



Nevada

Historical Society Quarterly



VOLUME XII
Number 3

FALL
1969

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Founded in 1904 for the purpose of investigating topics pertaining to the early history of Nevada and of collecting relics for a museum, the **NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY** has dedicated itself to the continuing purpose of preserving the rich heritage of the peoples—past and present—who have inhabited the land of Nevada.

The Society believes that it can best serve the State by arousing in the people an historical consciousness which it hopes will be carried to succeeding generations. Thus, through its director, the Society sponsors an educational program which carries the history of Nevada to the schools and organizations throughout the State.

The Society maintains a library and museum where historical materials of many kinds are on display to the public and are available to students and scholars.

The Society publishes the **NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S QUARTERLY** which publishes articles of interest to readers in the social, cultural, economic, and political history of the Great Basin area: Nevada, eastern California, eastern and southern Oregon, Idaho, and Utah.

NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
QUARTERLY

FALL 1969

VOLUME XII
NUMBER 3

EDITOR
Mrs. Andy Welliver

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**LETTERS OF WARREN WASSON,
INDIAN AGENT**

INTRODUCTION BY FEROL EGAN

COVER
Pyramid Lake
Indian Reservation

The NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY is published by the Nevada Historical Society, P.O. Box 1129, Reno, Nevada. Orders for membership, change of address, and undeliverable copies should be addressed to the Society.

Second class mailing privilege authorized at Reno, Nevada

SPO, CARSON CITY, NEVADA, 1969



*Warren Wasson,
Model Indian Agent*

FEROL EGAN



Warren Wasson.

—Credit Nevada State Museum.

Of all the unsung heroes of the American West, the good Indian Agent probably stands as the least understood of the Western Pantheon. The reasons for this are varied. Some are involved with the fact that many Indian Agents were in their positions through political pull, and some are involved with the fact that some agents were in their positions for avaricious aims. However, Nevada's second Indian Agent was a man of rare quality, a man who saw the need for justice and help for the Paiute and Washo people. He went out of his way to protect their rights, insure their well being, and explain their cultures to whites who persisted in believing that the only good Indian was a dead one.

Warren Wasson did not emigrate to the Great Basin to become an Indian Agent. A New Yorker by birth, an Illinois resident by parental transplant, Wasson and his father crossed the plains in the boom year of 1849. But this was only sixteen-year-old Wasson's first overland trip. In 1851, he returned to the East via the sea route, and came overland again in the following year. By 1857, young Wasson was acquainted with the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada in what was then the Territory of Utah. Then in 1858, he bought the rights to ranch in Long Valley, about five miles from Beckwourth Pass at Big Hot Springs. The sellers of these rights were Numaga of the Paiutes and Washo Chief Deer Dick.¹

During a year of ranching at Long Valley, Warren Wasson made friends with two men who helped to change the course of his life. One was Numaga, an outstanding leader among the Pyramid Lake Paiutes. From him, Wasson learned enough about the Paiute people to convince him that they had been badly mistreated by ruthless white settlers. At the same time, Wasson became acquainted with Frederick Dodge, Indian Agent for the Carson Valley agency which then consisted of the western portion of the Territory of Utah. Through his friendship with these two men and with both the Washo and Paiute people who made his place ". . . a sort of council rendezvous. . .,"² Wasson became an intermediary between Agent Dodge and the Indians.

Then in June 1859, Wasson gave up his Long Valley ranch and moved to Genoa. Here, he purchased another ranch, and served as one of the delegates to the Genoa Convention for the organization of a provisional government.³ However, he did not lose interest in his Indian friends, and that year he visited the reservations which Dodge had set up:

One on the Truckee river, commencing at a point one (1) mile above the Tower crossing or great bend of the Truckee, and extending down the river to and including the lake of the same, (Pyramid Lake,) and embracing the lands contiguous on each side of the river and lake; the other on Walker river, commencing at the great bend, about twenty-five (25) miles above the lake (Walker,) and running down to and including the same, and embracing the contiguous lands on both sides of the river and lake.⁴

