by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

A long-standing belief shared by many capital residents is what may be Carson City's oldest tree dates back over 200 years. In fact, during the nation's birthday celebration in 1976, the massive cottonwood on the northwest corner of Division and Washington streets was designated the "Nevada Bicentennial Tree." It is still marked as such with a wooden plaque. A story published in a Reno newspaper on Nevada Day, October 31, 1981, mistakenly suggested that the eight-foot thick Fremont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) was "so named because famed 'pathfinder' John C. Fremont reportedly observed it while passing through this area." Actually, the species was named in Fremont's honor by Botanist Sereno Watson in 1875 and had nothing to do with Fremont observing the tree in question.

The truth is Fremont in all of his 19th-century expeditions never passed through Eagle Valley, now the home to Carson City. The widely held notion that the controversial American military commander saw this area, then claimed by Mexico, and the cottonwood tree in question during his expedition of 1843-44 is mistaken. The exploration party encountered the Carson River in January 1844, downstream from where the Ft. Churchill State Park is today, and proceeded west to the north end of the Pine Nut Mountains. Fremont's expedition, including scout Kit

Carson, then headed southeast to the Mason Valley and the East Walker River. From there they traveled to the West Walker River and Antelope Valley before crossing the Sierra Nevada near today's Carson Pass. Fremont's journals, later published and annotated, measured locations in degrees of latitude, precisely down to minutes and seconds. The expedition had bypassed Eagle Valley.

For the sake of argument, let's conjecture what Fremont would have seen if he had visited Eagle Valley in 1844. Washoe Indians roamed the area and no settlements intruded on the landscape. According to descriptions from the early 1860s, the valley with its fledgling community of Carson City was virtually barren except for some trees lining the river and dotting the foothills. If the "Nevada Bicentennial Tree" existed at all in 1844, possibly nourished by water from a nearby spring, how large it must have been to have captured Fremont's attention while traveling southwest along the Carson River miles away! Some stories actually have the exploration party camping under the cottonwood that, at most, could have only been a sapling!!

In all probability, there were few, if any, cottonwoods in the middle of Eagle Valley until Aaron D. "Farmer" Treadway planted scores of trees on his ranch beginning in the 1860s.

Part of the ranch became a popular destination resort known as Treadway's Park in 1866. The hardy cottonwood near the southeast boundary of "Farmer" Treadway's property survived years of smoke and cinders belched forth by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad locomotives pulling trains between Carson City and Reno (1872-1950). Nevada foresters dispute the claim the tree has been around for some 200 years and place the age of the tree between 125 and 150 years old. Even in that age range, the "Nevada Bicentennial Tree" is not the oldest cottonwood identified by foresters in the state. The largest and presumably the oldest cottonwood tree in Nevada identified to date is in the Steamboat Springs area south of Reno.

People's imagination too many times has little to do with common sense, science, or historical reality. Folklore is fun, but it shouldn't pass for history. Be careful in going out on a limb, especially when it comes to the history of a tree.

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