

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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Two men who served as the nation's chief executive visited Lake Tahoe and Nevada in the late 1800s, ex-president Ulysses S. Grant and President Rutherford B. Hayes. Both were transported across the breathtaking, alpine lake by the steamboat *Meteor*. There is no indication another sitting president saw Lake Tahoe until President Bill Clinton's official visit in July 1997. Contrary to popular belief, John F. Kennedy's visits to Lake Tahoe were before he was elected president in November 1960.

The first chief executive to visit Lake Tahoe and Nevada was Ulysses Simpson Grant. The former president and Civil War general had left office in 1877 after serving two terms and was on the last leg of a world tour with his wife and son. Arriving at Tahoe City on the northwest shore of Lake Tahoe on October 26, 1879, Grant's traveling party boarded the *Meteor* bound for Glenbrook. Following their arrival, passage was taken on the narrow gauge Lake Tahoe Railroad to Spooner Summit. The party then rode in carriages to Carson City via the Clear Creek route. At the reins of Grant's carriage was the colorful and famous stagecoach driver Hank Monk.

After spending the night at Governor John Kinkead's house, which served as the Governor's Mansion, Grant was honored at the State Capitol and made a short speech before some 3,000 onlookers. From there, a Virginia & Truckee Railroad train transported the Grant family to

Virginia City, the state's largest city.

A tremendous crowd greeted the former chief executive in the "Queen of the Comstock" and a gala celebration and reception took up most of the remaining day. On hand to welcome the popular Civil War hero were Governor Kinkead, Nevada U.S. Senators John P. Jones and William Sharon, Comstock mining moguls John Mackay and James G. Fair, and the Virginia City mayor.

Grant spent two days on the Comstock attending functions at Piper's Opera House and the Savage Mansion, making speeches and being photographed, going down into the mines, and visiting the Sutro Mansion east of Dayton. He traveled the length of the recently-opened Sutro Tunnel to Virginia City. On October 29, 1879, Grant, his wife, and son boarded the V&T train bound for Reno. From there, they caught a Central Pacific train en route to their home in Galena, Illinois, with a brief stop in Wadsworth.

Less than a year after Grant's visit to Nevada, the first sitting president to visit Lake Tahoe and Nevada, Rutherford B. Hayes, arrived on the Comstock on September 7, 1880 after a brief stop and speech in Reno. The Hayes entourage was most impressive and included the First Lady, Civil War hero General William Tecumseh Sherman, Secretary of War Alexander Ramsey, and a number of lesser military and administration officials from Washington, D.C.

The day was filled with parades, speeches, tours through the mines, and, of course, much picture taking. President Hayes in one of his speeches to the huge crowds expressed his wonderment and praise for the engineering used to build the V&T Railroad from Carson City to Virginia City; to mine the mineral wealth at great depths; and to mill the massive amounts of gold and silver ore. Impressed with the prosperity of the Comstock despite the area's relative isolation, Hayes, speaking from the balcony of the new International Hotel, told the throng below that "Yours is a barren region but you have surrounded yourselves with all the comforts to be found in the most favored lands." In an offhand remark, President Hayes was heard to say that he would prefer to govern the country from Virginia City if he had the choice.

Following their one-day whirlwind visit to the Comstock, the presidential party on the following morning traveled to Carson City where they were escorted to the State Capitol for a reception hosted by Governor Kinkead. From there, Hank Monk drove Hayes to Spooner Summit where he and his entourage took the train to Glenbrook, then boarded the Meteor for a trip across Lake Tahoe. Disembarking at Tahoe City, California, late in the day, the party traveled to

Truckee to catch a special Central Pacific train bound for San Francisco.

While many of the nation's presidents have traveled through or visited Nevada during the state's history, almost 120 years would pass after President Hayes' visit in 1880 before another sitting president found his way to Lake Tahoe.

Photo of the *Meteor* courtesy of the Bliss Family Collection, Special Collections Department, University Library, University of Nevada, Reno. The steamship *Meteor* was launched Aug. 27, 1876 and for over twenty years was the fastest vessel on Lake Tahoe. Built and operated by the Bliss family, between 1876-1896 the

*Meteor*

was used to tow log booms from Bijou, Emerald Bay, Meeks Bay, and Sugar Pine Point to milling operations at Glenbrook. Presidents, generals, and members of the business elite accepted courtesy passes from owner Duane L. Bliss. In 1939 after years of non-use, the *Meteor* was deliberately sunk by owner William S. Bliss.

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