Throughout 1859 and a good portion of 1860, Wasson saw Frederick Dodge in his role as Indian Agent. He went with him on trips to the Truckee and Walker Reservations. And he was very much aware of Dodge's trouble in getting enough money from the government. As Wasson saw it, Dodge was always short of funds and had even used five thousand dollars of his own to purchase supplies, presents, building materials, and to pay his employees. Finally, Dodge went to Salt Lake City to talk to Jacob Forney, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Territory of Utah. When Forney refused to even give him an interview, Dodge broke into his apartment and gave him a sound thrashing. After this, he traveled to Washington, D.C., where he had better luck, for he was reimbursed, and his agency was removed from the jurisdiction of the Utah superintendent.⁵

By the time Dodge reappeared in Carson Valley, all hell had broken loose. The two battles of the Paiute War were over. His friend Warren Wasson had made a frantic ride from Genoa to Honey Lake Valley, covering 110 miles in 14 hours, to contact a company of cavalry and deliver a telegraph order from General Clarke of the San Francisco Presidio to ride south to protect the terrified citizens of the Comstock.⁶

Along with serving as a courier during Dodge's absence, Wasson had also become a guide and scout for the army after mountainman Michael Bushey was killed by Indians. As Wasson later wrote, he was ". . . thus engaged when Dodge arrived."⁷ Knowing a good situation when he saw it, Dodge promptly hired him for \$125^x per month plus expenses to act as negotiator between the Paiutes and the whites until peace was restored.⁸

After the cease fire, Wasson continued to be interested in what happened to his Indian friends. Between June and September of 1860, he watched Dodge spend nearly another five thousand dollars to purchase presents and supplies for the Indians, pay employees, and construct a three-room frame house and an adobe stable at Walker Lake.¹⁰ The actual construction work on these facilities required men with building know-how, but Dodge had trouble in getting men to work for him. Finally, the job was done by Thomas Knott and three other Carson City men for \$800. In later years, Knott recalled that the Paiutes were quite friendly and very helpful in the construction of the house and stable.¹¹

At the beginning of September 1860, Warren Wasson suddenly became more than an advisor to Indian Agent Frederick Dodge. Once again, the need of money made it necessary for Dodge to go East. This time, though, he made Wasson Acting Indian Agent. Wasson agreed as he thought it would only be for the duration of Dodge's trip, but he hadn't counted on the Civil War. For when Dodge got to the East, he joined the regular army as a lieutenant and was killed.¹²

An Indian Agent in spite of himself, Warren Wasson became one of the best during his term of office. He prevented a possible renewal of hostilities in April 1861 when W-a-hee or Fox, the second war chief of the Paiutes, gathered almost two-thirds of the warriors at Walker Lake

and got ready for war. According to Wasson, W-ahée was influenced by “. . . some disloyal white men, and entered into a conspiracy to begin a general onslaught by killing me and all connected with the agency.”¹³ But when Wasson’s Paiute interpreter fled without giving any reason, Wasson became suspicious. By some manner, he got wind of things and managed to frighten W-ahée enough so that he fled the reservation and headed for Oregon. Meanwhile, Agent Wasson “. . . induced the other Indians to abandon their bloodthirsty project. . . .”¹⁴

Time and again, the abuse and misuse of the Indians and their land is brought out by Warren Wasson’s letters and reports to Governor James W. Nye of the Territory of Nevada and to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, William P. Dole. Summing up these difficulties that he had with the whites while doing his job, Wasson wrote:

I had great difficulty during my administration of affairs to prevent whites from settling upon the reservations, and stock men from herding stock onto them, to the destruction of the grass seeds, one of the principal sources of subsistence of the Indians; also to prevent traders and fishermen from depriving them of their winter’s supply of fish by cheating them out of it entirely.¹⁵

