



# HISTORY OF CLARK COUNTY



Placer Mining is panning in water

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Two fur trappers, Peter Skene Ogden of the British owned Hudson Bay Company, and Jedediah Strong Smith of the American owned Rocky Mountain Fur Company penetrated opposite lands of this area in 1826. When they entered present Nevada, they were trespassing on Mexican soil as Mexico had gained independence from Spain five years earlier. Smith entered Nevada near present day Bunkerville proceeding south along the Virgin River to where it met the Colorado. He was the first to report on the native tribes of that area.

Rafael Rivera was a scout for Antonio Armijo, trail boss for a Mexican trade caravan. Between December 25 and January 6, 1830, Rafael got "lost" in the Virgin River area for twelve days according to Armijo's diary. When Rivera returned, he claimed that he had discovered the villages of Cucha Payuches and the Hayatas. He traveled due west toward present day **Henderson** where he viewed "The Meadows". He could see snow capped Mount Charleston in the Spring Mountain Range, Whitney Mesa (current location of Southern Nevada VoTech) and "Little Spring of the Turtle", Cottonwood Spring in **Blue Diamond**. His route became the famous Old Spanish Trail. He traveled 506 miles in thirteen days.

Mormon missionaries under the leadership of William Bringham established a fort at **Las Vegas Springs** in June of 1855 when Clark County was part of the New Mexico Territory. Wood was found in the mountains about twenty miles from the fort site. Most fences were built with Mesquite brush and adobe mud was used for the main building of the fort. Their purpose was twofold: to bring Christianity to the indians of the area, and to establish a supply base between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. When lead was discovered in the Spring Mountain Range (Mt. Potosi) in 1856, the Mormons were involved in the mining and attempting to smelt the lead. This attempt failed and the mine was abandoned. The Post Office at **Las Vegas Springs** was established February 28,



1856 as **Bringhurst** as there was already a **Vegas** in New Mexico. Due to problems with indian thefts at **Las Vegas Springs**, the fort was abandoned in 1858, selling out to an Arizona Rancher Octavius D. Gass who developed the **Las Vegas Rancho**. It remained a ranch for over thirty years.

In the winter of 1857/1858, Lt. Joseph Ives of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, United States War Department, was sent to see if troops and supplies could be transported on the Colorado River. In December 1857, he began his journey at Robinson's Landing (now Baja, California) on the steamer "Explorer". He ran aground on a barrier now known as "Explorer Rock", four miles north of Hoover Dam but established that the river was navigable through 400 miles of the territory. In 1864, the Mormon Church again became interested in colonizing southern Nevada which at that time was north of **Mesquite** and tipped on the 37th parallel. Several boundary changes took place. In 1862, the boundary of Nevada was moved west approximately 50 miles with the acceptance of a boundary agreement with California. In 1866, a sixty mile wide strip of Utah (St. Mary's County) was added to the eastern border. By 1867, the southern tip was annexed from the Arizona Territory (Pah Ute County) thus giving Nevada the geographical appearance it has today. The Mormon Leader Young sent a group of colonizers south in November 1864, to investigate the navigation of the Colorado River. Anson Call had specific instructions to find a practical way that goods could be shipped by water vs. over land. He was a proven leader and had prior successful experience dealing with Indians. They arrived at a place called **Echo Wash** and traveled south to a site above the mouth of Black Canyon. His plans were to build a warehouse for stores on a black rocky point they called "**Call's Landing**". The developed community later became **Callville** on the big bend of the Colorado River due east of the present town of **Henderson**. This community was named the county seat for the newly created Pah Ute County (1865) in Arizona. Supposed fears of "Indian invasions" were reported to Washington, and in January 1867, Capt. York, a Sergeant and nine privates were dispatched to **Callville** as a detachment from **Camp El Dorado**. No indian invasion ever occurred, and on May 9, 1868, the post was officially closed and the mail station was abandoned on June 15, 1868.

In October 1864, another group was dispatched to the Muddy River Valley fifty miles northeast of Las Vegas. They reached the Valley in January 1865 and founded the town of **St. Thomas**, so named for it's leader Thomas S. Smith. This was referred to as "Cotton Town" as it was expected to supply the other Mormon settlements with cotton. During this time, the Mormon settlers believed themselves to be in the State of Utah. Nevada, Utah and Arizona claimed this area. Nevada's interest was mainly due to an ore discovery in 1866 about seventy miles northwest. Although not significant in itself, the discovery lead to the establishment of four small towns and the ultimate creation of Lincoln County from which Clark was later formed. The first attempt to create Lincoln County failed as there weren't 300 people to sign a petition requesting local government. The following year success was finally achieved. By this time, the settlement of **St. Joseph** had also been established (1865) in the Muddy River Valley. **St. Joseph** was named for Joseph



