

by Guy Rocha, Nevada State Archivist



It seems every western town claims the first or oldest something west of the Mississippi. The boast has something to do with community pride, bragging rights, and bringing civilization to the frontier. The truth in the assertions is another matter. Anybody can make a claim, proving it to be true is the challenge.

In previous columns I have dismissed as nonsense that Virginia City's International Hotel had the first elevator west of the Mississippi. The same is true of the Goldfield Hotel having the first electric elevator. These were in all probability the first elevators of their type in Nevada. However, from there the claims are exaggerated to first on the West Coast, then west of the Rockies, and then finally the whopper, west of the Mississippi. If nobody contradicts you, you move up to the higher claim.

Is the oldest United Methodist congregation and church west of the Mississippi in Reno, Nevada? The answer is yes if you believe the myths perpetuated in the Reno media.

How could this be? Reno was founded in May 1868. The Methodists were probably the first congregation in the Truckee Meadows according to John Townley's *Tough Little Town on the Truckee* (1983). F.M. Willis was appointed pastor of the Truckee Circuit of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1863. The first Methodist church in Reno was built in 1870. However, American expansion and settlement westward from the Mississippi River dates back to the early 1800s including Missouri, Texas and the Oregon country in the far West.

I contacted the United Methodist Church national archives in New Jersey and the University of Pacific in Stockton, California (UOP was founded by Methodists). The archivists and historians I spoke with told me that the Methodist denominations were unified in 1968 taking the name United Methodist Church. Prior to that there were a number of Methodist sects throughout the country. Methodism was being routinely preached in Missouri by 1806. The McKendree Chapel, constructed in Jackson, Missouri in 1819, still exists today.

Jason Lee founded the first Methodist mission in Oregon in 1834. Other Methodist missions were established near Kansas City in 1830, in San Francisco in 1847, in Santa Fe in 1850, and in Denver in 1858 according to a work entitled *200 Years of United Methodism An Illustrated History* (1984) produced under the auspices of the Archives and History Center of the United Methodist Church.

In fact, Reno's downtown Methodist congregation is not even the oldest in Nevada. A Methodist congregation existed in Eagle Valley and Carson City by 1859 and celebrated its 140th anniversary in 1999. The Carson City church was dedicated on September 8, 1867. The historical marker on the front of the building proclaims the congregation as "The Cradle of Nevada Methodism." At the same time, the first Methodist church in Nevada was erected in Virginia City in 1861 by that town's congregation.

The truth be told, the oldest Methodist congregation or church west of the Mississippi is not even remotely associated with Reno.

Photo: Nevada State Museum, Carson City

Myth #46 - Reno's Methodist Church: Why the First or Oldest Something West of the Mississippi?

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, November 1999 edition)