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*Becoming Las Vegas:
Opportunity and Challenge
with the Building of Boulder Dam*

REX J. ROWLEY

On the mild winter day of December 21, 1928, the warm rays of fortune shone down on southern Nevada. Excited Las Vegans filled the streets of their small railroad town in a celebration that extended into the night. The Boulder Canyon Project Act had passed in the United States Congress, authorizing the damming of the Colorado River just thirty miles from Las Vegas. One local resident recalled the party and how “bootleg liquor just flowed like water.”¹ Leon Rockwell’s memory adds to the image: “There was people that got lit that never had taken a drink before.”² Amid this merriment, the *Las Vegas Age* reported the following day, more than two hundred Las Vegans made a prayerful pilgrimage to the dam site and “knelt on the sands by the muddy waters of the Colorado, in silent prayer” and “gave thanks for the blessings vouchsafed to them and to the community.”³ The coming of Boulder Dam,

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He would like to thank Professor Don Worster and his fellow students in the historical research seminar at the University of Kansas in which this project began. They helped the author to develop a wider methodological perspective as a budding historical geographer. He would also like to recognize Rachel Rowley for her consistent editorial advice on all his work, and thank editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

later to be renamed Hoover Dam,⁴ gave plentiful reason for rejoicing. The golden egg of the largest public works program in United States history (apart from the Panama Canal) had just been dropped in their lap.

As plans moved toward actual construction, the celebration in Las Vegas turned into blind optimism. With the help of the two community newspapers, both big boosters of the town—the *Las Vegas Age* and the *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*—Las Vegans expected nothing but greatness from Boulder Dam. With a population of only 5,165 reported from the 1930 census, the town optimistically (and somewhat naïvely) anticipated an explosion to between 25,000 and 100,000 people during and directly following dam construction.⁵ Las Vegans also expected that cheap power afforded by the dam would bring millions of dollars in economic development, elevating their city to one of the great industrial centers of the West.⁶ One booster, for example, saw Las Vegas becoming a “second Denver.”⁷ Las Vegas was “the ‘magic city,’ where millions in wealth [would be] constantly invested—where wealth—health and happiness await.”⁸ Las Vegans expected Boulder Dam to catapult their city into a grand future.

In general, the high expectations of Las Vegans were unrealistic. The census count five years after President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1935 dedication of Boulder Dam, for example, showed Las Vegas with only 8,422 people. Southern Nevada did not actually breach the 25,000 mark until the latter half of the 1940s, and it was a post-war boom that brought Clark County’s population to 48,289 by 1950.⁹ Las Vegans saw no growth in industry, either. That would come in the days leading up to World War II.

The dam did, however, mark a turning point in the fate of Las Vegas. Since 1905, it had eked out a meager railroad-town existence as an important division point on the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad.¹⁰ During the 1920s the small town was in the midst of a mild local depression following the removal of repair shops from the city’s railroad lifeline. “While much of urban America prospered during the roaring twenties,” wrote the historian Eric Nystrom, “Las Vegas drifted into a period of stagnation.”¹¹ Such economic doldrums worried Las Vegans, but the dam promised an end to those fears and salvation for their struggling town.

In addition, less than a year after the passage of the Boulder Canyon Project Act, the stock market crashed, plunging the United States into the Great Depression of the 1930s. Most historians agree that, because of construction work at the dam, Las Vegas sailed through that tumultuous storm with relatively few damaging effects.¹² It is of interest that the local newspapers gave the stock market crash scant coverage despite its dark nationwide implications.¹³ While other western communities coped with economic challenges in the early years of the Depression, Las Vegas experienced relative prosperity; businesses reported increases over previous years, new neighborhoods sprung up away from the town center amid a real-estate boom, and several infrastructure improvements were completed as the city gained new status as the “Gateway to the Boulder Dam” (Figure 1).¹⁴



Figure 1. A view of Fremont Street looking east in 1930, hints at the relative prosperity in Las Vegas during the early years of Great Depression, thanks to Boulder Dam construction activity nearby. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

What economic difficulties Las Vegas did face in the Depression, particularly between late 1931 and the summer of 1932, were mild compared to other places, thanks to growing visitation to the new gateway town. The consistent payroll at the dam and its workers who spent their free time and wages in Las Vegas were two important infusions into the economy.¹⁵ By the end of 1932, around twenty four hundred Boulder City residents daily made the short drive to Las Vegas for everything from buying milk, to seeing a movie at the El Portal, to patronizing the brothels on Block 16.¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands of tourists from outside the region also passed through Las Vegas in the 1930s on their way to see Boulder Dam under construction, three hundred thousand in 1934 alone (Figure 2).¹⁷ Indeed, Las Vegas had become almost wholly dependent on the dam for its survival. Al Cahlan, then editor of the *Review-Journal*, put it into perspective. Without the dam, he wrote: “Las Vegas would be in a Hell of a fix.”¹⁸ The historian Hal Rothman added that without the Boulder Dam project, “the whistle-stop easily could have become a ghost town.”¹⁹