Warren Foote, a pioneer settler and very active in the development of the Muddy River area. Still no boundary survey had been conducted and the settlers in this area refused to pay taxes to Lincoln County, Nevada. An official survey was finally conducted in 1870 which showed the Muddy Valley well within the boundaries of the now State of Nevada. This created problems for the Mormon settlers as they had no main outlet for their goods to exchange for clothing and tools. This, coupled with a major flood that devastated the Muddy Valley and the fear that Lincoln County would attempt to collect back taxes, the Mormon Church released the settlers. However, the settlers petitioned the Nevada legislature to create a separate and new county. This effort failed in 1871 and most of the Mormons returned to Utah. They left rich cleared land, their homes, and an excellent irrigation system. In 1880, the Mormons returned and **Overton** was revived as well as **St. Thomas**, and the former **St. Joseph** became **Logan and later Logandale**.

A self sufficient sect called the "United Order" came to the Virgin River Valley about 30 miles east of Moapa. Edward Bunker Sr. headed this group but it was not operating under the authority of the Mormon Church. They arrived in January of 1870 and spent the first summer building an irrigation canal and preparing land for cultivation. The town of **Bunkerville** was established in late summer. By 1879, members became dissatisfied and in 1881, the United Order was dissolved. It should be noted that the "United Order" practiced a cooperative program of community living.

Another community was developed on the north side of the Virgin River known as Mesquite Flat. The community of **Mesquite** was established in 1879. After a severe flood devastated **Mesquite** and **Bunkerville**, the **Mesquite** settlement was abandoned in 1891, and another group came in 1895. This group consisted of pioneer family members who were conditioned to the elements in this area.

During the depression years of the 1890's, Nevada survived thanks to the efforts of several cattlemen and sheep men. The sheep men being Basque's. This led to an influx of that ethnic force in mainly northern Nevada. The cattlemen established the northern town of Minden. Boomtowns came and went, but the more conservative families of the settlements remained. The 1900 census for **Las Vegas** was thirty.

Senator William A. Clark, a gypsum mining success from Montana purchased the **Las Vegas Ranch** from Archibald Stewart (**Stewart Ranch**) in 1902. Clark was building a railroad called the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad. He decided that the **Las Vegas Ranch** would be the next important town on the line. The first train arrived in January 1905, and the railroad announced lots for sale at auction. About 1200 lots were sold. A fire in 1907 destroyed most of the buildings and floods destroyed the rail lines. By 1909, more secure buildings replaced those of old. Because of the population growth and demands for local government services, the Nevada Legislature created **Clark County** in 1909 and designated **Las Vegas** as it's seat. It should be noted that for a brief period, the Las Vegas Post Office was called **Los Vegas**, so named in 1893. It was renamed to **Las Vegas** on December 9, 1903. **McWilliamstown** was established on the



west side of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad Line. It was also referred to as "**Ragtown**" and "**Old Town**". The town was named for J. L. McWilliams and is now referred to as "**westside**" in **Las Vegas**.

Many small towns popped up in Clark County because of smaller mining rushes. The most important was **Searchlight**, seventy-five miles south of **Las Vegas**. The town was named (1897) in honor of Lloyd Searchlight, an owner of several claims in the area. The first Post Office was established October 31, 1898.

The increased popularity of traveling by automobile from **Los Angeles** to **Salt Lake City**, made **Las Vegas** a popular stopping place and required better roads. A federal act in 1916 provided for a joint cooperation between the federal and state governments to assist states in developing a road system. The states, especially Nevada, could not have afforded this expense alone. The then Governor Oddie had pushed long and hard for better roads in Nevada. A federal gasoline tax was imposed by Congress and began in 1923 to keep up with the increased need for improved roads. U.S. 91, now mainly I-15, covered the same area as the Old Spanish Trail. Adding to the draw of people was the popularity of "quickie" divorces that could be obtained in Nevada. This primarily was in the town of **Reno**, but the residency requirement was only six months. As Paris and Mexico City relaxed their laws regarding divorces, Nevada responded with a lessening of residency from six months to three months in 1927. Again in 1931, the residency requirement was reduced to six weeks at which it remains today. In addition to this, the marriage requirements of Nevada were practically non-existent. No testing or waiting period was required.

The Federal Government began projects such as **Hoover Dam** (1931-1938) which required a large labor force meaning increased economy for Clark County. During World War II, **Nellis Air Force Base** was constructed on the old McCarran Field.

Interesting notes on **Las Vegas** are that when the original town lots were sold, there was a provision that prohibited serving of alcoholic beverages and gambling with the exception of "Blocks 16 and 17". Most of the town was dry. Of course a way was found around that provision and eventually the town rescinded the prohibition.

**Las Vegas** is the oldest place name of record in Nevada. Besides the early traders and the finding by Armijo's scout, it appeared on the topography map in 1848 by John C. Fremont. In December 1849, Joseph P. Homelin Jr. referred to it as "**Meadow Springs**". It has also been called **Ojo del Gaeton** or **Vega Quintana**.