

May-June 2015
Walking Tours!
See Pages 6-7

HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS HRPS



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Dedicated to Preserving and Promoting Historic Resources in the Truckee Meadows through Education, Advocacy and Leadership.

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Reno's Apartments with History

by Debbie Hinman

While Reno of today boasts of many beautiful, historic homes, an often overlooked segment of its residential history is the wonderful array of early apartment houses and complexes scattered throughout the city. From stately rectangular white-columned structures to Spanish-style units clinging resolutely to a steep hillside to individual all-steel apartment homes, these dwellings have a rich and varied history and tell a unique story of Reno's residential past.

By 1900, the small but thriving city of Reno had grown to 4,500 residents, a population that would more than double by 1910. During this decade, many new homes would be built to accommodate the growth, but there was recognition that less expensive and less permanent housing was needed. According to the U. S. Census report, 1105 dwelling units were erected during this period, more than in any previous decade and any other decade until 1940. There were hotels that accommodated some long-term residents but a few entrepreneurial developers saw the large apartment house as the answer.

Who would live in these apartment houses? The answer is a myriad of different people for a myriad of different reasons. New residents hoping to make a life in this growing city, current residents building a new home who needed lodging in the meantime, young couples just beginning their lives together, elderly residents unable or unwilling to cope with the upkeep of a home and singles needing temporary housing until they received their divorce decrees—all of these found apartment living affordable, convenient and pleasant. Most of the apartment houses featured here are still a vibrant part

of Reno's residential life; one group of apartment homes has been disbursed throughout the city and the units have joined established neighborhoods as single-family homes, and one apartment house stands empty, unique and lovely, hopefully awaiting new life in the future.

The Colonial Apartments/Ross Manor 118 West Street - 1907

One of Reno's early developers was Charles E. Clough who arrived in the 1890s, billing himself as a builder, architect and contractor. Clough established the Reno Press Brick Company



An early postcard of the Colonial Apartments, now Ross Manor.

around the turn of the century and with his partner George Crosby, built the Thoma-Bigelow building which long occupied the northwest corner of Front (First) and Virginia streets. In June of 1907, construction began on a large apartment house on the corner of Front (First) and West streets. The structure, which would be called the Colonial Apartments, would, of course, be constructed of brick and would contain 48 apartments. Clough would reside there himself and

was the apartment manager until his death in 1932. In 1912, the owners purchased the lot to the south of the apartments to put in a lawn area and add an addition. The *Reno Evening Gazette* reported, "This demonstrates that times are good in Reno and that more room is needed for apartments." Today the structure is known as Ross Manor or the Ross Apartments. It looks much like it did 108 years ago and the units remain a popular option for downtown renters.

Continued on page 2

Reno's Apartments with History (continued)

Continued from page 1

The California Apartments/ Vacchina Apartments 45 California Avenue - 1922

Eduardo (Edward) Vacchina, an Italian immigrant, first visited Reno for the 1910 Johnson/Jeffries fight, often called "The Fight of the Century." According to his son, Elmer, he became aware of the large Italian community in Reno and that there was insufficient housing for visitors in town. In the early 1920s, he began building the California Apartments at 45 California Avenue. He engaged Frederic DeLongchamps to design them; DeLongchamps used concrete blocks for the 11-unit structure and gave it a Classical Revival style by adding a lovely portico and Doric columns. The units were all-electric which was very progressive for the times, and featured Murphy beds and a cedar closet. Mrs. Cora Vacchina became the on-site manager of the units, a common practice. In 1940, as Reno was beginning to thrive again following the Depression years, Vacchina engaged architect Joe Tognoni to build a second apartment house on the same property, just ten feet behind the current building. This structure faced Granite Street (now S. Sierra) and contained 16 units. Once again, they were upscale and modern;



The Belmont Apartments.

the kitchenettes and baths were all tiled in ivory, cream and light greens in varying tile patterns and were fully furnished by Home Furniture Company down to the dishes and linens. All units were air-conditioned.

