In 2014, while Nevada celebrates the 150th anniversary of statehood, the Nevada System of Higher Education can observe a landmark in its history as well. The University of Nevada will mark the 140th year since its beginning and the 100th year since the death of its third president, Joseph Edward Stubbs.

The authors of the 1864 State Constitution directed the legislature to provide for a board of regents to manage a university. Nine years and six legislative sessions later, the lawmakers got around to implementing this mandate. In 1873, they specified that a “University Preparatory School” would be established in Elko, the four-year-old railroad town about 300 miles northeast of Carson City.

Although citizens of Elko made a noble effort to create the school after 1874, it struggled for a decade with small enrollment. Finally the legislature decided the school had to be moved to Reno, closer to the center of the state’s population. It reopened in 1886, but once again the University nearly failed; the first two presidents got only a pittance of support from the legislature. It received slightly more revenue from the federal government because it was a land-grant college.

In 1894, with Nevada’s mining and ranching economy in deep depression, the Board of Regents hired Stubbs, a classical scholar from Ohio, to lead the struggling school. During his 20-year presidency, Stubbs developed a vision about the qualities a mature university should have. He was the effective founder of higher education in this state.

A scholar trained in ancient philosophy and literature, Stubbs brought a vision of how humanistic learning and practical training could be blended. The University could be more than a training school, preparing graduates for good local jobs, and it could also encourage ethical attitudes and social
services to benefit society. He also identified the institution’s physical needs, including laboratories and a library for specialized learning. President Stubbs saw this infant as a seedling that could be nourished to become a vital cultural and scientific resource for the raw frontier state.

The University’s Alumni Association was founded in the spring of 1895, during the first year of the Stubbs presidency. Its members soon contributed scholarship funds and helped build the first gymnasium. The most important gifts of his presidency came from the family of John Mackay. The School of Mines building, the Quadrangle and the original Mackay Stadium with its field house all began during his later years.

Stubbs was an eloquent orator at a time when speech-making — without a microphone or broadcast possibilities — was a high art. He held the attention of an audience with the power of his voice and the beauty of his rhetoric. Although Nevada was one of the smallest of the land-grant institutions, he became national president of the Association of American Agricultural and Land Grant Colleges.

In 1910, he delivered one of his typical speeches in Goldfield, which was then the most prosperous mining town in Nevada. He was speaking to a teachers’ institute about the schools and the University of Nevada. Drawing on his knowledge of the Bible, he turned to the Book of Job, which is “as modern in its description of mining today as it was when it was written...” He suggested there were teaching and research projects underway in Nevada more durable than the mines and smelters of this famous boom town.

Stubbs died unexpectedly in 1914, during his 20th year as president and in the 40th year of Nevada’s growing university.

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