Like Dodge, Warren Wasson was constantly short of the needed funds to do what he thought was correct for Nevada’s Indians. At one point in 1861, he was completely out of cash. To get food for the Indians, he contacted Brigadier General Wright at San Francisco, and convinced him that the army could save itself a lot of potential trouble if they would simply let him have some of the spare supplies at Fort Churchill to issue to the Indians. General Wright agreed, and he bypassed the months of delay that a regulation transfer of goods would have required by writing to Governor Nye and telling him the following:

Although, I am not authorized by the regulations to dispose of these provisions, except for cash, yet, under the pressing circumstances of the case, I have not hesitated about ordering them placed at the disposal of your excellency as superintendent of Indian affairs for the Territory; and if you are without funds of the Indian department the transfer can be made at Washington, which I doubt not will be approved by our government.¹⁶

Wasson used this food for distribution along the Overland Trail and to the Indians in the Ruby Valley and its vicinity. He made this trip from Fort Churchill to the Ruby Valley in the latter part of December 1861. When he returned, he wrote to Governor Nye and gave him a full report of conditions among all the Indians he saw on this trip; and he recommended that two more reservations be established—one near Gravelly Ford and the other in the Reese River country.¹⁷

Warren Wasson’s days as an Indian Agent were drawing to a close, for on March 6, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln appointed him United States Marshal for the Territory of Nevada.¹⁸ But two last affairs needed his services even after he had taken up his new position.

In March 1862, he agreed to the requests of Governor James W. Nye of the Territory of Nevada, Governor Leland Stanford of California, and General Wright of the San Francisco Presidio to intervene in the Owens River War. Wasson reported to Fort Churchill, and he was put in command of Lieutenant Noble and fifty men. On their ride south, they visited the tribes along the way, and found that all of them were quite disturbed and worried that this war would result in a general one that would involve them. But while the Owens River War was short and bloody and Wasson couldn't stop it, he did prevent its spread by keeping the Mono Lake and Walker River Paiutes out of it.¹⁹