The Belmont Apartments 400 Arlington Avenue - 1929

The epitome of quiet opulence, the Belmont, named for the road stretching from the river southward to California Avenue that later became absorbed by Arlington Avenue, arrived on the apartment scene in 1929. They were immediately in demand, both by divorce seekers wishing upscale lodging and locals and new arrivals wanting the same thing without the bother of ownership. Early manager/residents were Anders and Elva Pederson, Danish immigrants who divided their time between The Belmont and their popular Reno eatery, the Monarch Cafe. The beautiful imported brick exterior of the structure houses 18 studio and one-bedroom units, with elegant casement windows. There is even a belowground garage, an unusual feature for apartments of this era. But the crowning glory of the structure has to be the lobby, with its Moorish influence and mural depicting a medieval scene. Many of Reno's historic apartment houses are today showing signs of age; the Belmont, listed by the Washoe County Assessor as The Spartan, is timeless. The lovely brick with its varying shades of gold and orange has survived over 80 years with hardly a sign of age and the beautiful arched doorway and original windows evoke nostalgia for the grace of an earlier era.



The Alta Vista Apartments.

The Alta Vista Apartments 1130-1158 California Avenue - 1923 or 1930

At the same time that the lovely, stone French country-style home known as The Castle was being built by the William Johnstons at the end of California Avenue, a unique collection of stucco apartment buildings was under construction just down the hill, where California became the South Verdi Road. Set against the steep hillside on the south side of the road, the apartments were in the Spanish style, on the exterior and interior. The units rented fully furnished, with Spanish-style furnishings and pure spring water pumped into each apartment. Garages were built below the units and were claimed to be fire and frost proof. The apartments were the creation of Mrs. Echo Gerow, with John Gerow as architect and builder. Mr. Gerow was well-known for building in the Spanish style in California. Mrs. Gerow, nee Ridenour, was from an early pioneer ranching family in the area. The apartments remain unique and eclectic dwellings, attracting artists as residents.

The Del Rio Apartments 208-216 Marsh Avenue - 1932

The Del Rios were in the Mission Revival style, so popular in 1930s Reno. Like the Hiland Apartments, they were configured in a U-shape with a narrow courtyard in the center. But the Del Rios were a

Reno's Apartments with History (continued)

step up in exterior and interior design elements, with decorative Spanish tile, stained glass panels and heavy dark wood doors. Unlike the apartments discussed above that still retain their original purpose, the Del Rio is today a small office complex. However, most of the original appointments are still in place and it is clear that the owner appreciates and wishes to preserve the historic feel of the beautiful building. The Del Rios were built by Angelo and Teresa Favatt. Angelo was born in France and was a partner in a restaurant on Center Street, originally known as Fior d'Italia and later the Club Comstock, then the Silver Bar and Rathskeller. His wife Teresa, born in Italy, managed the Del Rio for the first ten years. The Del Rio Apartments, now known as the Del Rio Building, is a wonderful example of adaptive reuse to save a beautiful piece of residential history.

The El Reno Apartments 1307 So. Virginia Street - 1937

Despite their Spanish name, the style of the El Reno units was far more cottage than Spanish. Rather than being built of stucco, they were porcelain-coated all-steel units, assembled on site with numbered parts. The El Renos numbered 15, with some units arranged in a semi-

circle facing S. Virginia Street, and two rows, one facing Arroyo Street to the north, and one facing Pueblo Street to the south. Purchased by Roland Giroux from the Lea Steel Company in Los Angeles, the El Reno Apartment Homes were designed by noted architect, Paul Revere Williams. They predated the Lustron Homes and other metal housing units. The El Renos were highly desirable as rentals, in a beautiful garden setting with all the most modern amenities; most were two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath units with wood floors, a stylish large bay window and modern kitchens. The apartment homes were heated by a central plant and there were laundry facilities on site. A row of garages faced Tonopah Street, to the rear of the property. In 1947, when the Rent Control Board refused to permit a rent increase, Giroux decided to sell the units off one by one for \$800 apiece with \$100 charged to move them. Today, 12 of the units remain scattered throughout the city, occupied as single-family homes, recognizable by their signature bay windows and ventilation turbines spinning merrily atop the roofs.

The Regina Apartments 260 Island Avenue - 1941

Following the lead of the Belmont, the Regina Apartments were another collection of units encased in a lovely brick building. The exterior design was exquisite, with a beautiful front entry tower with glossy tile trim and large windows. The front units faced Wingfield Park and the river, and were within convenient walking distance to downtown shopping and services. There were only eight three-room units, but they were fully and tastefully furnished and decorated, two in Satinwood Regency period, two in Mahogany Regency, two in Swedish Modern and two in French Provincial. One front upstairs unit



The Regina Apartments stand vacant.

had the added bonus of a small den with windows on three sides, occupying the upper portion of the tower. The building had a basement for garage space, additional storage, and heating and air conditioning equipment. Joseph Tognoni designed the building for owner Jean Sigg, local businessman who managed the Club Fortune. Sadly, this apartment house is currently sitting vacant.

