

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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One of Nevada's long-standing myths is that President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09) stopped and visited Governor John Sparks' impressive Alamo Stock Farm. Some stories actually claim the president stayed the night at the governor's house during a trip to Nevada. The claims are generally made for the year 1904; Roosevelt only visited Nevada once as president in 1903. Of course, people want to believe the stories and still do.

Stockman John Sparks bought the property he would name the Alamo Stock Farm from prominent farmer Jason C. Smith in 1887. The ranch location was mostly northwest of what is now the intersection of Virginia Street and Peckham Road. Before Sparks was elected Nevada governor in 1902, he expanded the already large house built by Smith in 1875 and made it an imposing mansion surrounded by Hereford cattle, bison, Persian sheep, elk and deer. The mansion was moved to the southwest corner of Steamboat Valley in 1978.

Governor Sparks met the presidential train in Truckee, California, on May 19, 1903. The train arrived in Reno at 7:30 a.m. President Roosevelt's whirlwind speaking tour in western Nevada marked only the second time a sitting president had visited Reno and Carson City. The *Reno Evening Gazette* in a banner headline claimed it was the first visit by a sitting president, failing to note that President Rutherford B. Hayes briefly spoke in Reno on September 7, 1880 before traveling to Carson City and the Comstock.

Roosevelt's presidential train stopped long enough to switch engines and proceeded to Carson City. The Virginia & Truckee Railroad tracks were located immediately east of Governor Sparks' palatial, carpenter Gothic mansion. The reporter for the *Carson City News*, who apparently boarded the train in Truckee with the Nevada party, noted President Roosevelt's comment when he saw the Alamo Stock Farm from the railroad car window:

"As he [President Roosevelt] passed Governor Sparks' magnificent ranch this side of Reno, he remarked: 'I wish I could return here and stay a week or more at your place, Governor. We would have some splendid times, eh?'"



According to journalist Alfred Doten, the presidential train arrived at the Carson City passenger depot at 8:45 a.m. and the party was transported by carriage to the front of the State Capitol. Carson City had gone all out to greet President Roosevelt; a banner was strung in front of the statehouse reading “Nevada Honors the Hero of San Juan.” People traveled from as far away as Tonopah to hear the nation’s chief executive. Doten claimed the audience was “fully 15,000 people.” However the *Carson City News* estimated the crowd size to be seven thousand. Even with the lower figure, it exceeded the attendance at the Corbett-Fitzsimmons world heavyweight championship fight in 1897 and was the largest crowd for any single event in Carson City history excluding the Nevada Day parades.

After being introduced by Governor Sparks, President Roosevelt spoke for nearly half an hour. He talked of many things, but most importantly for Nevadans he extolled the value of reclamation in the American west. The Truckee-Carson Project legislation had been passed by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt in 1902 at the behest of U.S. Rep. Francis G. Newlands of Nevada. The Secretary of the Interior had recently approved five such projects, including Nevada’s and construction of the Truckee Canal was about to begin. Nevadans seemingly had much to celebrate following years of depression in the mining industry.

Roosevelt spent about an hour in Carson City before boarding the presidential train and returning to Reno. His scheduled arrival time there was 11:10 a.m. Again, Roosevelt passed the Alamo Stock Farm prior to his arrival at the Southern Pacific Railroad depot in Reno. The president was on a very tight schedule and the reporters for the two Reno and the two Carson City newspapers surely would have highlighted the presidential train stopping at the Governor’s ranch, if it happened.

President Roosevelt regaled the crowd in front of the Washoe County Courthouse for about fifteen minutes. Running late, the presidential entourage made a hasty excursion to the University of Nevada campus where Roosevelt spoke to the student body for some three minutes. This was the last time a sitting president visited the university until President Ronald Reagan spoke there on October 7, 1982.

By 12:30 p.m., Teddy Roosevelt had boarded the presidential train and was on his way to Oregon via Sacramento. He would return to Reno as a private citizen in 1911 and again in 1912, running as the “Bull Moose” presidential candidate on the Progressive Party ticket.

Meanwhile, Governor John Sparks died in his mansion on May 22, 1908 and the Sparks family sold the Alamo Stock Farm shortly thereafter.

Some folks wedded to the myth can perhaps take solace knowing that, while there is no evidence Roosevelt visited or stayed at the Alamo Stock Farm, the president did see it twice looking out his railroad car window and expressed a desire to spend time there.

Photograph of President Roosevelt on the steps of the Nevada State Capitol courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal*; the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley; the *Humboldt Sun*; the *Battle Mountain Bugle*; the *Lovelock Review-Miner*; and the *Nevada Observer* (online version).