

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



There must be something special about claiming you have the first whatever west of the Mississippi River, especially elevators. I debunked the myth that the Goldfield Hotel, completed in 1908, had the first electric elevator west of the Mississippi. In fact, the Otis Elevator Company, after perfecting the new technology in 1889, sold the first electric elevator west of the Mississippi to a party in Spokane, Washington on September 12, 1890. Probably every western state has examples of their bogus firsts, however it seems to me Nevada takes it to the extreme in hyping its past for tourist and newcomer consumption.

Another claim of an "elevator-first" appeared in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* on January 12, 1998. The story which focused on an effort to build "a 204-room reincarnation of the original [International Hotel in Virginia City]," noted that "[t]he third and final International opened in 1877 and was considered one of the finest in the world, featuring the only elevator west of the Mississippi, until it, too, burned down in 1914." Why Virginia City would have a passenger elevator before much larger cities west of the Mississippi like St. Louis and San Francisco is difficult to fathom. Wells Drury, in his book

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(1936), played it safe and noted "[t]he International Hotel in Virginia City had one of the very first elevators west of the Mississippi River" (p. 121).

The source of the claim was the developer himself who had heard the story after coming to Nevada. A check of the excellent history of the hotel, Elegance on C Street, *Virginia City's International Hotel*

(1977) by Richard C. Datin, would have saved everyone the embarrassment of perpetuating this promotional hype. According to Datin, "[i]n one corner of the lobby was the first hydraulic elevator ever erected in Nevada, which worked on the same plan as those in San Francisco, but with nearly three times the pressure at 125 pounds to their 45." Hydraulic elevators had just been invented and the passenger elevators in Virginia City and San Francisco were among the first in the country.

Pre-hydraulic passenger elevators had been invented by 1857 and the Otis Elevator Company installed their first one in a store in New York City in the same year. By 1875, according to the Otis Elevator Company Historic Archives in Farmington, Connecticut, the company had installed passenger and freight elevators throughout the United States including in New Orleans, St. Louis, and at the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco. In addition, the Otis Company was not the only elevator manufacturer in the country at the time. San Francisco's Palace Hotel, which opened on October 2, 1875, had five elevators.

Repeating and expanding on my warning from "The First Electric Elevator West of the Mississippi" story, beware the claim that something or somebody was first, last, youngest, oldest, biggest, or smallest. More often than not, it isn't true! Anyway, it never hurts to ask how do they know and can they prove it. People can say anything, and generally do.

Photo: Nevada State Museum, Carson City

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