

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

---



"Jarbidge is often mistermred 'Jarbridge' by the uninitiated [sic], or the newcomer to northeast Nevada," wrote the authors of *Nevada's Northeast Frontier* (1969), "much to the pained annoyance of Elko County old-timers." The issue in this story is not so much myth but misnomer.

The isolated, former mining town is situated near the scenic, west fork of Jarbidge River, on the Snake River-Columbia Basin side of the Jarbidge Mountains near the Idaho border. Located some 100 miles north of Elko, the tiny community recently has been the focus of hostile confrontations between Elko County residents and U.S. Forest Service officials over closed roads, threatened fish, and the town cemetery. News stories and broadcasts many times have referred to JARBRIDGE instead of JARBIDGE. The history of getting the town's name wrong and the clashes with the federal government are as old as the community itself.

The name Jarbidge is an anglicized version of the Shoshone word "Tsaw-haw-bitts," which identifies a mythical, cannibalistic giant who the Shoshone believed lived in the Jarbidge Canyon. The giant preyed on native people, tossing them into a basket slung across his back, and later cooked and ate the unfortunate victims. The Shoshone supposedly avoided the area until after the mining boom in 1909. "The name was eventually pronounced 'Ja-ha-bich' then bastardized to Jarbidge," according to author Howard Hickson in the Spring 1978 issue of the *Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*. "Even today people mispronounce its name as 'Jarbridge'."

Prospecting in the Jarbidge Mountains had been going on for years. A location notice for the "Jaw Bridge" placer mining claim was filed with the Elko County Recorder on December 3, 1901. In the summer of 1909, the first major discovery of an ore outcropping ignited the Jarbidge mining rush. The stampede that followed brought some 1500 people to the area seeking their fortune. A log-cabin post office was established on March 5, 1910 in the predominately tent mining camp. Among the newcomers was Lorin Otho Ray who had made a name for himself in the turn-of-the-century Tonopah/Goldfield/Rhyolite mining booms in south central Nevada.

"Judge" Ray, as he was called, reportedly served as a Justice of the Peace in Tonopah's first years. On Christmas Day, 1901, he founded the nearby mining camp of Ray. He later served in the State Assembly representing Rhyolite and Nye County in 1907. By 1910, Rhyolite was well on its way to ghost town status when Judge Ray decided to seek his fortune in Jarbidge.

"Our main trouble in Jarbridge [sic] is the Forest Reserve which I am fighting here at the present time," wrote Judge Ray to Lt. and Acting Governor Denver Dickerson on September 28, 1910. Dickerson, who had become Acting Governor following Governor John Sparks' death in May 1908, was running for election in November. "I must say if you make a stand with the boys there to have the district excluded from [the] reservation you will get every vote in the camp," Ray promised while attending the American Mining Congress in Los Angeles as a delegate appointed by Dickerson. "However, in the meantime, I will do everything that a good Democrat can do." Dickerson lost the race for governor to Tasker L. Oddie despite Judge Ray's best efforts. Ray was luckier. The residents of Jarbidge Township elected him their Justice of the Peace. Ray later moved to Beatty in southern Nevada, and eventually died in the Nevada State Mental Hospital in Sparks in 1941.

On March 8, 1911, much to Judge Ray's delight, the Secretary of Agriculture issued a proclamation withdrawing the town of Jarbidge from the Humboldt National Forest. By then the initial mining rush was slowing down, although now the remaining residents had access to saloons and stores selling liquor, illegal while Jarbidge was under federal control. What is believed to have been the last holdup of a horse-drawn stage (in this case a U.S. Mail wagon) in the nation occurred outside Jarbidge on December 5, 1916.

Jarbidge reached its apex as a producing mining camp from 1916 until 1933. All major operations were suspended in the latter year. Some work in and around the town continued until World War II when precious metal mining was prohibited during the war emergency. While

modest prospecting and leasing activity continues today, the Jarbidge area is now a popular hunting, fishing, and recreation spot.

The tension between the U.S. Forest Service and Elko County residents has continued off and on for almost 100 years since the creation of the Humboldt National Forest. The mispronunciation and misspelling of the name Jarbidge has been around for just as long, if not longer. It seems unlikely that either problem will ever be resolved to everybody's satisfaction.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, May 2000 edition)