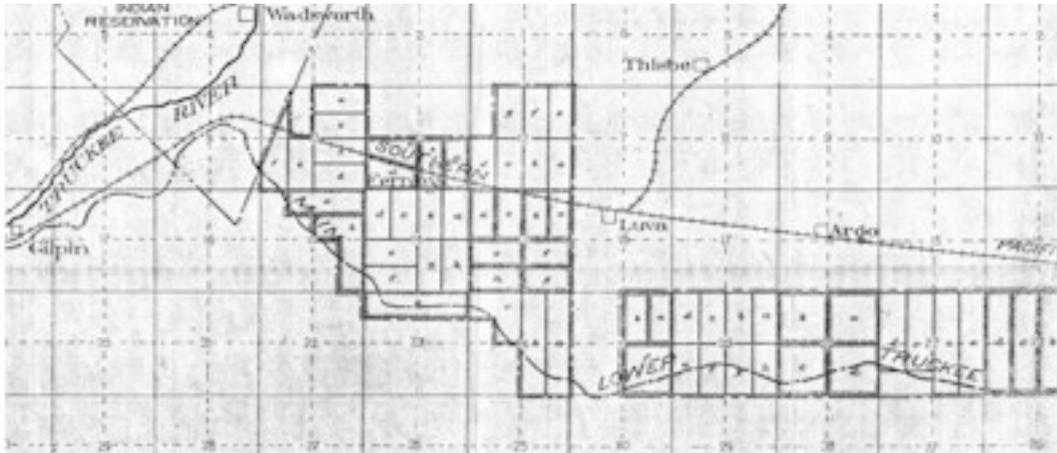


by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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Fernley is Nevada's newest municipality. When city hall officially opened for business on July 1, 2001, the State Demographer estimated 9,529 residents in the rapidly growing northern Lyon County community. However, the origin of Fernley's name remains obscure and shrouded in mystery.

One hundred years earlier, there was no such place. It was not until the Southern Pacific Railroad realigned its route through northwestern Nevada that the Fernley siding was created. Fernley first shows up as a station stop, but with no other services, on Southern Pacific employee timetables beginning with the September, 18, 1904 edition (SP Salt Lake Division ETT No. 2). By September 3, 1905, Fernley is listed with a day and night telegraph office and wye facilities. The descendants of the telegrapher James A. Galbraith, who arrived with his family in 1906, still reside in the region.

In the meantime, a community emerged and took the name Fernley. The general area was part of the fledgling Truckee-Carson Reclamation Project created by Congress in 1902 and named the Canal Township because of the newly created Truckee Canal connecting the Truckee River to the Carson River and Fallon. Workers and settlers found their way to the western edge of the first federal reclamation project. On June 9, 1904 the Lyon County Commissioners created the Canal Township and appointed a constable, Robert A. Benson, and a justice of the peace, Edgar I. Parker, both men filing for homesteads in late 1903 according to records housed at the National Archives. In 1907 more settlers arrived and established homesteads.

On April 21, 1908, the Fernley post office opened. A public school also operated beginning in the 1908-1909 school year. According to the 1910 U.S. Census, 159 people lived in the Fernley area. Many of the town's residents were active in the Socialist Party; some were appointed postmaster, and others elected to the school board, the office of the Justice of the Peace, and the State Assembly.

In addition, the Southern Pacific Railroad completed the Fernley & Lassen Railway in 1914 and a suitable depot was constructed in Fernley. Residents welcomed the completion of the Transcontinental Lincoln/Victory Highways through town in the 1920s.

The town grew slowly at first. In 1960, only 654 people were enumerated in the U.S. Census. However, the population more than doubled by 1970 with the construction of Interstate 80 and the Nevada Cement Company opening its operation in 1963. By 1980, the population more than doubled again. By 1990, the population reached 5,164 and in 2000, the census counted 8,543 residents. The State Demographer estimated the population as of July 1, 2006 to be 18,850.

Still, why the siding was named Fernley more than 100 years ago remains unknown. The answer probably is somewhere in the voluminous records of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Over the years, there has been much conjecture on for whom or for what Fernley was named.

A letter-to-the-editor published in the Sept./Oct. 1990 issue of *Nevada Magazine* claimed that a physician of Welsh origin by the name of Fernley opened a coal mine in the area and supplied coal to the railroad. "The coal mining operation gave its name to the town of 'Fernley'," wrote Al Riggle on behalf of the 95-year-old Mrs. Nettie Fernley of Tombstone, Arizona. "In the early '30s a nephew of the doctor, Tom Fernley, moved there and set up a casino in Fernley."

Nothing can be found that verifies Mrs. Nettie Fernley's claim. No coal mines were known to operate near Fernley; there is no record of a Dr. Fernley living or practicing anywhere in Nevada; and a Tom Fernley cannot be found operating a casino in Fernley in the 1930s.

On the other hand, the Fernley family name has its origin in Wales and England. The ancient English town of Hereford, near Wales, was once known as Fernley. St. Ethelbert (Aethelbarht), King of the East Angles, following his murder was finally buried at the church in the Heath of

Fern circa 794. Today, there are no other communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or the United Kingdom by the name of Fernley according to on-line place names databases. Fernley, Nevada County, California, no longer exists.

The source for Fernley, Nevada's, name may never be discovered. It's highly probably that the naming of the siding was random and concocted like nearby sidings labeled Bango, Benin, Ditho, Dodon, and Parran.

However, given Fernley's rarity as a place name, and the name's association with ancient Hereford, England, maybe Fernley should make an overture to Hereford for sister-city status. After all, in making another connection, Hereford beef cattle--the breed originated in the Herefordshire area--surely grazed the ranch and rangelands in and around Fernley over the last 100 years.

1909 Map of Truckee Carson Project Showing Farm Units Irrigable courtesy of Nevada Historical Society.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, June 2003 edition)