Figure 2. Visitors to the Boulder Dam construction site view Black Canyon from Lookout Point in April 1932. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

The newfound gateway city faced struggles of a different sort. Thousands of jobless men and families, poor and hopeless in the depressed economy, came to the city in search of the “greatest single payroll in the country.”²⁰ Las Vegans undoubtedly expected workers to come; indeed, they had hoped to become the home for the construction force. And any public works project of the dam’s magnitude would certainly draw workers from all over the country. But the expected influx of job seekers was magnified to an unexpected degree as a result of the unique combination of local prosperity and national, Depression-wrought blight. A November 1930 report in the *Review-Journal* highlighted this phenomenon when it noted, “Las Vegas had the longest bread line in the United States according to its population.”²¹ In short, Las Vegas residents were forced to respond to a much larger influx than anyone would have expected prior to the stock market crash, along with the crime, hunger, and sickness that followed.²²

During the period between 1929 and 1933, Las Vegas lay at the nexus of opportunity and challenge as a result of the opposing forces of a new tourism market and a depression. This crucial period in the city’s evolution, however, has received scant attention in the historical literature,²³ but it was during these early years of the Great Depression, that Las Vegas *began* its transformation into the city it is today. Presently, for example, locals still encounter the dual forces of opportunity in the powerful economic engines of gaming and tourism, as well as challenge in dealing with explosive growth as a result of the boom driven by tourism forces. More recently such challenges have been placed in sharp focus during the so-called Great Recession. The local character that has developed in response to such forces is one of the most evident in the city’s current sense of local identity.²⁴ Whereas historians often point to the post-dam era as the roots of the tourism industry, it was the coming of Boulder Dam and its workers—both the project’s gainfully employed who spent their salaries in the city and the unemployed who were in need of assistance—fostered a lasting trait in the city’s character as being a place shaped by outside forces.²⁵ Indeed, the title of Joan Burkhart Whitely’s portrait of Las Vegas prior to the transition time of Boulder Dam construction is telling and accurate: *Young Las Vegas, 1905-1931: Before the Future Found Us*.²⁶

How did Las Vegans respond when their naïvely anticipated future did not pan out as they had hoped? How did Las Vegans, moving through the Depression in relative prosperity, cope with the thousands of unemployed and poverty stricken men and families seeking work at the dam who arrived before New Deal money would help ease this burden placed on the town?²⁷ In general, the response in Las Vegas was one of ambivalence. The townspeople had no desire to bear the responsibility of caring for a population of outsiders who landed on their doorstep; the town saw this burden as taxing on the community, its resources, and its present and future goals. At the same time, locals did not ignore the problem, but confronted it, meeting the needs of many unemployed people.²⁸

The first half of the Boulder Dam construction period provides a unique perspective in answering these questions. Even though actual work on the



Figure 3. More than 10,000 people gathered around what was then a remote part of the Las Vegas Valley, some seven miles from Fremont Street, to celebrate the driving of the silver spike that would initiate construction on a spur of the Union Pacific Railroad to the Boulder Dam site. The September 17, 1930, event signaled the beginning of the Boulder Canyon Project even though actual work on the dam would not begin for several months. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

diversion tunnels and cofferdams began in the early spring of 1931, congressional appropriations in July of 1930 and the start of a railroad spur to the dam site from the mainline in Las Vegas later in September had signaled the beginning of construction on the project (Figure 3). That was when, a year following the stock market crash, hordes of unemployed persons seeking a job at the dam began to arrive in southern Nevada.²⁹ This article will focus on Las Vegas' actions from the beginning of this influx through March of 1933, the inauguration of President Franklin Roosevelt. The city continued to face related difficulties after Roosevelt took office and beyond the 1935 dedication of the dam, but understanding the situation in Las Vegas in the deepest throes of the Depression before the compounding influence of the New Deal's effects is particularly illuminating.³⁰

THE INCOMING HORDE

Even though Boulder City was chosen as the home for the construction force, Las Vegas still became the focal point for the waves of unemployed people who began to flock to the region late in the summer of 1930. First, as a gateway town, Las Vegas's name was firmly associated with the nationally known project. In addition, the employment office for the project was established in Las Vegas in November 1930 under the direction of Leonard Blood. The employment office remained there throughout construction, except for a short stint in Boulder City.³¹ Also, construction on Boulder City would not begin until April 1931, and so the job seekers needed a place to live. Even after the government town came into existence, it was closed off to all those who did not have business there. Finally, Las Vegas had both relative prosperity and an informal infrastructure to care for a needy population. In other words, many of the unemployed persons who came to southern Nevada and did not find immediate work at the dam could potentially receive assistance through charity organizations at work in the Las Vegas Valley.³²