These are, of course, not the only significant apartment houses in Reno. There are many more around our city; others have been lost to fire or demolition, but these eight remind us that the homes of Reno can be defined in many different ways. They are an integral part of Reno's colorful residential history. 🏠



The Del Rio Apartments, now an office building.

Information for this story came from *Reno Evening Gazette* and *Nevada State Journal* articles between 1907 and 1940; various property deeds; *Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression*, Master's thesis by Mella Harmon; and Reno Historical, an online reference. Photos of the Del Rio and Hiland apartments by Kim Henrick; all other photos and the postcard courtesy of Debbie Hinman.

Debbie Hinman is a HRPS member, a HRPS Tour Guide and a member of the HRPS Editorial Board.

Sunlight Infuses 50 South Virginia Street Reimagined - Revived - Repurposed

by Carol Coleman

The downtown Reno Post Office, now known as 50 South Virginia Street, designed by Frederic DeLongchamps and completed in 1934, was decommissioned and then purchased by 50 South Virginia LLC in August 2012. Bernie Carter, managing member of the LLC and his partners have been hard at work renovating the historic building to transform it into a central hub for local business and retail.

At Open Houses held for USPS employees and retirees on March 20, and other guests on March 21 and 22, visitors were amazed to see the way that light entered this beautiful old building. We'd been in the building over a year ago, after the landscaping was done and before interior work really began. The interior was dark with no power on to turn on lights. Today natural light infuses the first and second floor, and likely the third floor.

About 1965, the Postal Service took out DeLongchamps center skylight to install a new and modern pneumatic heating and cooling system. Besides removing the natural light that came in through the skylight, they walled off the interior-facing windows on the second and third floors — making the hallways of the building “dark.”

A main effort of the LLC's repurposing of the old post office was to restore the building to Frederic DeLongchamps original concepts. Removing the HVAC system was essential to that effort.



Once the roof was opened and the HVAC system removed, reconstruction of the skylight has permeated the first floor with natural light — it's wonderful! (In a future article, we'll describe the new and efficient geothermal heat pump system that heats and cools the building.)



On the second floor, the walls covering the original interior windows were removed, windowsills created, and once again the hallways resembled what Frederic DeLongchamps had planned — lots of light. A door opens from the hallway to an outdoor walkway around the entire skylight; one can imagine a chair and table and some plants sitting in that space in the future.

The Carter brothers and crew have kept their promise to restore the building to the original plans. Ceilings upstairs have been lifted to their original height, floors have been cleaned and sanded and oiled — and look like new. The Canadian maple parquet floors in the first-floor work area are gorgeous and only a few pieces have had to be replaced due to extreme wear. The terrazzo and marble floors throughout the hallways look like new. The ornate wooden mailboxes have been cleaned and oiled — they'll be preserved for the future, names and all.

The basement, known as The Basement, will open first, possibly in early summer, and have separate access from outside.

Some prospective tenants (similar to New York's Chelsea Market) will be a spice shop, chocolatier, a barber shop, flower shop and a cold press juice bar. There will be a central seating area with Wi-Fi and down the hallway a “Lecture Hall” to offer old movies and lectures and comedy shows.

The main level of 50 South Virginia is intended for a major retail store, perhaps a store that has never been in Reno. On the second and third level, the plan is for office space and the LLC is looking for up to three different companies to share a 13,000 square-foot floor.

The project is still some ways away from completion and a potential slowdown is the construction of the Virginia Street Bridge. Keep track of progress by following <http://50southvirginia.com> for videos, pictures, articles, the whole story and updates on this project. Look on facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/50southvirginia> for updates on what is happening.



Honoring our Collective Past

by Byllie D'Amato Andrews

Last fall the *Reno Gazette-Journal* ran several articles on the rebranding of Reno, and defining the core of central Reno as a collection of neighborhoods and districts: Midtown, Wells Avenue, University Gateway, and the Arch District. Each of these districts, among other central Reno neighborhoods, contains cultural and historical resources that represent our past and make Reno distinctive from other communities. Our historic buildings weave together the common thread that tells the story of the Biggest Little City in the World. The Historic Reno Preservation Society is dedicated to supporting the preservation of these resources that have created our community, and that continue to provide a connection to our history.

