by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The folklore is that the hillside letters found principally throughout the American west were created to help early 20th-century airplane pilots navigate and identify communities, presumably when the aviators could see the letters during daylight hours, with good weather, and no snow cover. The truth is the hillside letters are first and foremost symbols of school and community pride dating back to 1905. Early-day pilots found the hillside letters useful at times; however, any aeronautical value associated with the school and community letters came after the fact.

Folklorist Andrea Graham in the Sept./Oct. 1987 issue of *Nevada Magazine* wrote an excellent article on the subject of hillside letters in Nevada entitled “If It’s ‘T’ It Must Be Tonopah.” Shortly thereafter, a comprehensive article, “Hillside Letters in the Western Landscape,” by University of California, Berkeley geographer James J. Parsons appeared in the 1988 edition of Landscape, Vol. 30, No. 1 (abstracted in the Jan. 1989 issue of Harper’s).

The University of California's 70-foot high "Big C" in the Berkeley Hills started the college craze that spread throughout the trans-Rocky Mountain West. Built by the freshman and sophomore classes during the first spring days of 1905, just in time for official recognition at the annual Charter Day celebration, the hillside letter became the model for scores of letters to follow. Students at Brigham Young University built a 320 foot-high "Y" above its Provo, Utah campus in 1906. The University of Utah constructed a block "U" in 1907 just above Salt Lake City. Other schools soon followed the trend including Colorado State University, the Colorado School of Mines, and the University of Oregon in 1908; the University of Montana in 1909; and the Montana School of Mines (Montana Tech) and the New Mexico School of Mines in 1910. There are many more college hillside letters throughout the West and some of them are fairly recent in vintage.

University of Nevada students constructed a 150-foot high and 140-foot wide block "N" on April 13, 1913 composed of rocks covered with whitewash and located near the base of Peavine Peak overlooking the Truckee Meadows. The block "N" covers 13,000 square feet. Graham noted in her story that it was the largest hillside letter in the country until 1925.

The first documented Nevada high school letter was the Elko "E" reportedly built in late 1916. According to Howard Hickson, former Director of the Northeastern Nevada Museum, the "E" was constructed in honor of Raymond Thomas, a popular high school teacher who died on October 1, 1916 in an unexpected snowstorm while hiking in the nearby Ruby Mountains.

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