Las Vegas was eager to remain intimately connected with the work at the dam, but as the Depression deepened and work on the dam began, they realized the impact of a potentially large migration of jobless people into their community. As a result, starting in June 1930, Las Vegas newspapers, later to be joined by national-level employment officials, including Blood's Las Vegas employment office, warned the nation's jobless against flocking to Las Vegas without a promise of employment or the financial wherewithal to support themselves for several months until work became available.³³ Despite the warnings, by the late summer of 1930, flock they did. Some were duped into thinking there would be jobs immediately available upon arrival in Las Vegas. Others, apparently, saw no alternative other than to go to the town and wait for potential work. For many Americans affected by the Depression, the dam project seemed the only place in the country to get a job.³⁴

It is difficult to determine exactly how many job seekers came to Las Vegas. The initial influx of unemployed came after the United States Census Bureau completed its official 1930 tally in Las Vegas. We do know, however, that the Boulder Dam project employed more than five thousand workers at its peak, so it is easy to infer that at least thousands came through the region in search for employment. John Cahlan, the brother and employee of Al Cahlan at the *Review-Journal*, recalled: "a good 10,000 to 20,000 people [were] dumped on it all at one time." That volume is difficult to believe, however, as is especially Cahlan's claim that it occurred "all at one time," considering that such an event would surely have been highlighted in the newspaper, which it was not. But, by early 1933, Blood's employment office reported having processed twenty-two thousand applications. Even if that total included some duplicates—the office required those who were still looking for work after their initial filing earlier to



Figure 4. Men stand in front of the federal employment agency in Las Vegas, hopeful for a job at Boulder Dam. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

re-register—this more verifiable total confirms that John Cahlan’s estimate may have been accurate over the long term. As another indication that the incoming volume of job seekers was considerable for the small town, Thomas Wilson, who came to work for the *Age* early in the dam construction period, gave the following vivid description of his observation of the mass of men waiting for employment at the dam when he arrived in the town: “the streets [were] just black with people standing on the sidewalk” (Figure 4).³⁵

Local newspapers generally divided the unemployed horde into two groups.³⁶ The first consisted of those jobless persons considered “undesirables.” They were usually profiled as single men who begged for sustenance, refused to work, or survived by questionable or criminal means. The local press attached various labels to this group: vagrants, undesirables, hoboes, hangers-on, floaters, moochers, panhandlers, bums, and tramps. Individuals described in this manner were considered criminals and officials generally dealt with them through local police and judicial action. As will be apparent in the

stories below, acts that police, judges, and newspaper editors considered to be punishable crimes seem somewhat innocuous and the rulings unjust. In fact, some of what was considered criminal was simply the *potential* of crime, such as loitering in a district of the town where panhandlers were known to bother out-of-town visitors, or sleeping in a public square. In general, the newspaper record reveals no evidence of blatant discrimination against jobless migrants to the city. Of course, the more obvious prejudice against the "Okies" in California may explain some of the seemingly harsh actions by Las Vegas officials toward vagrants and hoboes. More apparent in this analysis, however, were actions on the part of locals that reflected their goal of maintaining a clean, friendly atmosphere for their visitors.

The second group, usually referred to as indigents, were people in the town who were basically "down on their luck" and victims of the Depression. They were actively looking or waiting for jobs, often had a family, and were likely living in a tent city on the outskirts of town. They were not criminalized, but were generally treated well and provided for through kind acts of Las Vegans or various local charitable and service organizations. What follows is a description of the local response toward each of these groups.

THE VAGRANT CRIMINAL

A sampling of anecdotes demonstrates how some unemployed persons in Las Vegas resorted to criminal behavior. On an autumn evening in 1930, Mrs. J. S. Walton, a West Las Vegas resident, hung a purple blanket, a woman's overcoat, and a quilt out to dry in the breeze. When she looked out fifteen minutes later, they were gone and the culprit was nowhere to be found. A little more than a month later another local home was burgled: The loot this time was just a coat. In January 1931, a man was caught after hours in a grocery store eating food that he did not pay for. His alibi: he saw the door open, was hungry, and so he entered and started to eat. He took no money, but the "yegg" was nonetheless charged with burglary. In March, two men "of transient habits" ordered and ate two porterhouse steaks in a local cafe. They started to walk out without paying when the cafe owner confronted them, escorted them to the kitchen, showed them a large cleaver knife, and took their shoes in lieu of payment. They were charged with vagrancy and spent five days "in the jailhouse...in their stocking feet."³⁷

