by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

On a Reno TV weather broadcast recently, the weatherman referred to the Sierra Crest and then images of peaks in the Carson Range were displayed in the background. The Sierra Nevada crest line, nevertheless, is west of Lake Tahoe in California. In fact, virtually all of the Sierra Nevada is in California. What's wrong with this picture?

Most geoscientists would tell you that the Carson Range is a spur of the northern Sierra Nevada and perhaps 80 million years old. The appendage begins in the south at Carson Pass in Alpine County, California, skirts Lake Tahoe—a much younger geologic feature--in a northward arc into Nevada, and ends just south of the border town of Verdi in Washoe County, some 52 miles in length (71% in Nevada and 29% in California). The Carson Range, including Job's Peak, Job's Sister, Genoa Peak, King's Canyon, Slide Mountain, and Mount Rose (the highest point in the Nevada portion of the range at 10,776 feet), serves as a majestic backdrop for the Reno/Carson City/Carson Valley metropolitan area. The highest point in the Carson Range is Freel Peak at 10,881 feet on the border of Alpine and El Dorado counties in California and south of South Lake Tahoe.

Nineteenth-century immigrants to northern California, crossing the Great Basin by the Carson

and Truckee routes, encountered this huge mountain range before them and called it the Sierra Nevada. Ferdinand Von Leicht and J.D. Hoffmann's 1874 map of Lake Tahoe referred to the feature as "Sierra Nevada (eastern Summit)."

As early as 1855, surveyors like George H. Goddard knew the difference between the crest lines. In late August while pursuing a wagon road and boundary survey, Goddard's party came to the summit of the "Great Carson Spur, which being the highest point on the wagon road, is generally called Carson Pass, although in reality it is not on the divide on the Sierra." The "Great Carson Spur" was officially named the Carson Range in 1939 by the United States Board on Geographical Names.

The congressional acts creating Nevada Territory (1861) and the State of Nevada (1864) provided for a western boundary at the Sierra Nevada crest line if the California state legislature would agree to change its existing boundary from 120 degrees longitude. Of course, California was not about to relinquish any territory, particularly its portion of Lake Tahoe which is east of the Sierra crest line.

This story is really about long-standing confusion over area nomenclature that is perpetuated in the media. While one could argue that the Carson Range is part of the Sierra Nevada as a breathtaking eastern spur, it is misleading to depict or mention the Carson Range crest line and call it the Sierra Nevada crest line. The respective crests are two very different features, one bounding Lake Tahoe on the west and the other principally bounding Lake Tahoe on the east and south.

For the sake of accuracy, to eliminate long-standing confusion, and to inform the many new-comers to this area, perhaps we can get the geography right in the 21st-century.

Photo: Carson City and Lake Tahoe, showing both the Carson Range immediately west of Carson City and the Sierra Nevada crest, on the west side of the lake. Photographed at 13,500' by Adrian Atwater, April 1969. Courtesy of Nevada State Archives.

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