

### Myth #34: What Didn't Happen at Tonopah's Mizpah Hotel! by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

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Probably no hotel in Nevada has claimed more has happened within its walls when, in fact, it didn't happen there at all. For years promoters, managers, and owners of Tonopah's Mizpah Hotel, about halfway between Las Vegas and Reno on U.S. Highway 95, have taken great liberties with the past to enhance the history of the business and attract more patrons. The marketing strategy is an old and unsophisticated one and incorporates the "George Washington slept here" approach. As is almost always the case, the burden of proof lies with the consumer proving the claim wrong, rather than the person disseminating the information demonstrating with some evidence that the assertion is true.



Let's start with famed gunfighter and lawman Wyatt Earp. Despite the claim to the contrary, Earp had no verifiable association with the Mizpah Hotel. Yes, Wyatt, and his wife Josie, lived in Tonopah in 1902 running a saloon, prospecting, and pursuing other business. However the Mizpah Hotel only dates back to 1907-08. By then the Earps were long gone, living virtually the rest of their lives in the Los Angeles area and prospecting along the Colorado River. Brother Virgil had died in nearby Goldfield in 1905, and while Wyatt and Josie may have left LA to visit Virgil prior to his death in October, there is no record of the couple ever returning to central Nevada after 1905. The truth in this story probably relates to the Mizpah Saloon and Grill, a landmark wood-frame structure, located at the site of the Mizpah Hotel before it was built. Earp may have frequented the business before it was moved to the south end of Tonopah to make way for the Mizpah Hotel in 1907.

In another column, I demonstrated the claim was preposterous that long-time Democratic U.S. Senator Key Pittman of Nevada had died prior to the 1940 general election and his body kept on ice at the Mizpah Hotel. Records, newspapers, and an interview with Dr. "Bart" Hood, Pittman's personal physician, clearly indicate that Key died in Reno's Washoe General Hospital some 4 days after the election. The November 5 edition of the Nevada State Journal noted that Pittman was hospitalized and would not be able to travel to Tonopah to cast his vote as was his custom. The senator's wife, Mimosa, arrived at his bedside on Election Day from Washington, D.C. Her journal stated that she saw her husband alive and conscious: "Went straight to hospital with Dr. Hood. Key happy."

Despite the bogus frozen body tale repeated in the controversial book *The Green Felt Jungle* (1963), and, at one time, on the hotel's Key Pittman Restaurant menu, the story is really about keeping the news of Pittman's terminal illness, linked to a massive heart attack, from the voters. Following Pittman's death, Governor "Ted" Carville, a Democrat, could then appoint another Democrat to the vacant seat--which he did in appointing Berkeley Bunker of Las Vegas.

Moving ahead in time 17 years, a myth has seemingly developed around multi-millionaire and eccentric Howard Hughes's secretive second marriage to Hollywood actress Jean Peters in Tonopah. We know from marriage records and other later biographical accounts that early in the morning on January 12, 1957, Hughes, Peters, and a few select Hughes' associates, flew from the LA area to the former Tonopah Army Air Base in a new 120-passenger TWA Constellation (Hughes owned TWA at the time). The commonly-accepted story goes the troupe was shuttled to the Mizpah Hotel, where several rooms had been reserved. Under the assumed names of G. A. Johnson of Las Vegas (Hughes) and Marian Evans of Los Angeles (Peters), the couple was married. Their first honeymoon night was not spent in Tonopah, but rather in LA following a quick return flight. According to the account in *Empire*, a Hughes biography published in 1979, "[t]he entire operation took about three hours."

Hughes' veil of secrecy lasted for quite some time. Rumor abounded in Hollywood and elsewhere of the marriage, but no press accounts appeared until March 1957, and they were full of distortions as to when and where the couple were wedded. Tonopah was not mentioned in any of the stories. In fact, the Nye County marriage certificate with the fictitious names was not filed in the county recorder's office until May 27 by District Attorney William P. Beko (later long-time district judge).

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Eventually the facts came out that Hughes and Peters were actually married in Tonopah. Yet according to LeRoy David, a Nye County Democratic Assemblyman at the time, Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, a.k.a. the Johnsons, were married in his apartment at the L&L Motel (razed in 2005) and not at the Mizpah Hotel (the biography *Empire* referred to a second-floor room in "a nondescript motel"). David, late in life, had mistakenly credited Justice of the Peace Tom McCulloch with marrying the couple--McCulloch was not elected JP until November 1958. Actually the marriage certificate shows long-time JP Walter Bowler conducted the brief wedding ceremony. In an interview in 2002 with Associated Press reporter Martin Griffith, a former Hughes attorney, D. Martin Cook, said, "the only people in the motel room other than the happy couple and himself were Hughes aide James Arditto and Justice of the Peace Walter Bowler, who performed the five-minute ceremony." Arditto had arranged the Tonopah wedding with the assistance of Las Vegas City Attorney Howard Cannon, who was later a long-time U.S. Senator from Nevada.

Jean Peters obtained a divorce from Howard Hughes in Hawthorne on June 18, 1971.

So has anything happened at the Mizpah Hotel that corresponds with the claims made over the years?

Well, some people claim Jack Dempsey held a job at the Mizpah Hotel. Dempsey, who won the world's heavyweight title in 1919 from Jess Willard, fought a number of fights in Nevada including against Johnny Sundenberg in Tonopah on June 13, 1915. Dempsey, originally from Colorado, got into the fight game in 1911 and bounced around Nevada for a few years until Tex Rickard, one of the great boxing promoters of the day, took him to the big time. There are no known published sources to prove conclusively whether or not Dempsey worked at the Mizpah, and he has been dead since 1983. However, he wrote in his 1960 autobiography "I never was a saloon bouncer in my life," casting considerable doubt on the widely-publicized claim that he was once a bouncer in the bar of the Tonopah hotel. William Pettite of Fair Oaks, California—a friend and associate of Jack Dempsey late in Dempsey's life—wrote in a letter dated January 12, 2001, that "[Dempsey] was never a bouncer anywhere... never worked at the Mizpah Hotel... and never met Tex Rickard until 1919 in New Jersey."

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

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