

Myth #11: "The First Electric Elevator West of the Mississippi" by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

An Associated Press (AP) story ran in Nevada newspapers late in 1995 that claimed, among other things, that the Goldfield Hotel "boasts the first electric elevator built west of the Mississippi." The aging Goldfield Hotel was again for sale and an article first appearing in the *Lahontan Valley News & Fallon Eagle Standard* clearly mistook myth for reality. Folklore was promoted as fact with the tired claims that Wyatt Earp worked at the hotel and President Teddy Roosevelt stayed there after its completion in 1908. However, now the story's writer went so far as to repeat the fallacious assertion that somehow the Goldfield Hotel was equipped with an electric passenger elevator before hotels in St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, and San Francisco, to name but a few cities much larger than Goldfield's 20,000 peak population.



What makes the claim all the more preposterous was that the electric elevator was first used commercially in 1889 in New York City. Goldfield was not established as a mining camp until 1902 and the Goldfield Hotel would not come along for another six years. Why wouldn't cities west of the Mississippi have electric elevators installed in their buildings long before 1908?

I called the Otis Elevator Company Historic Archives in Farmington, Connecticut, as the Otis firm pioneered the new technology. The corporate archivist told me that the first electric elevator west of the Mississippi was sold to a party in Spokane, Washington, on September 12, 1890. Continuing his review of their sales records, the archivist noted that Los Angeles and Oakland got their first elevators in 1892, and the first one in San Francisco was at the Alcazar Hotel in 1893.

The Goldfield Hotel did not have the first electric elevator in Nevada, nor did Tonopah's Mizpah Hotel which still has an operating electric passenger elevator built in 1907 by the Otis Elevator Company. The oldest extant electric passenger elevator--dating back to 1906--is located in the five-story Belvada Building in Tonopah.

However, Nevada's first electric elevator was installed at Harry J. Gosse's new Riverside Hotel in downtown Reno in 1902, fifteen years after electricity was first used in the town on the Truckee River. According to the January 25, 1903 issue of the *Nevada State Journal*, "the electric elevator is the finest make and the only hotel elevator in the State." While Virginia City's six-story International Hotel had an elevator before the building burned to the ground in 1914, the conveyance installed in 1877 was a hydraulic elevator. Fire consumed Gosse's four-story hotel and Nevada's first electric elevator in 1922. The bottom line is that any good reporter or writer needs to approach their story with some rigor and fact-check whenever possible. These myths have been making the rounds for years and are kept alive in newspaper morgue files, chamber of commerce materials, amateur "history" publications, video and DVD productions, and websites. Making matters worse, these stories find their way into the schoolroom and are unknowingly passed off as history rather than folklore or legend.

Beware the superlative claim that something or somebody was first, last, youngest, or oldest. More often than not, it isn't true!

Postscript: On August 23, 2003, the Goldfield Hotel was sold at auction to a buyer hoping to renovate and reopen the building as a hotel.

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

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