by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Thanks to the honesty and good work of the late Italo "Pete" Gavazzi of Reno, we now know the claim that Italian opera star Enrico Caruso sang at Virginia City's Piper's Opera House is a classic example of fakelore. Gavazzi grew up on the Comstock, and a letter to this writer explained how as a young boy he was an innocent party to the commercial hoax first perpetrated in the mid-1930s. The Virginia City native, with a penchant for the truth, came forward after some diligent research to set the record straight.

According to Michael Scott, author of *The Great Caruso* (1988), Enrico Caruso made his American debut on November 23, 1903 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, appearing in "Rigoletto." As the world's foremost tenor, he traveled throughout the United States until the end of 1920, exciting crowds with his inspiring vocals. However, he made just two trips to the west coast, playing only San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In 1906, Caruso, appearing in "Carmen," had a one-night appearance in San Francisco on April 17. On the following morning the great earthquake struck, the opera company's properties were destroyed in the subsequent fire, and Caruso and the company considered themselves lucky to escape the holocaust the next day. Caruso refused to ever visit San Francisco again and never

returned to the west coast to sing. He died in Naples, Italy in 1921 at the age of 48.

It seems unfathomable that people would believe the "Great Caruso" ever sang in Virginia City, a dying mining town since the 1880s with scarcely 2500 residents by the time Caruso toured the west coast. Piper's Opera House could not have afforded the Metropolitan Opera Company at the time. Besides consulting the comprehensive chronology of Caruso's appearances in Scott's detailed biography, Italo Gavazzi examined issues of the Territorial *Enterprise* for 1905 and 1906 and found no mention of Caruso on the Comstock.

So how did this hoodwinking of the public get started? Clearly, the public's memory was short. Within fifteen years of Caruso' death, one Paul Smith directed Gavazzi, then a teenager, to hand-letter a sign stating that Caruso was among the many celebrities who appeared at Piper's Opera House. Following in the tradition of P.T. Barnum, Smith, who had the concession for taking tourists through the Opera House at the time, figured that no one would or could expose his deception. And like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, who for awhile was duped by the Duke and the Dauphin's hucksterism before he exposed them as frauds, Gavazzi late in life demonstrated that Caruso never played Virginia City's Piper's Opera House. In his letter Gavazzi labeled the whole charade "a figment of Paul Smith's imagination."

If we can forgive Huck for his innocent role in the Duke and the Dauphin's duplicity, we can certainly find it in our hearts to hold Gavazzi blameless for Paul Smith's trickery. Mark Twain, who spent time on the Comstock in the 1860s and perpetrated a few hoaxes of his own, certainly had a place in his heart for the wronged innocent.

Photo: University of California, Bancroft Library

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