

Twain's first paid appearance benefited Carson City church

By Guy Rocha

Carson City's First Presbyterian Church celebrated 150 years as a congregation on June 2.

Legend has it that Mark Twain once performed in the church in 1864 to raise money to replace a roof on the building. The fundraiser was a favor to his brother, Orion Clemens, who was a church member and Nevada's secretary of state at the time, so one version of the story goes.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a legend is "a story coming down from the past, especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable." The Twain story may have come down from the past, or maybe someone just assumed it to be true and told a newspaper reporter. However, it is verifiable.

Relying on "Twain's Letters, Vol. 1, 1853-1866," we know that while there was a church fundraiser, it was not held in the church because it was unfinished and there was no roof to replace. At the same time, the request to speak came from two church trustees and not brother Orion, who was secretary of Nevada Territory and not secretary of state.

Guy Rocha is the former Nevada state archivist.

Read the whole story