

The story of the Reese River Navigation Company in central Nevada is an oft repeated tall tale very short on depth.

Of nationwide scope was the stock promotion bubble of the Reese River Navigation Company... when thousands of credulous souls bought shares in a company 'to freight rich ore from mines to mill on barges floating down the Reese River.' Little could they tell that the impressive river on the maps was (like most Nevada rivers) only a few inches deep!



So says *Pioneer Nevada* (1951), a creation of Reno's Thomas C. Wilson Advertising Agency, in its story "Incredible Austin!

The claim for the little river-just a stream really-in Lander and Nye counties is pure invention, a real anecdotal whooper, getting bigger and better with every telling. A host of articles and books have further exaggerated the tale since it first appeared in Nevada newspapers in 1946 as part of a Reno Harolds Club promotion. Any mention of the Reese River Navigation Company is conspicuously absent in Fred Hart's *Sazerac Lying Club* (1878), Oscar Lewis's *The Town That Died Laughing* (1955), and Donald R. Abbe's scholarly study, *Austin and the Reese River Mining District* (1985).

It's not known if John L. "Jock" Taylor, editor of Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise* (1946) and Austin's *Reese River Reveille* (1949-62), created the story or just embellished it. A July 8, 1955 *Oakland Tribune* story quoted Taylor as saying:

Thousands of gullible easterners dragged the old socks out from wherever they were hidden and peeled off greenbacks to a total never revealed. What became of the greenbacks and the promoters who garnered them nobody appears to have learned. Despite all the furor created by the navigation company, the Reese remains a virgin stream, down which no barge has ever floated or ever will.

Taylor also pointed out "that during the greater portion of the time it is necessary to grease the sides of the trout to enable them to navigate between the banks of the noble Reese."

Nevada native and history buff Myrtle T. Myles, writing in the *Reno Evening Gazette* on February 17, 1962, placed the alleged swindle during the Austin mining boom in the 1860s. Reporting one hundred years later on recent flooding in central Nevada, Myles called the river, named by Captain James H. Simpson for early Nevada pioneer and scout John Reese, the "muddy trickle." "Old posters printed by a fake concern, The Reese River Navigation Company, to which stock was sold to gullible Easterners," Myles recalled, "showing steamers plying up and down the stream, along whose banks factories and mills were pouring out smoke and steam, would not at present seem so ridiculous."

A contemporary version of the fable claims "Shares of the Reese River Navigation Company formed to freight ore in barges to the railroad, sold briskly to investors who recalled the strategic importance of the Sacramento River traffic to the Mother Lode mines of California fifteen years earlier." The fallacy in this rendition is that by the time the Central Pacific Railroad reached Battle Mountain in late 1868 the Reese River mining district was no longer booming and only some 2,000 people remained in Austin.

To date no Reese River Navigation Company posters have been found. Nor is there any record of a company by that name in the Secretary of State domestic and foreign incorporation filings housed in the Nevada State Archives. A review of digital and analog newspaper indexes for newspapers throughout Nevada and the United States using keyword "Reese River Navigation Company" has turned up nothing prior to 1946.

Myth #137: Navigating a Tall Tale by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

From all indications, Mark Twain, Dan DeQuille, Sam Davis, Fred Hart and a host of Nevada's nineteenth-century "humbug" journalists would be suitably impressed with the latter-day hoax called the Reese River Navigation Company.

Photo credit: Photo of Reese River flood near Austin, Nevada, 1910, courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

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