

Myth #125: Spanning Time and Place: Community Arches and Slogans by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Nevadans know that Reno is “The Biggest Little City in the World.” While the Truckee River community dates back to the arrival of the Central Pacific Railroad on May 9, 1868, the downtown Virginia Street welcome arch first proclaimed that slogan in 1929, when the city’s population was less than 20,000. The 1926 arch frame adorned with the vintage slogan now spans Lake Street near the National Automobile Museum. Today “The Biggest Little City in the World,” growing in virtually every direction, has more than 220,000 residents.

Few Nevadans know that Fresno, California, calls itself “The Best Little City in the U.S.A.” There is a welcome arch spanning Van Ness Avenue, the current frame dating back to 1925, although the unofficial community slogan was not added until 1980. Fresno’s population approached 50,000 in 1925. Today it’s almost 475,000.

Gateway arches and city slogans were very popular for much of the twentieth-century. What better way to attract attention to your bustling burg in the midst of the nation’s burgeoning highway system and booming tourism industry? Seemingly every small town and city erected a gateway or welcome arch, and/or adopted a slogan, particularly those communities located next door in California. As early as 1910, some called Modesto “The Best Little City in the State.” Later references in the 1930s noted “The Best Little City in California.” However, the 1912 vintage welcome arch is adorned with “Water Wealth Contentment Health.”

The Oxnard Chamber of Commerce referred to the Ventura County city in 1922 as “The Best Little City on the Coast.” Another newspaper story later in the year changed one word in the slogan, labeling Oxnard “The Best Little City Along the Coast.”

In 1935, the Woodland Chamber of Commerce called the small community north of Sacramento “The Best Little City in the West.” Oakdale, to the south in the San Joaquin Valley, was not to be outdone. A story ran in 1968 referring to the Stanislaus County community as “The Best Little City in the West.” Perhaps there were just too many best little cities in the west. Today Oakdale’s nickname is “The Gateway to Yosemite” and its slogan is “Cowboy Capital of the World.”

Speaking of gateways, Las Vegas had a gateway arch between 1929 and 1931 spanning Fremont Street where it intersected with Main Street. It read “Welcome to Las Vegas—Gateway to Boulder Dam.” Clovis, California, adjacent to Fresno, still has a gateway arch. It reads “Gateway to the Sierras.”

Although Willits, California, on Highway 101 acquired Reno’s second arch frame (1964-87) and added the slogan “Heart of Mendocino County” in 1995, the heyday of welcome and gateway arches as a marketing tool was long over. On the other hand, town and city slogans are still widely used. Over time with development and change, these communities have adopted new slogans to presumably capture their transformation.

It’s unlikely Reno will change the slogan “The Biggest Little City in the World” despite its substantial growth and current rank as a mid-size American city. The 82-year-old slogan is a nostalgic symbol of the city’s small-town past in the midst of tremendous change, particularly in the downtown core. Practically all the late 19th-century buildings are gone, so too many of the earliest 20th-century structures when



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Reno first laid claim to being the “The Biggest Little City in the World.” The welcome arch slogan not only represents a connection to this bygone time, but hopefully also the desire to sustain some essence of what made Reno so special for so long.

Photo credit: Reno’s second arch at night, courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives. This arch spanned Virginia Street in Reno from 1964-1987 and is now in Willits, California. See a photo of the redesigned sign on the city of Willits website.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* and *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley.