From Wadsworth to Sparks

Edward H. Harriman, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, wanted to reroute the company’s tracks from Sacramento through Nevada to Ogden, Utah, beginning in 1901. Land was bought in 1902, and the town site was laid out in 1903. At that time, trains were the primary way both passengers and freight moved throughout the United States. By eliminating dangerous curves and steep grades, trains could transport more passengers and freight at a faster rate. Harriman found that land in Reno was too expensive, so he scouted four miles east of Reno for a new division point that would bypass Wadsworth, the existing division point. The Southern Pacific Railroad bought land on the Mary Wall and William Thomas Ranches for the new roundhouse, shops, and town. Newspaper headlines proclaimed: “Entire town to be moved.” Wadsworth businesses and residents followed their customers and friends to the new unnamed town east of Reno.

Source: Cox, Joyce M. Images of America: SPARKS. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2017.

Why Move From Wadsworth to Sparks?

In the year 1902, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company had shortened and straightened the line across the Forty Mile Desert, thereby eliminating Wadsworth, the current division point, necessitating a new division point. Reno was considered, but the sudden large increase in the price of real estate in that city caused Southern Pacific to reconsider. The land a few miles east of Reno was swampy, subject to flooding and therefore considered unsuitable by Renoites. But Southern Pacific officials preferred the costly filling of the swamps to the costly Reno real estate market. The company purchased land from the widow Thomas/Martin’s and Miss Mary Wall’s ranches, and the “Big Fill” began. The Southern Pacific Railroad Company delivered the rock and dirt to the new area twice a day. The crew of 350 men, which only had wheelbarrows and horse drawn graders, worked 24-hours a day in two shifts. They spread 360 cars of material a day. This operation took six months. The ground was filled up to nine feet deep in places and raised the average elevation by 18 inches.

**Source:** Sparks Centennial History Book Committee. History of Sparks, Centennial Edition. 2004.

How Did Sparks Get Its Name?

As the railroad “took over” transportation in the area, Glendale was no longer on the main route through the valley. When the realignment of the old Central Pacific track was put into operation and the new facility for Southern Pacific Railroad begun, several names were suggested for the area including *New Wadsworth*, *East Reno* and *Harriman*. The latter was in honor of the president of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, Edward H. Harriman. This worthy official objected and gave notice that the town be given another name. A meeting of interested parties was held to determine the proper name. Many inhabitants wanted the name of *Glendale*. However, the railroad pointed out the problem of safety issues since there was a station by that name near Los Angeles, California. Then *East Reno* was offered again, but there would be too much confusion on the railroad to have two similar named stations so close together.

Finally, the name of the State of Nevada’s current governor was suggested, Governor John Sparks… They called him “Honest John Sparks,” according to a Nevada Historical Society report. In the April 7, 1904 Nevada State Journal, Governor Sparks is quoted, “Although I have been approached by a few friends who have urged that I allow them to use my name in selecting a title for the new town, I would prefer that the people of the coming city select some other name. I heartily appreciate the spirit which prompts my friends in East Reno to name their city in my honor.”

The municipality was only three years old at the time it was officially incorporated into a city on March 15, 1905. That was the day Governor Sparks signed the bill which granted his namesake a city charter.

**Source:** Sparks Centennial History Book Committee. History of Sparks, Centennial Edition. 2004.

History of Wadsworth

The Wadsworth area was important for settlers as early as 1841, but was not formally established until the railroad arrived. Westbound immigrants, having crossed the Forty-Mile Desert to the east, found the area on the big bend of the Truckee River a welcome place to rest and water livestock. Seasonal trading posts were established by 1854. Wadsworth turned from small settlement to permanent town in 1868, when it was designated as a service station and headquarters for the Central Pacific Railroad’s Truckee Division.

By 1883, the town had become an important supply and maintenance station for the railroad. Wadsworth also was a freight and trading center for outlying mining camps, as well as to the agricultural community of Stillwater. A fire destroyed most of the town in 1884. But Wadsworth was rebuilt, and by 1900 supported a population of 1,309.

Citing outdated structures and another destructive fire, railroad officials moved service facilities, thirty miles to the west in 1904. The event greatly reduced the population of Wadsworth, with railroad employees moving their families – and, in some cases, houses – to the new location just east of Reno. The move resulted in the formation of Sparks, which immediately sprang to life.

**Source:** Marschall, P. (2009, March 18). Wadsworth. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from http://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/wadsworth