

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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On February 21, 2007, the crowd booed national TV personality George Stephanopoulos, Democratic presidential forum moderator, at the Carson City Community Center when he mispronounced the state's name, "Nuh-VAW-duh."

Late in 2003, President George W. Bush and 2004 Democratic presidential candidates Howard Dean of Vermont and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut made the same mistake while campaigning in Las Vegas. Interviewed by reporter Sean Whaley, I commented on the error in pronunciation in a *Las Vegas Review Journal* article. The Associated Press (AP) wire service circulated the story nationwide referring just to President Bush's faux pas. Right-wing radio personality Matt Drudge made me the story, posting the AP story and my work email address on his website. For weeks, I received vile, mean-spirited emails attacking me for correcting the president. The pronunciation of our state's name had been reduced to a partisan issue. Most of the persons who came to my support, many of them left-wing, arguably had more issues with the Republican president than just how he pronounced Nevada. I found myself caught in the middle of a vitriolic firestorm.

Vindication came when President Bush campaigned at the Reno-Sparks Convention Center on June 18, 2004. The president opened his talk by proclaiming that "It's great to be here in 'Nuh-VAD-uh,'" the crowd roaring its approval when he light-heartedly noted "You didn't think I'd get it right, did ya?" The president had made lemonade out of a lemon.

Those who preferred the state's name to be pronounced correctly were not being partisan, which became clear later in the year when U.S. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democratic presidential candidate, came to Nevada and mispronounced the state's name. I, and no doubt other Nevadans, made contact with his campaign and at his next rally in Henderson Kerry, too, had corrected his pronunciation. The flap spurred the Nevada Commission on Tourism to include a pronouncer on its logo to try and get the point across.

Folks east of the Rocky Mountains defend saying “Nuh-VAW-duh” by claiming it’s the proper Spanish pronunciation. So why don’t they pronounce Florida, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California by their Spanish pronunciations? Anyway, I argue that Nevada would be pronounced “Na-VAW-duh” in most Spanish dialects where the “e” in Nevada is pronounced as a long “a.”

Americans rushing to the California Mother Lode mining camps in the late 1840s and 1850s probably anglicized the Spanish pronunciation of Nevada when they first encountered the massive Sierra Nevada range. Before there was a territory or state of Nevada, there was a Nevada City and Nevada County, California. These gold rush place names are pronounced the same way as the Silver State’s name.

However, the story doesn’t end there. Some gold rush sojourners returned to their homes in the midwest and south after chasing their golden dreams. Towns named Nevada in northeast Texas (named for Nevada Territory); central Iowa (founded in 1853 and named for the Sierra Nevada); and southwest Missouri (incorporated in 1855 and named for Nevada City) came into being. The Arkansas Legislature created Nevada County on March 20, 1871 in the southwestern part of the state, giving it that name because it resembled the State of Nevada upside down.

The additional twist in this story is that all these places are pronounced “Nuh-VAY-duh.” In the end, local usage should prevail. So when in Rome, or should it be Roma?

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