

Myth #76: Dying to Know the Truth: Governor John Sparks by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

The name "Sparks" is familiar because of the city so-named on the Truckee River in northwestern Nevada. However the person for whom the town was named, Nevada Governor John Sparks, too many means little or nothing. The newly-created Southern Pacific railroad division point was named to honor the popular chief executive in April 1904, some four years before his death in office on May 22, 1908. The circumstances surrounding his demise have become so distorted with the passage of time that they can only be described as fanciful and maudlin.



John Sparks was born in Mississippi in 1843, raised in Texas, and made a fortune in the cattle business in Texas and Wyoming Territory, before moving to Elko County, Nevada, in 1881. With partner John Tinnin, Sparks acquired huge land holdings and established a cattle empire in northeastern Nevada and south-central Idaho Territory. In 1887, Sparks purchased Jason C. Smith's ranch and large Carpenter Gothic-style house--on the site of the former Anderson's Station south of Reno--moved his family there, and operated the palatial Alamo Stock Farm near the Virginia & Truckee Railroad (today the northwest corner of Peckham Lane and Virginia Street).

By the end of the 19th century, John Sparks was among the most wealthy and powerful men in the state. Running on the Democrat-Silver ticket, Nevadans elected him governor in 1902. In 1905, he unsuccessfully attempted to convince the predominately Republican state legislature to select him as a U.S. senator. At that time, state legislatures, not the electorate, chose U.S. senators. Sparks went on to be reelected governor by an even greater margin in 1906.

"Honest John" Sparks, as he was affectionately called by his admirers, had probably reached the height of his popularity beginning his second term in office. However, Sparks' response to 1907-08 events in the booming mining town of Goldfield in south-central Nevada cost him dearly in the court of public opinion; it may have also cost him his life.

Goldfield, Nevada's largest town at that time, with about 20,000 residents, was beset with labor strife. Governor Sparks enjoyed the support of organized labor, particularly among the railroad brotherhoods and craft unions in northern Nevada. Yet during a labor dispute, he sided with the Goldfield mine owners rather than the miners union associated with the militant Western Federation of Miners and the radical Industrial Workers of the World ("Wobblies"). Sparks found himself increasingly on the defensive.

Sparks' call to President Theodore Roosevelt in December 1907 for federal troops to police a strike action was precipitated by the mine owners, who in the midst of a national bank panic paid the miners in scrip instead of cash. Then in January 1908, the governor had to call for a special session of the state legislature to create a State Police to replace the federal troops, because Roosevelt believed he had been duped following the report of a federal investigative commission. The situation took a toll on Sparks' reputation and his health.

A great-great nephew of John Sparks, in a book entitled *Cattle in the Cold Desert* (1985) and in a newspaper interview ten years later, claimed that the 66 year-old governor, afflicted with a kidney ailment known as Bright's Disease and pneumonia, dragged himself out of his sickbed in December 1907 and rode on horseback to Goldfield "to see what he could do to help the situation." The distant relative's claim that the governor's death was directly linked to a 400-mile round-trip ride to Goldfield in December weather is preposterous. Governor Sparks arrived by train in Goldfield on December 10th.

While Sparks had been suffering with Bright's disease, the truth in the story surrounding the events leading to the governor's death was related in considerable detail to the press on April 29, 1908 by attending physician Dr. Raymond St. Clair of Reno. "Governor Sparks' illness dates from December 7, and was caused by exposure in an open auto on a trip [on December 6th] from Carson City to Reno and

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return" noted Dr. St. Clair. "He was taken to bed about the first of the year and I was called about January 18, and have attended him ever since." Dr. St. Clair went on to state that "Governor Sparks is an old man and it is believed that worry incidental to the Goldfield strikes and the subsequent special session of the legislature are what broke him down."

Dr. St. Clair claimed that the ailing Sparks would "recover sufficiently to again take up his duties as Governor." Instead, Sparks died some three weeks later at the Alamo Ranch and Lt. Governor Denver Dickerson became the Acting Governor for the remainder of the term.

A story has circulated over the years that Governor John Sparks ultimately died of a broken heart. It may have some basis in fact. However, we can be sure that a round-trip from the state capital to Reno by car in the chill air of early December, and not a horseback ride to Goldfield of epic proportions, shattered his health.

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