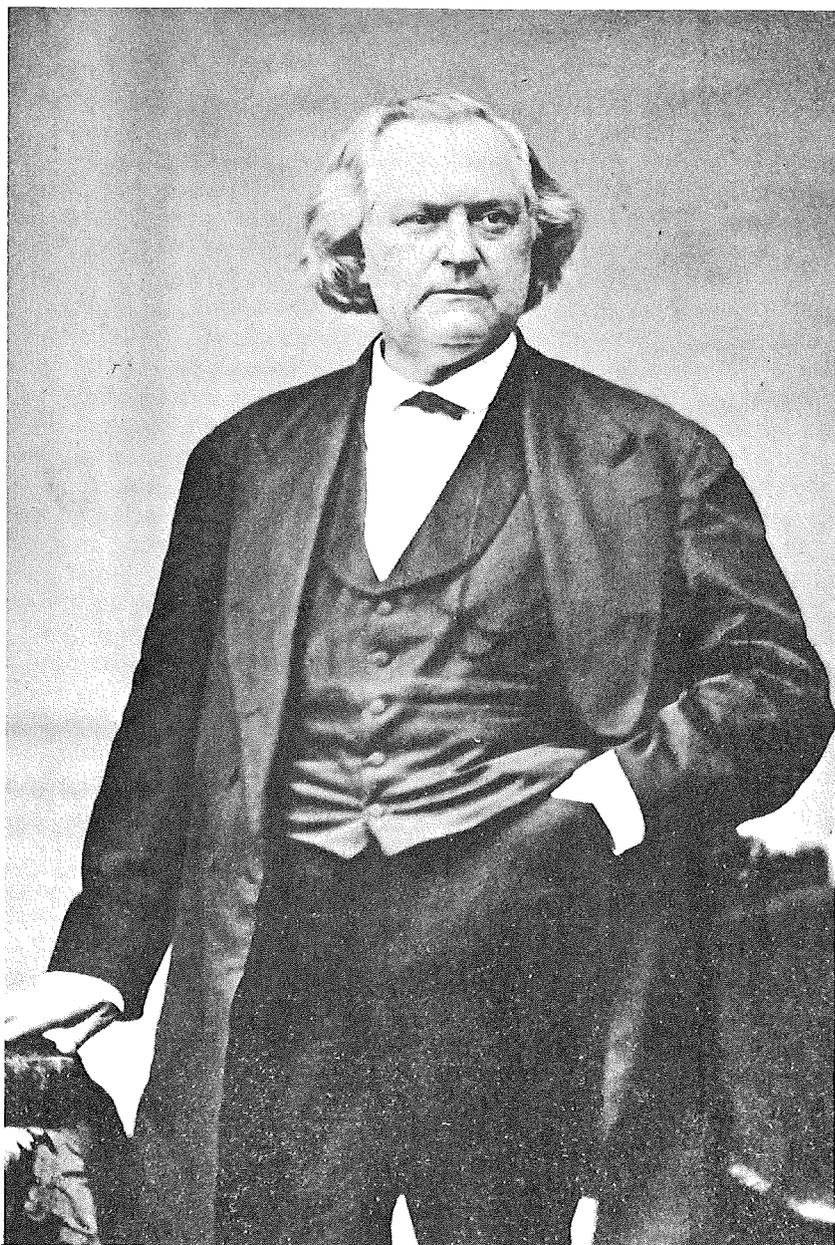
Between April and May 1862, Warren Wasson settled a dispute between Chief Winnemucca's Pyramid Lake Paiutes and Chief San Joaquin's Walker Lake Paiutes. The explosive issue in this affair was that Winnemucca's brother, Wak-hee, had been killed by San Joaquin. To complicate matters even more, a group of Bannocks were visiting at Pyramid Lake, and they were all for attacking the Walker Lake tribe. To make things even worse, Chief San Joaquin had heard that Wasson had been taken prisoner by the Bannocks, and he had his people all ready to come to Wasson's rescue.²⁰ In short, all the makings for a first-class battle were quickly forming. But in that he had the loyalty and trust of all the Indians, Warren Wasson was able to prevent this disaster.

A man of great courage, humanity, and stamina, Warren Wasson was more than a good Acting Indian Agent. He was that rarity in Indian-white relations in our history: a man respected by both races, a man with natural instincts to do the right thing at the right time. In every way possible, Warren Wasson of Nevada was a model Indian Agent, and a hero to both races.

FOOTNOTES

1. Angel, Myron, *History of Nevada* (Oakland, California: Thompson & West, 1881), pp. 533-534.
2. *Condition of the Indian Tribes*. Report of the Joint Special Committee (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867), p. 517.
3. Angel, *op. cit.*, p. 534.
4. *Condition of the Indian Tribes, op. cit.*, p. 518.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 518.
6. Mack, Effie Mona, *Nevada* (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1936), p. 305.
7. *Condition of the Indian Tribes, op. cit.*, p. 518.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 518.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 518-519.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 519.
11. Knott, Thomas, *Personal Reminiscences* (Ms. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California), p. 11.
12. *Condition of the Indian Tribes, op. cit.*, p. 519.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 519.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 519.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

16. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1862* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863), p. 218.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–222.
18. Angel, *op. cit.*, p. 534.
19. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, op. cit.*, pp. 223–227.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 229.



Territorial Governor James Nye.

(copy)

Carson Valley Indian Agency
Nevada Territory July 15th 1861.To His Excellency Gen James W. Fife
Superintendent of Indian Affairs for
Nevada Territory -

Sir. In compliance with your request, I have the honor to submit herewith a brief report of the affairs of this Agency, and as you requested me also to make such suggestions as might occur to me as to the proper course to be pursued towards the tribes within the limits of the Agency, you will find those suggestions embodied in this report -

Two reservations have been made by the Department, of lands for the use of the Indians within the Agency - One is situated on the Truckee River including Pyramid Lake, the other is on Walker River including the Lake of the same. At the latter place the Department has caused to be constructed the necessary buildings for the use of the Agency, including a frame house 14 by 28 feet in size, divided into three rooms, used for an office, kitchen and store room, and a stable of aches 14 by 30 feet - I would suggest the propriety of creating the necessary buildings upon the Truckee Reservation and the placing of a local Agent there before next spring. 163

I trust you will perceive the importance of continuing these Reservations, so necessary for the Subsistence of the Indians - They are the natural homes of the Indians and abound in fish, game, roots and seeds, their customary food, and are in fact the only places in the Territory where they could subsist without an immense expense to the Government - The two Reservations do not contain more than ten thousand acres of arable land, they are isolated from any other portion of the Territory fit for the habitation of man, and therefore better than any other place adapted to the uses and home of the Indians - There are but ^{two} tribes of Indians within the limits of this Agency, namely, the Pah-utes and Washoes - The Pah-ute tribe numbers about six thousand souls, and are now increasing, the sexes being about equally divided - They occupy a strip of country about two hundred miles in width extending along the Western boundary of the Territory from the Northern to the Southern line - They are the ^{most} virtuous, temperate and warlike of the two tribes, and of all the Indians I am acquainted with the most susceptible of acquiring the arts of civilized life - I would respectfully make the following suggestions with a view

3) to the improvement of their condition -

First, that they be furnished with a few agricultural implements and seeds such as are adapted to the soil as early as next spring, as many of them have been engaged on the ranches of the settlers and understand the cultivation of the soil. - It would not require a local agent to superintend the work to insure a handsome return for their labors.

Second - In order to teach them our language and habits, it is necessary either to establish schools among them or to procure situations for as many of the children of both sexes as possible in respectable white families, the subject at the same time to be supervised and controlled by the officers of the Agency - Applications have frequently been made to me by respectable persons for Pah-Ute children to adopt in their families and I think a number of good situations could be obtained - The property of the tribe consists of a few ponies of little value -

It affords me great pleasure to inform you that the Pah-Utes since the unfortunate difficulties with them more than a year ago, have behaved themselves with the utmost propriety till about the middle of April last, submitting to the greatest out-

-rages upon them, committed by villainous
 whites, having their men shot and their
 houses stolen on several occasions without
 offering to redress the outrages themselves -
 about that time they assembled in council
 at the junction of Walker river to the
 number of about three thousand, a portion
 of the most warlike from the interior num-
 -bering perhaps two or three hundred
 influenced by white enemies to the peace
 and harmony of the country, were disposed
 to create disturbances, drove off the inter-
 -preter and otherwise behaved very badly -
 I succeeded however in quieting them and
 they are now dispersed over the country
 engaged in their usual occupations, hunt-
 -ing and gathering seeds &c per writer use
 their country is peculiarly adapted
 to grazing purposes and I think that a suit
 and some encouragement in the raising of
 cattle, horses and sheep, would in time
 prove highly beneficial -

It is almost absolutely neces-
 -ary in order to preserve their good will
 that some more presents from the Government
 be issued to them before long and I would
 suggest that a few ornaments to please
 their fancy be selected with other ¹⁶⁶ articles

of more utility and the Superintendent should be provided with ample means to assist them in case of a severe winter, an occurrence by no means unusual here, of which we can have no previous warning. A neglect of this might prove disastrous to the Indians and create disturbances between them and the whites - the necessity of the Indians being in such tin is likely to force them to commit depredations upon the stock of the settlers.

In issuing presents I think that a proper distinction should be made between those who have acted in obedience to the instructions of the agent and those who have not.

I have also to suggest that the agent be provided with a medicine chest containing such simple remedies as their diseases require. I have heretofore been in the habit of furnishing them medicines at my own expense and my prescriptions having been attended with great success among them they will expect medicines of whatever residues among them hereafter.

