by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Mark Twain didn't say "Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over," or any other version of the oft-quoted phrase. That's what seemingly everybody wants to believe. It's a great quote but there's absolutely no reliable evidence linking it to Twain.

A representative from the Nevada Contractors Association in a September 2006 Associated Press story harkened back to Twain, or so he thought, when testifying on the Las Vegas plan to pump billions of gallons of water from White Pine County to the ever-growing entertainment capital of the world. People fighting water wars throughout the American West just love to use the quote. Hundreds of websites erroneously attribute this phrase to the great humorist and writer who lived in Nevada in the early 1860s and returned to lecture in 1866 and 1868. One site credits Twain in 1884 for the whiskey and water quote, but does not tell us where it came from.

The truth is somebody surely made it up and we don't know who. The predictable response is that if Twain didn't say it, he should have.

Staff members at the Nevada State Library and Archives have been asked to verify the quote many times over many years. Researchers at the Mark Twain Papers and Project at the University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library have found nothing to support the claim. Barbara Schmidt who maintains the website www.twainquotes.com makes no reference to the quote. Authoritative quote books do not include the phrase among Twain's many quotes. The University of Virginia website entitled Mark Twain in His Time has a search capability and a

check for the whiskey and water quote turned up nothing.

The general public is obsessed with attributing lively quips and quotes to prominent figures without really knowing if the attribution is true. In fact, the Florida League of Cities website credits Will Rogers with saying “Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting.”

Some historical figures seem to be particular repositories for things they never said. Scholars have identified dozens of bogus anti-democratic quotes attributed to the revolutionary Marxist Lenin and many of the things we “know” Abraham Lincoln said did not come from him. Researcher Robert Newcomb determined that nearly all Benjamin Franklin’s “Poor Richard” sayings were cribbed from other writers. Franklin himself admitted as much: “Why should I give my Readers bad lines of my own when good ones of other People’s are so plenty?” In our time, South African leader Nelson Mandela has been quoted making a comment that actually came from self-help writer Marianne Williamson.

Who hasn’t been to a meeting where someone doesn’t regale the audience with a quote from Twain, Will Rogers, or Yogi Berra? Fortunately, no website has been found crediting the Yankee baseball great with the whiskey and water quote. At least not yet.

Photo credit: Lahontan Dam, courtesy of Nevada State Library and Archives.

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