Positive changes are occurring with the development and renovation in our downtown and older neighborhoods. We are seeing new life in these areas and are hearing rumors of what may be coming in the future. As I write this message, the Carter Brothers are planning private and public events at 50 South Virginia, the former Downtown Post Office (you may have even had the opportunity to attend one of these events). You can stay informed about the progress of this project at [facebook.com/50southvirginia](https://www.facebook.com/50southvirginia).

The Powning Addition and Wells Avenue Neighborhood have already been designated as Neighborhood Conservation Districts, and work is in progress to have the Newlands Neighborhood declared a Neighborhood Historic District.

Businesses along Riverside Drive and in Midtown are successfully repurposing historic buildings into thriving restaurants, coffee shops, bars and retail shopping. The Nevada-California-Oregon Train Depot has been repurposed as The Depot, and holds the honor of being Reno's first craft brewery and distillery. The Morris Hotel on 4th Street has been

repurposed as the Morris Burner Hotel and is contributing to Reno's thriving art scene.

Over the past two years the Siegel Group, based in Las Vegas, has purchased the Senator Hotel on 2nd Street, the Virginian and Nevada Hotels on North Virginia, the Truckee Lane Building between 1st Street and the Truckee River, and the classic Art Deco El Cortez Hotel. Although two of these are not historic properties, their development will definitely affect the quality of downtown redevelopment projects. The former Kings Inn, a long-standing Reno eyesore, is currently under renovation by Bentar Development, also based in Las Vegas.

The people who developed the projects in the first group discussed above are people who call Reno their home; their investments are where they live. Other projects occurring in Reno's core are being undertaken by people who don't have the same connection to the Truckee Meadows, and HRPS must be ever vigilant to ensure that development of historic properties in Reno is pursued in a way that celebrates and preserves our shared history. To this end, the Advisory Advocacy Council has compiled a watch list of potentially threatened historic buildings. Since we aren't omnipresent, we are asking our HRPS members to notify us if they learn of changes — good or bad, planned or in progress — to any of the buildings below. If we have omitted a building that should be on this list, let us know so we can add it.


- Freight House on Evans Street
- Nevada Brewing Works on 4th Street
- Regina Apartments on Island Avenue
- First Masonic Building (Reno Mercantile) at Sierra and Commercial
- Buildings in The University Gateway District
- Buildings in the University Neighborhood

- The El Cortez Hotel at 2nd and Arlington
- Hill/Redfield Mansion on Mt. Rose Street

The City of Reno's Community Development Department (reno.gov/government/departments/community-development-department/historic-resources) sums up my sentiments perfectly:

"These 'old buildings' reflect the character and values of the people who shaped our city and made it into the unique place that it is today. Historic structures add to the value and character of their surroundings. They are non-renewable resources ... In order to maintain the value of historic buildings and to preserve them for future generations, it is necessary to take deliberate measures to ensure their continued survival."

HRPS Program Chair Steve Davis continues to work with Washoe County Library System to offer a second presentation of each of our regular HRPS programs on the Sundays following the regularly scheduled fourth Wednesday programs. Paul Starrs' program, *Let the Cowboy Ride: Ranch Life in Northern Nevada*, will be presented at the Laxalt Theater on Wednesday, April 22, at 7:00 pm, and in the Auditorium at the Downtown Reno Library on Sunday, April 26, at 1:00 pm.

In closing, we welcome Katherene Latham and Patricia & Wayne Melton, our newest Lifetime Members. The Meltons and Ms. Latham join 28 other couples and individuals who have made this commitment to HRPS. Income from Lifetime Memberships is used to support our Neighborhood Preservation Fund. 



Historic Preservation Month

May-June 2015

HRPS Historic Walking Tours

Put on your walking shoes – it’s time for Historic Reno Preservation Society’s spring tour season to begin. Tour cost is \$10 per person, free to HRPS members. Walks generally last from 1½ to 2 hours. No dogs please. **Reservations are required and space is limited.** Please go to www.historicreno.org or call 747-4478 for information and reservations.

MAY HISTORIC WALKS

Saturday May 2 10:00 a.m. **NEWLANDS NEIGHBORHOOD** – Enjoy an architectural walk through one of Reno’s oldest and most prestigious neighborhoods. Meet at the Lander Street side of My Favorite Muffin, 340 California Avenue. Tour guide: Scott Gibson.

Saturday May 9 10:00 a.m. **CULTURAL CROSSROADS, EAST SIDE** – Some call Lake Street “Paradise Lost” but we will recreate the vibrant neighborhoods of Chinatown, Little Italy and Basque life. Meet at the National Automobile Museum parking lot area, 10 Lake Street. Tour guide: Sharon Honig-Bear.