The Wah-shos number about five hundred souls and are rapidly diminishing, being located in the

immediate necessity of the Whites, they have no property whatever and seem to have very little inclination to acquire any; they however behave themselves very well considering their proximity to the Whites - They live along Lake Bigler and the head waters of Carson, Walker and Truckee rivers and in Long and Sierra Valleys, which last is in the State of California -

All that I can suggest for them at present, is, that they be permitted to occupy their present locations and that a few presents be distributed among them -

I have prepared the Indians for your reception and you will find them ready to obey your commands, while I would recommend a humane course towards them, firmness should not be forgotten -

The affairs of this Agency have all been settled by Frederick L. Dodge, late Agent up to the 31st day of March 1861 - The unpaid bills for the quarter ending June 30th 1861 amount to nearly three hundred and fifty dollars exclusive of the salaries of Acting Agent, Translator and Interpreter, their salaries for the 11th quarter amount to six hundred dollars

and fifty - dollars, making a total amount
of about one thousand dollars.

The property belonging to the
agency is all safe and in good condi-
tion, at the Walker River Reservation -

All of which is respectfully
submitted by Yours

Obedient Servant
Warren Wasson
Acting U.S. Indian Agent

1871

V. Coffey

Office Indian Agent
 Carson Valley Agency
 August 15th 1881

Sir,
 I have the honor to submit the following report
 in reply to the letter headed "Date June 21st 1881" addressed
 to you by Charles E. May Acting Commissioner of Indian
 Affairs dated by you ^{transmitted} to me July 13th.

First. There are but two tribes within the limits of this
 Agency, viz the Piute and the Washoe
 Second. The Piute are numbered 7000 souls, 3000 of which are
 females and 4000 males. The Washoe are numbered 5000 the
 sexes are about equal if anything the women predominate
 Third. The wealth of the Piute consists of about
 two hundred pieces worth fifty dollars each. The
 Washoe have no property of any kind.

Fourth. They have no schools

Fifth. No Temperance or religious Societies within the limits
 of this Agency. All of which is respectfully submitted to
 your Excellency

Wm. H. May

Assistant Comm. Indian Affairs,
 Carson Valley, Nevada Territory

Wm. Wasson 174

Acting Indian Agent

Carson Valley Agency

Copy ✓

Office U. S. Indian Agency,
 Grand Valley Agency
 August 13th 1881

His Excellency
 James A. Kay
 Governor & Ex. Off. Terr. Indian Affairs

Sir, I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the present instant, requesting me to furnish a statement of such expenditures as I in my judgment, might deem necessary for the future to insure the proper and efficient working of the Indian Service in this Agency.

The expenses of the office at Walker River will be about as follows.

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Expenses of team and teamster per annum | \$1500. |
| Interpreter salary and expenses while in the field | 740. |
| Soap, candles, stationery &c | 100. |
| To rent, & food, medical, doctor house & furnish it | 500. |
| " " the necessary buildings at Pyramid Lake & furnish them | 200. |
| Expenses of an additional team, teamster and a local agent or teacher. | 2330. |
| | <u>6480.</u> |
| A good substantial wagon suitable for this Service will cost | \$250. |
| Receipts for four mules \$90. Four good mules at \$20 each (800) | 800. |
| | 171 |
| | \$1140. |

Am't carried over from p. 18.

or (I would) let justfully, encourage the purchase
of two or three of their yokes each, under two or
wagons which would cost at present prices \$200.
Under one four wheel wagon. 250 14.50
Two loads to be furnished annually to the P.B. Co. in
to the Washers in blankets and clothing 6500.
and in spring each year to the P.B. Co. in spring, which 1500.
to the Washers " " " 1000.
The P.B. Co. should also be furnished with two
hundred head of cows which can be purchased
at \$20 per head 4000.
Two hundred head of sheep 2000.
There should be provided annually and set apart
for the purchase of provisions, medicines, tools &c
to be issued to those Indians as they require. 2500
The necessary farming implements and seed for next year 1000
A blacksmith and tools should be furnished for all
reservations as early as next spring, tools for two shops.
Salary for two blacksmiths per annum 1000
board " " " " " " " " " " " " 2000 42.00
Total expenses for first year exclusive of salaries of
Asst. and Agent and their travelling expenses 44200
172 \$27,280

The year following this expense would be reduced
to \$118,000
Explaining pay of Superintendents and Agents.

