

Myth #18: Is There Anything Traditional About Nevada Day? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Why all the fuss about Nevada's birthday on October 31? The battle lines were drawn between "traditionalists", and the "grinches" who would steal Nevada Day by calling for the last Friday of October to be the state's official holiday. The parade and other festivities would follow on Saturday; thus making for a three-day weekend for some Nevadans as well as state and local government employees. With the passage of AB396 by the 1997 legislature, Nevada voters, on November 3, 1998 advised the 1999 legislature they wanted to celebrate Nevada Day on the last Friday in October beginning in 2000. The legislature, after much heated debate, complied.



The myth in this story is that the celebrating of Nevada's admission into the Union in 1864 has been anything but traditional. Carson City's Nevada Day parade and festivities date back to 1938. In the state's earliest years, it appears only the Pacific Coast Pioneer Society on the Comstock celebrated admission day. It was not until 1891 that "Admission Day" was legislatively declared a judicial holiday with no court business to be transacted on October 31. Outside occasional parade activities in Virginia City and Reno, Nevada's birthday went virtually unnoticed. Efforts by the State Federation of Women's Clubs in 1908 to have Admission Day declared an annual legal holiday failed.

However, the 50th anniversary of Nevada's statehood in 1914 was officially observed. Governor Tasker Oddie issued a proclamation declaring Saturday, October 31, a onetime public holiday. Reno hosted the grand event. The outgrowth of Nevada's semi-centennial was the creation of a Nevada Pioneer group called the "Society of Nevadans" who for some twenty years sponsored Nevada's Admission Day in Reno.

The legislature changed the name of Admission Day to Nevada Day in 1933 and made it a discretionary state holiday. However, the festivities in Reno were on the decline with the old pioneers dying off, and weekday Nevada Day events not generating enough money and attendance.

Fortunately, Tom Wilson, a Reno advertising executive, and Carson City's Judge Clark Guild, the "father" of the State Museum, saved Nevada Day. Carson City became its new home in 1938, and a law passed the following year made Nevada Day an official state holiday which helped to further the success of the birthday event.

Ironically, just as the tradition of annually celebrating Nevada Day in the capital city was underway, World War II precluded conducting any celebration in 1942, 1943, and 1944. Then, in 1948, October 31 fell on a Sunday for the first time and Nevada Day officials decided that the parade and other events would be held on Monday, November 1. The legislature followed suit the next year, making Monday the state holiday when Nevada Day fell on a Sunday.

If that wasn't untraditional enough, when Nevada Day again fell on a Sunday in 1954, parade officials decided to hold the birthday events on Saturday, October 30; Halloween was observed on Nevada Day; and Monday, November 1, was the state holiday. Nevada Day has been celebrated in this manner in 1971, 1976, 1982, 1993, and, for the last time, in 1999. Moreover, when the Nevada Day Committee overrode religious sentiment in 1965 and held the parade and activities on Sunday, October 31, public outcry ensured that this was the first and last time Nevada Day was celebrated on the Christian Sabbath. An effort in 1969 to move the Nevada Day holiday to the last Friday in October, died in committee. However, in 1971, the legislature made Friday, October 30, the state holiday when Nevada Day fell on a Saturday.

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What we can conclude from all of this? Since the Nevada Day celebration moved from Reno to Carson City in 1938, there has been no long-standing tradition of the Nevada Day events or the state holiday being consistently on October 31. The Nevada Day Committee made exceptions, the state legislature made exceptions, and World War II made for exceptions. What seems to be playing among "traditionalists" was a general backlash against the modern tendency to create three day weekends, the general public forgetting why and what we are celebrating, and the perception that business interests dictated the agenda.

However, Nevada Day on weekdays had become a losing proposition in recent years. The event was principally a regional celebration in the northwestern part of the state. Parade entries and visitors from eastern and southern Nevada were few and far between. When they participated it was during a three day holiday. Californians at one time came in large numbers, but no more. While Nevada and Carson City's populations were bigger than ever, the Nevada Day celebration had gradually declined in comparison.

While three states have statehood public holidays (Hawaii, Nevada, and West Virginia), the annual Nevada Day parade and celebration in Carson City is one of a kind.

Nevada Day is something special, or at least it used to be. What the ultimate solution is, if there is one in today's world of virtual reality and hotel/casino theme parks and entertainment venues, is unclear. However, it would be very sad indeed if Nevada Day event goes the way of the American frontier and passes into history as we proceed in to the 21st century.

Photo: Nevada State Library and Archives

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