Saturday May 16 10:00 a.m. **BRICKS AND STONES** – A walk through the Humboldt and Lander Streets Neighborhood. Discover the architectural treasures of this area, a mix of bungalows, Tudor and mission revivals and cottage styles. Meet at the Lander Street side of My Favorite Muffin, 340 California Avenue. Tour guide: Bill Isaeff.

Saturday May 23 10:00 a.m. **MOVIE FOOTPRINTS IN RENO** – Walk in the footsteps of Marilyn Monroe, Kirk Douglas, Kevin Costner, Clint Eastwood, Maggie Smith, Helen Mirren and more. The tour covers downtown Reno’s rich filming history inspired by divorce, gambling and the city’s distinct look in such movies as “The Misfits,” “Cobb,” “Sister Act” and “Love Ranch.” Meet in the lobby of the National Automobile Museum, 10 South Lake Street. Tour guide: Robin Holabird.

Saturday May 30 10:00 a.m. **BEYOND THE ARCHES** – Witness downtown Reno as it has reinvented itself for 150 years. This tour links the downtown Reno arches with stories of the forces that shaped the town: railroad and mining, immigrants, as a notorious divorce and gambling mecca-- and now as a livable cultural hub. Walk in the footsteps of Bill Harrah, Myron Lake, Baby Face Nelson, Frederic DeLongchamps and others. Meet at the National Automobile Museum parking lot area, 10 S. Lake St. Tour guide: Jim Smith.

JUNE HISTORIC WALKS

Tuesday June 2 6:00 p.m. **HISTORIC UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO CAMPUS** – Visit Morrill Hall, Mackay School of Mines and the Keck Museum to learn the history of this beautiful campus. Meet on campus at the Honor Court just off 9th and Center streets. Tour guides: Jack Hursh and Bob Shriver.

Saturday June 6 9:00 a.m. **DELONGCHAMPS RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE** – This walk takes you on a neighborhood tour of homes, large and small, designed by Reno’s notable architect, Frederic DeLongchamps. Hear about his life and what made him so unique to this area. Meet at the Hardy House/Arte Italia, 442 Flint Street. Tour guide: Anne Simone.

Tuesday June 9 6:00 p.m. **PARSONS/MILLS ARCHITECTURE** – Stroll one of Reno’s most unique neighborhoods to view some properties designed by Reno architects Edward Parsons and Russell Mills, who sometimes collaborated on designs. Hear about the families who first lived in these homes. Meet at the corner of Marsh Avenue and LaRue. Tour guides: April Kempler and Anne Simone.



Truckee River (and walking bridge) and new McKinley School c. 1915. Courtesy Nevada Historical Society.

JUNE HISTORIC WALKS, cont.

MID-CENTURY MODERN — PLEASE NOTE SPECIAL DAY AND STARTING TIME AT 3:00 P.M. — Thursday June 11 3:00 p.m. — Reno underwent a building boom in the 1960s and 70s to keep up with trends in modern architecture. Join HRPS on a special tour with in-depth, interior visits to the Downtown Reno Library, “old” City Hall (now the Discovery Museum), “new” City Hall (formerly FIB building) and the Pioneer Center. Background information on the Modern Movement and examples in Reno will be provided. Tour begins in the Lobby at 3 p.m. at the Downtown Reno Library, 301 So. Center Street. Tour guide: Sharon Honig-Bear. Reservations are a must.

UPPER RALSTON/NORTHERN LITTLE ITALY — Saturday June 13 9:00 a.m. — Enjoy a walk in a residential neighborhood with a mix of architectural styles. Proximity to the University has traditionally determined the mix of residents, professors and students alike. Meet at the intersection of Washington Street, The Strand and College Avenue. Tour guides: Jim and Sue Smith.

WELLS AVENUE NEIGHBORHOOD — Tuesday June 16 6:00 p.m. — Take a stroll through a working-class neighborhood along the path of the Wells Avenue streetcar, across the V&T tracks, and past the homes of the “Thoma Street Gang.” Meet at the Sinclair Street side at the historic Southside School Annex, 190 East Liberty Street. Tour guide: Mark Taxer.

DOWNTOWN SPARKS — Saturday June 20 9:00 a.m. — Learn about the history of the rail city with a one-hour guided walking tour of Victorian Square and Downtown Sparks. This interactive tour is designed to show how this area has transformed itself from a railroad hub, to a vibrant commercial district, to a rundown urban area and finally to a successful redevelopment area that has changed the image and future of the city. The tour includes 17 buildings and sites that have played an important role in the history and development of Sparks and Nevada. Tour begins and ends at the Sparks Heritage Museum located at 814 Victorian Avenue, Sparks. Tour guide: Scott Carey.