Remarks.

If the Government will do this for these Indians, they will soon become a prosperous and happy people, and see how few great needs abused care. In one year they can be induced to do their own blacksmithing, thereby saving eighteen hundred dollars to the Department's purse annually and in five years the Agency may be made self-sustaining if properly managed.

This policy, will insure peace at an expense of not more than five dollars per Indian for the first year and three dollars for the subsequent year. There is not a Pekeute warrior in the tribe, who is not capable of costing the Government five thousand dollars a year, in the course of a war, to say nothing of the consequent loss of life, and the retarding of the development of the country, obstructing of the rail and telegraph lines, and the cutting off of civilization culture.

Very respectfully,
Wm. H. Wasson

Warren Wasson
Acting U. S. Indian Agent

Office Indian Agency
Warren City, N. H. Sept 1st 1861

Hon Wm P. Cole
Commissioner Indian Affairs
Washington D. C.

Sir

Enclosed please find Certificate
of Issue to the Pak-ute and Wa-sho Indians
during 2nd yr 1861.

I have the honor to be

Very respectfully
Your Obedt. Servant
Warren Wasson

James White
Gov & Affairs Supt
Indian Affairs

Abstract of articles delivered as presents
to the Pah-ute and Na-sho Indians during
2nd q.r. 1861

24. Hickory Shirts.

24. Pairs Overalls.

650. lbs Flour.

250 " Bacon.

40 " Tobacco

1 Doz Boxes Matches

June 30th 1861

We the undersigned disinterested persons
herby certify that we were present and witnessed
the delivery of the above articles to the
Pah-ute and Na-sho Indians.

Joseph ^{his} Lane
mark
Interpreter

J. A. Hantors
J. A. Crighton

Executive Department
 Carson City N.S. Sept 8th 1861

How
 Am D Cole
 Commissioner of
 Indian Affairs
 Washington D.C.

Sir

I have the honor to forward the following communication from the then acting agent Warren Wasson and to speak for it - Your favourable consideration after carefully investigating the whole matter I am satisfied it is right. He has been & is now one of the most faithful public servants I ever knew. I shall soon forward a statement of the two first quarters of ~~the~~ my administration

together with all vouchers
pertaining there to

I have the honor to subscribe
myself
Your humble servant

James W. Nye
Gov &c

Carson City, Nevada Territory
March 12th 1863.

Sir,

Under date 1st ultimo I am
advised by Jacob F. Seckhart late
Indian Agent for the Carson Valley Agency
that my account for the expenses of
the Carson Valley Agency for the quarter
ending June 30th 1861 has been allowed.

Will you do me the favor to send
me a draft on the U.S. Treasury at
San Francisco for the amount allowed
and oblige,

Very respectfully,
Warren Wasson

Hon. Wm. P. Felt
Commissioner Indian Affairs
Washington D. C.

Executive Department, Nevada Territory.

Carson City March 14, 1863.

Mr. Wasson's services have been very valuable,
and I trust the above request will be favorably considered.

Yours truly,
John C. Brown, U.S. Agent
Carson City, Nevada Territory.

Ferol Egan is a fourth-generation Westerner who spent his childhood in the Southern Mother Lode of California's gold-rush county. As a boy and as a young man he lived on a cattle ranch and rode on cattle drives to the summer ranges. *Mr. Egan* once taught at Reno High School.

He is an author-historian who has published many articles about the West, writes the Books in Brief column for *The American West*, and is the author of the *El Dorado Trail: The Story of the Gold Rush Routes Across Mexico*, a forthcoming book in McGraw-Hill's The American Trails Series. At present, he is writing *Sagebrush Soldiers: The Story of Fort Churchill* for Prentice-Hall's The American Forts Series.

