

## Myth #74: "First Lady" Patricia Nixon: Her Life Began in Nevada, But Where? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

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Nevada's first and only "First Lady" of the White House was born in White Pine County. Many people assert Ely was Mrs. Nixon's birthplace. However others claim it all began in the nearby towns of Riepetown, Ruth, Lane City, Kimberly or East Ely. A few even suggest remote Cherry Creek. Why all the confusion?

The official on-line biographies produced by the White House and the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace state Patricia Nixon was born in Ely, as does her published biography. According to the biography written by daughter Julie Nixon Eisenhower, Thelma Catharine Ryan was born near midnight on March 16, 1912 "in a miner's shack high in the mountains of eastern Nevada." Her father called her his "St. Patrick's babe in the morn." From then on her birthday was celebrated on St. Patrick's Day, March 17.



Her Irish father, William M. Ryan, worked as a gold miner in the Black Hills of South Dakota before moving to Nevada's White Pine County. The April 1910 U.S. Census enumerates the 42-year-old Ryan as living in the Reipetown precinct and working as a copper miner. Other census information noted he was born in Connecticut, had not worked for 16 weeks in the previous year--which is why he came to Nevada--and that he had been married one year.

His wife Catharine--a widow prior to their marriage in 1909--two stepchildren and son William are not enumerated in the census. The mystery begins here because William M. Ryan is living with other miners, not with his family. Social Security records for son William George Ryan indicate that he was born on January 31, 1910 in Nevada, however there is no birth certificate in White Pine County.

A second son, Thomas Sanford Ryan, was born on February 24, 1911. There is a birth notice in the February 26, 1911 issue of the *White Pine News* for a nine-pound male child born to Mr. and Mrs. William Ryan. A birth certificate, filed by Dr. A. F. Franklin on March 1, denotes he was born in Ely.

The Ryan family stayed only a short time in Nevada after Pat was born. The Ely area was in a period of violent labor unrest. Kate persuaded her husband to give up the dangers of mining for farming and the family moved to southern California when Pat Ryan was about a year old.

The Ryan children had virtually no memory of their childhood in White Pine County. In a conversation with William Ryan prior to his death on September 11, 1997 in Los Angeles, he told me he could not remember where they lived in the Ely area and had only a vague recollection of his sister's birth. After all, William was not quite three when the family relocated to Artesia. He explained that his father and mother did not talk much about their hardscrabble days in White Pine County.

Kate Halberstadt Ryan died in 1926. At the tender age of 13, Pat assumed the household duties for her father and brothers. Her father became seriously ill two years later and died in 1930.

Despite the loss of her parents as a young woman, Pat Ryan went on to receive an undergraduate degree in merchandising from the University of Southern California where she graduated cum laude in 1937. She met Richard Nixon while working as a high school teacher in Whittier. They were married on June 21, 1940.

A check of her application for Social Security, dated April 26, 1939, gives her name as (Thelma) Patricia Ryan, although she signed the form as Patricia Ryan. She worked at the Bullock's Wilshire department store in Los Angeles. While the information regarding her parents' name is correct, her birth date is listed as March 17, 1913, her age is noted as 24, and her place of birth was typed as Eli, Nevada.

What does this confusing information tell us? Did Patricia Ryan actually know when she was born, or did she misrepresent her birth date? Whether she was born in 1912 or 1913, she would not have been 24 in 1939. Was the spelling Eli, Nevada a typographical error, or did she think that was how the city's name was spelled? Did Miss Ryan even know for sure that she was born in Ely and not in a nearby town?

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Some people who claim that she was born in Riepetown suggest she did not want to be associated with the wide-open community known for its saloons, gambling, and prostitution. Unfortunately, the social security application only adds to the mystery surrounding her birth in White Pine County.

Patricia Nixon's birth certificate reveals the truth in this story. On March 16, 1912, at 3:25 a.m., Dr. Albert Franklin Adams delivered Thelma Catharine at the Ryan residence on Campton Street, west of the county courthouse, and filed her birth certificate with the county recorder on April 7. An April 1912 Sanborn fire insurance map shows a concentration of modest houses on the south side of Campton Street between Fifth and Sixth streets. The confusion over Pat Nixon's birthplace may stem from the fact her father rented a number of dwellings during the four years the Ryan family resided in White Pine County.

The Nixons visited Nevada many times. Richard Nixon was a U.S. Representative for California during a visit in 1948 and a U.S. Senator in 1952. Ely feted Pat Nixon during her husband's U.S. vice-presidential campaign in 1952; her photo appeared on the front page of the local newspaper announcing that she was an Ely girl and a banner welcoming her home was strung across the main street. Mayor Nevin E. Broadbent presented the senator's wife with a foot-long copper key to the city.

Old-timers remembered little about the family and nobody could agree as to where the Ryans lived. The *Ely Daily Times* reported that a Mrs. Amy Stambaugh believed the house where Pat Nixon was born was located on High Street near the Ely grade school.

During the presidential election campaign in 1952, the vice chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) claimed that Richard Nixon had told "two unimportant lies but lies nonetheless" during his controversial and now famous "Checkers speech" on September 23. The so-called lies related to his wife's name and when she was born. The *New York Times* on November 4 reported Senator Nixon had referred to his wife as "Pat" or Patricia and stated that she had been born on St. Patrick's Day. The DNC vice-chair "commented that Mrs. Nixon's name on her birth certificate was Thelma Katherine and that she had been born on March 16, not St. Patrick's Day, which is March 17."

A spokesman responded to the charge stating "that Mrs. Nixon had used the name Patricia since infancy and 'to the best of her knowledge' was born on St. Patrick's Day." Mr. Nixon was quoted as saying: "How silly can the opposition get?"

One could assume from this "tempest in a teapot" that Patricia Nixon had never seen her birth certificate. She believed that she was born on March 17 because the family had always celebrated her birthday on St. Patrick's Day, although it is unclear why for so long she claimed 1913 as her year of birth. In the fall of 1931, the young Miss Ryan dropped her given name Thelma and enrolled at Fullerton Junior College as Patricia.

Vice-President Nixon and Patricia returned to Nevada in 1956 on the reelection campaign trail and during the 1960 U.S. presidential campaign. On February 18, 1960, the couple presided over the opening of the Squaw Valley Winter Olympic Games. They also visited Nevada in 1959, 1966, and 1968.

With the election of Richard Nixon in 1968 as the 37th President of the United States, Nevadans took pride that the First Lady of the nation was a native.

In 1970, Pat Nixon campaigned in Nevada for Bill Raggio in his race for the U.S. Senate against Howard Cannon.

Patricia Ryan Nixon died at home in Park Ridge, New Jersey, on June 22, 1993. She and the former president are buried at the Richard Nixon Library and Birth Place in Yorba Linda, California.

Photo: Vice-President Richard Nixon and his wife Pat stepping off plane in Reno in 1959 bound for Virginia City's Centennial Celebration. Photo from The Nevada State Museum  
(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, March 2002)