HISTORIC TRUCKEE RIVER WALK — Tuesday June 23 6:00 p.m. — A relaxing stroll along the Truckee River from the McKinley Arts and Cultural Center to the Lear Theater reveals eclectic architecture grounded by rich political histories and spiced with colorful anecdotes. Meet in front at the McKinley Arts and Cultural Center, 925 Riverside Drive. Tour guide: Joan Collins.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET — Saturday June 27 9:00 a.m. — Perhaps you’ve done the Mansions on the Bluff and DeLongchamps walk but how about the houses on the *other* side of Court, Ridge, California and Arlington? Distinctive architecturally styled homes line these quiet streets where many of Reno’s families lived, some for over 50 years. Today the neighborhood is a blend of family homes along with businesses. Meet at the southwest corner of Arlington and Court. Tour guide: Anne Simone.

EL RENO APARTMENT HOMES — Tuesday June 30 6:00 p.m. — Visit the original site of these charming and unique homes and view seven of them at their new locations. Other examples of the Sierra Vista Addition architecture will be seen. Meet at the northwest corner of the Statewide Lighting parking lot, 1311 S. Virginia. Tour guide: Debbie Hinman.

Did Fred Have a Sense of Humor?

by Kim Henrick

NOTE: *Frederic J. DeLonchant changed the spelling of his last name to “DeLongchamps” in late 1911, and he usually referred to himself as “Fred.”*

On August 27, 1909, the *Nevada State Journal* (NSJ) published an article touting Frederic DeLonchant’s contest-winning design for the remodel of the Washoe County Courthouse: “F. J. DeLonchant, the successful competitor is a Reno man. He was born and raised here and was graduated in this city from the University of Nevada. He has been four years in the business and in that time has prepared the plans and supervised the constructions [*sic*] of 31 buildings of importance.” I wonder what Fred thought when he read that article. Was he proud as he reflected on his already-amazing career, or did he read the article and chuckle at the embarrassing blunder. In the 1960s, Fred made a list and titled it, “The following list is a selected part of the items that have been completed during the active time.” He started this list with the “Washoe County Court House.” I’m sorry his “active time” didn’t include the 31 buildings of importance that he reportedly designed and supervised before that.

Who Was Frederic J. DeLongchamps?

Any history-loving Renoite, who has lived here for at least six days, is probably familiar with the name Frederic J. DeLongchamps—Nevada’s preeminent architect. His legacy is the impressive collection of hundreds of beautifully-designed buildings scattered around our state and others. Two local favorites are the Washoe County Courthouse and the U. S. Post Office buildings in downtown Reno. Much of what we know

about DeLongchamps comes from his extensive architectural drawings and specifications collection (NC 1215) at the University of Nevada Libraries, Special Collections Department. Unfortunately, this collection includes little from before the courthouse commission. This article examines the period between 1904, when Fred graduated from the University of Nevada, and August 1909, when he won the courthouse design contest. It was a period in which several historians have credited him with great architectural achievements—yet they remain a mystery to this day. More about that later.



Author’s sketch of Tesch & DeLonchant’s 1907 grammar school design.

A Rare Find

It may be hard to believe, but in looking back on our area’s educational history, the year 1907 may rival the year 2014 for contentious and divisive news. School attendance had grossly outpaced the creation of new classroom space (school attendance had grown significantly from the 1,191 pupils in February 1906). A *Reno Evening Gazette* (REG) article on September 16, 1907, reported that the school houses in use at that time were the “Central High School building, the Southside school, the Riverside school,

the Whitaker hall and the Kindergarten.” Another article that same month states, “One teacher, Miss Catherine Hand, has been teaching 76 pupils in two sections, giving each half a day of instruction.” The system was running in emergency mode, and hopeful that a school bond issue would pass to fund some new schools, the Reno School District #10 published the notice calling for bids to design “an eight-room brick schoolhouse of modern style, with proper halls and cloakrooms, not to exceed \$25,000 in cost...” The new grammar school was to be built on the southwest corner of

Ralston and 2nd streets. Since this article isn’t really about the school system, but rather this particular school building, we’ll jump ahead to the winning building design. [Note: For an in-depth history of Reno’s schools, please read Debbie Hinman’s *FootPrints* (Fall 2011) article titled, “A History of Reno’s Early Schools: 1868-1912,” and her *FootPrints* (Summer 2012) article titled, “A History of Reno’s Early Schools: 1912-The Present.”]

