts note a flurry of activity at the newly-established Mormon Station and nearby Gold Canyon in the summer of 1850. Reese, arriving in Carson Valley from Salt Lake City on or about June 6, 1851, claimed in his memoirs that only Indians were living in the area when he arrived. "[T]he nearest white man, he recalled, was a man in Gold Canyon who had a trading post there before and he wintered there in a kind of small dug-out The man who lived in Gold Canyon was nick-named Virginia and it was after him that Virginia City was named. . . . I know of no other white man that settled 50 or 100 miles of there before him." Stephen Kinsey, who accompanied Reese, also stated in Myron Angel's *History of Nevada* (1881) that there was no one living in Carson Valley.

However, John Reese is generally credited with establishing the first permanent, non-Indian settlement in what was to become Nevada. For example, federal postal authorities issued a centennial commemorative stamp in 1951. In completing Mormon Station in July 1851--considered the first permanent structure and trading post in the present state of Nevada, Reese laid the foundation for a settlement that Mormon elder and Carson County Probate Court Judge Orson Hyde renamed "Genoa" in 1855. By then, it had grown into a small town with a federal post office and was designated Carson County, Utah Territory's first county seat. Six years later, Genoa became Douglas County, Nevada Territory's first county seat.

At the same time the encampment at the mouth of Gold Canyon where James "Old Virginny" Finney wintered in a rude, make-shift shelter in 1850-51 grew and prospered. By spring 1851, according to California newspapers, emigrant diaries and secondary sources, as many as two hundred miners had joined Finney. Some of them, augmented by newcomers, spent the following winter in the canyon. Many of the new settlers upstream on the Carson River, including John Reese, spent much of their first winter mining in Gold Canyon. Nathaniel R. Haskill and Washington Loomis, who kept a trading post at the canyon's mouth, helped organize the provisional government at Mormon Station in November 1851.

In 1852, placer mining was booming in the canyon. Andrew Spofford Hall, late of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, acquired Haskill and Loomis' trading post after first partnering with them. Hall's Station was purchased by employees James and Alice McMarlin in early 1854 after Hall suffered a serious injury and returned to the Midwest. Judge Hyde appointed James McMarlin a Carson

County Selectman and brother John McMarlin the Gold Canyon Justice of the Peace in 1855.

The Grosh brothers, Allen and Hosea, recognized as the first discoverers of silver in the area, began prospecting in Gold Canyon in 1853. Long-time area resident Laura Ellis and her husband arrived in June 1853 at the mouth of Gold Canyon and found Walter Cosser, his wife, and 12-year-old daughter; Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Pitt; and many miners working in the vicinity. According to Myron Angel's *History of Nevada*, the first dance by non-Indians was held on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1853, at Hall's Station.

By 1858, the location was generally known as "Chinatown" because of the virtually all Chinese population reworking the placer deposits and digging ditches to convey water from the Carson River up Gold Canyon. On November 3, 1861, the many new town residents voted to rename the community "Dayton" in honor of surveyor John Day. Shortly thereafter, the first Nevada territorial legislature designated Dayton the county seat of Lyon County.

In which community did people first winter—that is, sustain the encampment over an entire winter? That is generally the test of permanence of a community and a threshold competitors for the title of Nevada's first settlement must first cross.

Despite the evidence presented here, the debate will surely continue between residents of Genoa and Dayton over who gets to wear the mantle of Nevada's first permanent, non-Indian settlement. After all, in this case it's all about how you define your terms and present the facts.

Note: For further reading on both sides of the argument, see Martin Griffith's article, "What's Nevada's Oldest Town?" in the September/October 1998 issue of *Nevada Magazine*; and Stanley W. Paher's article "From Emigrant Trading Posts to Nevada Towns: Genoa and Dayton" in the Winter 2003/2004 issue of *Overland Journal: the Official Journal of the Oregon-California Trails Association*

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