

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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"Nevada's first state seal had a mistake on it," wrote Gary BeDunnah in *Discovering Nevada*, a school text published in 1994. "The smoke from the train and the mill blew in opposite directions."

There has been a long-standing belief in Nevada that the smoke from the passenger train locomotive and the quartz mill should have been blowing in the same direction on the original state seal. Some claim the smoke blowing in opposite directions was a hoax perpetrated by *Territorial Enterprise* reporter Mark Twain and some of his associates.

The claim has nothing to do with the design of the state seal as promulgated in the 1863 and 1864 state constitutional conventions in Carson City and officially adopted by the 1866 state legislature. Nothing in the description, officially or unofficially, identified which way the smoke should blow.

“Nevada’s 1860s seal was executed in the pictorial heraldic style that was popular in the 19th century,” according to vexillologist James Ferrigan, III. “This replaced the symbolic heraldry of the 18th century. In pictorial heraldry the focus is the center of the image, which generally contained the principal activities or aspirations of the state or territory. The smoke was incidental to the mill and would have been naturally drawn blowing out of the frame of reference. The train, a significant technology of the 19th century, was central, and assumed to be in motion, so the smoke was behind it. Hence smoke in two directions.”

The fanciful story suggests that if the wind is blowing the smoke from the quartz mill smokestack one way in the foreground of the state seal, then the smoke from the locomotive smokestack in the background logically must conform to the same wind direction. However, on the presumption the train is traveling across the viaduct at some speed, and not standing still, the smoke will inherently trail behind the train. Debate over the state seal in the 1863 state constitutional convention made it clear that the speed of the train would be left to the imagination of the people. The words "very slowly" were dropped from the draft description and an amendment to adopt "rapidly" failed. Depending on which way the wind is blowing, the smoke from the mill and a moving locomotive could blow in different directions.

That was clearly the case when John Church, the first Nevada State Printer, printed the state seal on publications beginning in August 1865--ironically, before the legislature officially adopted the seal design on February 24, 1866. The smoke from the locomotive is blowing to the left and the smoke from the quartz mill is blowing to the right.

There is no evidence that Samuel Clemens, alias Mark Twain, had anything to do with which way the smoke ended up blowing on the official state seal. It is true that he humorously commented on the spirited 1863 debate over what the motto would be on the state seal, either "volens et potens" (willing and able) which was on the territorial seal designed by his brother Orion, the Secretary of the Territory; or "The Union Must and Shall be Preserved." And, it is also true that he proposed, tongue-in-cheek, a state seal that included "a jackass-rabbit reposing in the shade of his native sagebrush, with the motto 'Volens enough but not so d...d Potens'."

However, despite conjecture in *Nevada's Symbols: Reflections Of The Past* (1978), a school text directed at seventh graders, Mark Twain could not have collaborated with his so-called "drinking partner" State Printer John Church and "good friend" Alanson W. Nightingill, a delegate to the first state constitutional convention who served on the state seal committee, to mastermind a hoax showing winds "coming from two directions at the same time." "There is no evidence that this is what happened," wrote Angela Brooker, "but it only takes a little

imagination to see Twain, Nightingill and Church sitting around a barroom table plotting to play a mischievous trick on Nevada's lawmakers." In other words, if it didn't happen this way, it should have!

The statement made by Brooker that "Lance" Nightingill, a sign painter from Unionville, designed the state seal is true according to records in the Nevada State Archives. However, Nightingill was not a delegate to the second state constitutional convention in July 1864 and, therefore, did not participate in the debate over the state seal's final design which included adopting the motto "All For Our Country."

Mark Twain, after offending some folks in Carson City and challenging an angry Virginia City newspaper editor to a duel, made a quick exit to California in May. Twain did not torment the second convention. The "Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope" did not return to Nevada until October 1866 to lecture about his trip to the Hawaiian Islands.



*(Reproduction of State Seal)*

Finally, the state legislature did not elect John Church the state printer until January 11, 1865, some six months after the second constitutional convention had adjourned. Twain was long gone and Nightingill had been elected Nevada's first State Controller.

While there was no hoax, there was some confusion in 1915 over which way the smoke should blow. Publications in that year had state seals with the smoke blowing in opposite directions and also in the same direction. From 1917--thanks to State Printer Joe Farnsworth--to the present, the smoke from the locomotive and the mill on the state seal blows to the left on all state publications. However, not until May 1929 did the official state seal kept by the Secretary of State for the Governor look the same as the State Printer's seal.

Only time will tell if blowing smoke in Nevada will again be an issue.

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