On July 16, 1907, the *REG* reported, “...the school trustees accepted the plans offered by Tesch & DeLonchant [*sic*], local architects, for the new grammar school building.” (See the crude sketch of the schoolhouse that I reproduced from a poor newspaper image. I’m glad Fred will never have to see this.) The article goes on to say, “It is one of the most attractive buildings of its kind to be found anywhere, its lines being simple and beautiful to a degree.”

NOTE: This is a little off the subject, but jump ahead a few years when an editorial in the July 13, 1909 *REG* criticizes this *style* of architecture like this: It is “...ornamented with an aggressive

Did Fred Have a Sense of Humor? (continued)

obtruding chicken-coop deformity on top, designed for what purpose no rational being has yet been able to give a satisfactory answer.” The article specifically criticizes the new City Hall of Reno building at Front (First) and Center streets (completed in May 1907), which also had a similar chicken-coop *deformity*. The editorial pleaded for the new Washoe County Courthouse remodel coming up soon to be of a “modern design,” and not another “monstrosity.” Well, Ira Tesch and Fred DeLonchant were in good company when they designed their schoolhouse, since the similar City Hall of Reno building was designed by prominent Reno architect

See my photograph of the present-day southwest corner of Ralston and 2nd streets, where the school would have been built.

Another Grand Claim

The grammar school design by Tesch and DeLonchant does not satisfy any part of the August 27, 1909, *NSJ* claim since the schoolhouse was never built. (Remember, Fred was supposed to have designed and supervised the construction of 31 buildings of importance.) But there have been numerous claims (with slight variations) made in the last 30-or-so years in which the schoolhouse

ment in the April 4, 1907, *REG*, titled “Going to Work For Themselves,” the gentlemen announce that they will leave the U. S. Surveyor General’s office in Reno the next day and “open offices in the Sunderland building on Virginia street, where they will do architectural work and general drafting.” There is more evidence that they started their business in April, but that hasn’t been controversial. But, how long were they together? Here are a few facts: (1) a lengthy *NSJ* article published on December 12, 1965, about Frederic DeLongchamps’ and George O’Brien’s retirement, states that after a year, Fred’s partner (Tesch) had to return to



Southwest corner of Ralston and 2nd streets, where the grammar school would have been built. Photo courtesy author.

M. J. Curtis. And in their defense, the school board specifically requested a “tower” in the grammar school design. (I wonder if Fred read that July 1909 editorial piece, because a “chicken coop” couldn’t be found anywhere on his Washoe County Courthouse remodel plans.) Now, back to the school story.

Unfortunately, the school bond measure never materialized in 1907 and this grammar school was never built. In November, the school board approved payment of \$250 to Tesch and DeLonchant for their school design and around \$64 for their plans for a new lavatory building at Central High School.

design fits nicely. It goes something like this: Tesch and DeLonchant received “some 30 commissions” during their partnership. In these reports, the period of their business arrangement is often expressed as “two years,” presumably 1907 to 1909. (I won’t list the sources of these modern claims as they can easily be found on government websites and in their publications, in many newspaper articles, and in scholarly journals.)

I believe Ira W. Tesch and Fred DeLonchant were in business together for only about a year, not two, making the supposed “30 commissions” claim even more implausible. In an announce-

ment “due to an illness in his family;” (2) an article in the *Salt Lake Herald* on July 8, 1909, reported that Ira’s wife, Gertrude B. Tesch, testified in a divorce action against Tesch, and claimed that he had deserted her back on August 14, 1908, and then wrote to her in November from Denver, where he was working as a traveling shoe salesman; (3) and, what seems a little odd, was that there were over 60 business advertisements for “Tesch & DeLonchant” between April 23 and September 11, 1907, so for only about five months. Then, in the following four months,

Continued on page 10

Did Fred Have a Sense of Humor? (continued)

Continued from page 9

there were only *three* sporadically-placed ads for “Johnson, Tesch & DeLonchant.” (I’m not sure who this Johnson fellow was.) After that no more ads appear again for the firm. So, Fred claimed he and Tesch were together for one year. Their business ads don’t run even for a full year, and Tesch’s wife’s testimony has her husband moving back to Denver, possibly as early as August 1908. I get the feeling that this business arrangement wasn’t a two-year venture, let alone a successful one.

