

Naming Nev. cove after Twain dead in the water

By Martin Griffith, AP

RENO -- A state panel has effectively killed a bid to name a Lake Tahoe cove for Mark Twain, citing opposition from a tribe that says he held racist views on Native Americans.

The Nevada State Board on Geographic Names this week voted to indefinitely table the request after hearing opposition from the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, whose ancestral homeland includes Lake Tahoe.

Supporters had sought to name a scenic cove on the lake's northeast shore for Samuel Clemens, Twain's real name.

But Darrel Cruz, head of the tribe's cultural resource department, said Twain was undeserving of the honor because of derogatory comments about the Washoe and other tribes in his writings.

Among other things, he cited Twain's opposition to the naming of the lake as Tahoe, which is derived from the Washoe word "da ow" for lake.

Cruz also objected to a Twain quote about Lake Tahoe: "People say that Tahoe means 'Silver Lake' – 'Limpid Water' – 'Falling Leaf.' Bosh! It means grasshopper soup, the favorite dish of the digger tribe – and of the Pi-utes as well."

Cruz said Washoes dislike being referred to as the "digger tribe," a derogatory term applied to some tribes in the West who dug roots for food. Other tribes ate grasshoppers.

"Samuel Clemens had racist views on the native people of this country and has captured those views in his literature," Cruz wrote in a letter to the board. "Therefore, we cannot support

the notion of giving a place name in Lake Tahoe to Samuel Clemens."

But James Hulse, history professor emeritus at UNR said it's irrelevant whether Twain's writings were insulting to Native Americans.

The cove should be named for Twain because he praised Tahoe's beauty while visiting the lake in 1861-62, and he became one of America's most beloved authors after assuming his pen name as a Nevada newspaper reporter around the same time, Hulse said.

"In his early days, (Twain's) ironic-comic mode was insulting to everyone, including governors, legislators, mine bosses and journalistic colleagues," he told the board. "He learned and overcame his prejudices far better than most of his contemporaries and successors."

Thomas Quirk, an English professor emeritus at the University of Missouri and leading Twain scholar, said the author eventually overcame his racism against blacks. But Quirk said he has found no evidence that he significantly changed his views on American Indians.

Twain did not embrace the idea of idolizing what he called the "noble red man," Quirk said, and poked fun at writer James Fenimore Cooper for doing so.

"When it comes to African Americans, he was ahead of his time substantially," he said. "When it comes to Native Americans, his record is not very good. If he were alive today, he would sing a different tune."

Board member Robert Stewart, who initiated the plan to name the cove for Clemens, said it's unlikely it would resurface.

He said he dropped his support of it, even though he learned about a later letter Twain wrote objecting to the treatment of

tribes in Arizona and New Mexico.

"I have a great deal of respect for the Washoe Tribe. And if their cultural committee is unhappy with naming the cove for Mark Twain, I'm not going to fight them," Stewart said. "We need to show sensitivity to the tribe."

Stewart said he still believes the cove near Incline Village is where Twain camped and accidentally started a wildfire while preparing to cook dinner in September 1861. But David Antonucci, a civil engineer from Homewood, maintains Twain camped on the California side of the lake.

It's the second time the bid to name the cove for Twain failed. In 2011, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names rejected the request after the U.S. Forest Service said Twain's influence on the Sierra Nevada lake was minimal and other historical figures were more deserving of the honor.

Supporters sought to honor him because there is no geographic feature in the state named for Twain, whose book "Roughing It" put Nevada on the map.