by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The 2002 Winter Olympics Games in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City have come and gone. Stories assessing the economic impact on Utah and surrounding areas appeared in the media and pundits speculated that Nevada gambling did not significantly benefit from the event as had been hoped. One gambling expert claimed the same unmet expectations were true during the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. However, should we believe this expert's statement in an Associated Press (AP) story that in 1960 the Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, California, outside Lake Tahoe, failed to attract an influx of gamblers to Nevada casinos? Could this be a careless mistake and the making of a modern myth?

Thanks to the efforts of lawyer/developer Alex Cushing, Squaw Valley (located some fifty miles west of Reno in the Sierra Nevada) was awarded the bid in 1955 for the Eighth Winter Olympics. Over the next five years preparations for the Olympics were made not only at Squaw Valley, the first winter games site in the western United States, but also throughout the surrounding area. In November 1957, the widening of U.S. Highway 50 and its realignment from Carson City to Lake Tahoe was completed in anticipation of increased automobile traffic. Construction on Interstate 80 between Sacramento and Reno had begun, although its completion came long after 1960. Also, a new Reno airport was opened in 1959 to accommodate the athletes and spectators from throughout the world. This is today's Reno/ Tahoe International Airport.

At the same time, major hotel and casinos such as the Riverside, Mapes, Holiday, Harolds, and Harrah's (including its operation at Stateline, Lake Tahoe) prepared to host and entertain the ten of thousands of visitors expected to converge on the area. Roy Powers, formerly with Harolds Club, and Harry Spencer, formerly with the Mapes, said the casinos were packed, the showrooms were full, and virtually every room in the greater Reno/Carson City area was occupied between February 18, when the winter games were opened by Vice-President Richard Nixon, and the final day of the Squaw Valley Olympics on February 28.

On February 22, 1960, the *Reno Evening Gazette* wrote that the "[c]oincidence of the long Washington's Birthday holiday and the VIII Olympic Winter Games has brought to Reno the largest crowd of tourists over a sustained period in history . . .. A survey of the Reno Chamber of Commerce, hotels, motels and other facilities showed the city was bursting at the seams as early as Friday . . .. Veteran observers said: 'It beats everything we ever saw, even in the middle of the summer tourist season'." According to Carson City's
Nevada App
eal on February 29, "Attendance for the games totaled 240,000-highest official attendance in the history of the winter events."

The Stateline casinos and South Lake Tahoe motels did not fare quite as well as their Reno counterparts in attracting Winter Olympic spectators. Yet, according to interviews in the oral history *Every Light Was On: Bill Harrah and His Clubs Remembered* (1999), the Squaw Valley event was considered a marketing coup. The Eighth Winter Olympics was the first to be televised, bringing Lake Tahoe to the attention of people nationwide. " We considered the Olympics a great opportunity to get Lake Tahoe's name out to the world and to get Harrah's name out at the same time," noted publicist Mark Curtis. "It did the job. It established Harrah's; it established Tahoe. Everybody knew where it was, and from then on business was great."

Efforts to attract the 2022 Winter Olympics games to the Reno/Lake Tahoe/Carson City area are underway. While it may be true that Nevada tourism and gambling was not measurably enhanced by Olympic events in the Salt Lake City or Los Angeles areas, to suggest that an Olympic event in any community's backyard does not bolster the area economy is dead wrong. Witness the frenetic activity surrounding the Eighth Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley in 1960-no myth here!

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, April 2002)