What Should We Make of Fred’s Early Years?

I’m going to take a giant leap here (and this is pure speculation), and say the *NSJ* article on August 27, 1909, about the “31 buildings of importance” could likely have been the seed for the much later claims. I think it may have been tweaked to coincide with Fred’s and Ira’s business years (when Fred publicly engaged in *architectural* endeavors), and the duration of their business was conveniently rounded off to a neat 1907-1909. And I believe since no “built” buildings had been found by these two men, the original article language was changed to “some 30 commissions.”


I will stop hunting for any more early Fred buildings, but hope to stumble on more some day. But, I think he did just fine with what we *know* he accomplished in those early years. Most researchers agree (thanks in part to his own written recollections of his life) that he graduated from the University of Nevada in 1904 with a mining engineering degree and then spent about a year working in the mining industry in Southern California. He then worked for a few years in the U. S. Surveyor’s office in Reno before starting an architectural business with Ira W. Tesch in April of 1907. And, maybe Fred even had something of a social life. Let’s lose the image of him hunkered down over a drafting table, and entertain the idea that he might have had a little fun back then.

It’s 1907 and not only does Fred start a business with Ira W. Tesch, but in June of that year he marries Elizabeth (Bessie) Shay of Virginia City. In August, the newspapers report that he’s the pitcher for the Reno Victors baseball team; in September he’s on the nominating committee for the Reno Wheelmen’s Club (bicycle club); and in October Fred is on the

“program committee” of the newly-formed Entre Nous Club. “Entre Nous” loosely means “between us,” or “privately,” and this all-men club sets out to put on the greatest dance parties Reno has ever experienced. One dance party in November of 1907 boasted “more than 140 couples attended and danced until a late hour to music from Kyle’s 10-piece orchestra which was surrounded by palms and flowers.” In February 1908, Bessie gave birth to their son Frederic Vincente (also spelled Vincent), and Bessie too had a social life. In January 1909, Bessie attended a grand party for the St. Agnes ladies club that was held at Mrs. Frank Golden’s impressive home on Mill Street, where she likely mingled with prominent ladies like Mrs. Alf Doten and Mrs. Charles Gulling.



I’m not sure what Fred did between the end of his partnership with Tesch (likely sometime between the spring and summer of 1908), and May 27, 1909, when the State of Nevada “asked for plans and specifications for the construction of a ward building on the grounds of the Nevada Hospital for Mental Diseases.” But I’ve always been impressed with what he did next. Working alone (as far as state records indicate), with only two weeks to come up with plans, Fred designed a handsome, 3-story brick building that would accommodate state hospital staff and 70 patients, and matched the style of the original hospital building. The state accepted his plans on June 9, 1909, and we now know that the Washoe County Courthouse was not Fred’s first “solo” commission, nor was it his first “big” commission. I would argue that both the state hospital ward building (solo design) and the earlier unbuilt grammar school in 1907 (joint design with Tesch) would have been considered big design jobs by any standards in those years.

I welcome any proof of more commissions during this early period, whether they culminated in a built structure or not, and I will follow up with that information in a future article. Contact the author at khenrick@rtci.net. 

Sources not listed are a few newspaper articles that can be easily found with an online article search by the month and year.

Kim Henrick is member of HRPS and the HRPS Editorial Staff.

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Steve Davis – Program Chair; srdavis1941@gmail.com

Historic Reno Preservation Society's free programs offer an assortment of Reno historic topics. **All program events are on the 4th Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm at The Laxalt Theater in the Nelson Building at 401 W. Second Street, Reno.** For more program information contact Steve Davis at srdavis1941@gmail.com or call 747-4478 and leave a message. More organization information can be found at www.historicreno.org or on Facebook.

Wednesday, April 22, 7:00 pm, Let the Cowboy Ride: Ranch Life in Northern Nevada: Paul Starrs, a UNR geography professor, will speak about his decades of research on western ranching. A former cowboy himself, Starrs will discuss ranching in the Great Basin. Starrs is the author of several books including, *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West*.

Sunday, April 26, 1:00 pm, Paul Starr's program, Let the Cowboy Ride: Ranch Life in Northern Nevada, will be presented again at the Auditorium in the Downtown Library.

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Dinner with history speakers and presentations, third Thursday of the month, 6:00 pm, Sands Regency Casino banquet room, 345 N. Arlington Avenue, Reno.
For reservations, call the Sands at 348-1392 no later than two weeks before.

www.nevadawesterners.org

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