On a Saturday night later that year, another resident reported a break-in, but no crime committed. The homeowner was convinced that the only thing "his visitor" wanted was something to eat. Unfortunately for the looter, the refrigerator was empty. "He then proceeded to go thru [*sic*] the entire house," it was reported. "Clothing was removed from hangars, and instead of being thrown on the floor, was carefully laid over a chair, and pole extending thru [*sic*]

the clothes closet. The bag of the housewife, left on the dresser was ransacked, but everything replaced instead of being dumped out on the floor or dresser top. Drawers were gone thru [*sic*], but the contents carefully replaced."³⁸

These stories not only illustrate the terrible circumstances surrounding the Depression, but also typify the criminal portion of the influx of people seeking salvation in Las Vegas. They are examples of criminal acts with one motivation: survival. As a trans-shipment point for one of the West's major railroads, Las Vegas was a common destination for vagrants and hoboes. And crime in the town had been on the rise since the initial speculative boom in 1929 that followed the announcement of the dam.³⁹ But the intensity of the spurt of crime beginning in the fall of 1930 was, according to the *Age*, "greater than ever."⁴⁰

As the unemployed population expanded, Las Vegas law enforcement adjusted to the challenge. By November 1930, the small local police force was giving the "once over" to up to forty men a day. A few of the men were just down on their luck and were released, while the police drove others out of town for their crimes. Police and newspaper editors admonished the local population to assist in the situation by locking their homes, businesses, and vehicles, and reporting crimes immediately. In addition, they asked locals to refer beggars or panhandlers to the Salvation Army, rather than provide assistance directly, and thereby potentially contributing to the cause of what one editor termed the "professional 'gimme' artist."⁴¹ However, none of the tactics seems to have been a fully effective deterrent for the lawless population. Making matters worse, newspapers from around the country branded Las Vegas a "wide-open community" full of opportunity, and a "mecca for many a 'bum' thruout the country."⁴²

By the summer of 1931, "petty crimes" became so great that Las Vegas police officials changed tactics. On July 2, Chief of Police Clay Williams announced plans to round up all suspicious people and place them in jail. Williams made the argument that he had counted a hundred and thirty-six men sleeping in the park one particular night and that the way to put a stop to petty crimes was "to get rid of the type of men responsible." He further announced: "Within ten days or two weeks we'll have a chain gang working and a stockade to keep the men in nights. We're going to make this town an unpleasant one for bums!"⁴³

Williams kept his word. Twelve days later the *Review-Journal* reported that a newly formed chain gang was assisting the street department in street and alley cleaning. Construction of the stockade was completed by October 1931.⁴⁴ The new structure was built on a barbed-wire-enclosed, one-acre tract of land. The building's main room measured fifty by forty feet and consisted of walls made from three hundred railroad ties cemented together and allowing for several windows. The walls and roof were lined with sheet metal, and the floor was made from an asphalt-like surface. It contained "sanitary toilets, with washing facilities throughout—shower baths, hot and cold water," plus a kitchen and large table for feeding inmates. Its stated purpose: "To take care of those who violate the lesser city ordinances, as well as those who desire to

work for a free feed." The stockade cost less than \$1,200 and was built largely with prisoner labor.⁴⁵ On October 23, 1931, "seven 'guests' were housed in the new city stockade . . . at the 'house warming' staged by city police."⁴⁶

Some locals disagreed with the police force's plan of action. Mrs. Joe Liston was one such opponent. She wrote to the editor of the *Review-Journal* and criticized the city for being in such a hurry to put men in the stockade or on a chain gang. After all, she argued, the city had advertised the town and the need for dam workers. She recommended that instead of locking up the "working men," the city should place "an arch over every highway leading into [the] city saying: 'Welcome stranger!'" She summed up her feelings: "All Las Vegas should be ashamed."⁴⁷

From another perspective Mrs. Liston's condemnation was unfair and ignored the relief given to hundreds of jobless in Las Vegas. Al Cahlan confronted such criticism in his daily editorial column by urging his readers to visit the stockade building to see what type of place the inmates would be living in. He cited many of its comforts and deemed it preferable to the situation in the overcrowded jail. He stated that such a visitor would see an effective solution to the vagrancy problem faced by the city. Furthermore, Cahlan addressed the unconventional name given to the place; prisoners would not be herded like cattle, despite the building's label. As one supporting example of Cahlan's argument, city police provided a Thanksgiving lunch there for a hundred and ninety men.⁴⁸

Criticism of the stockade, however, heightened in the following months when, in March 1932, the police faced cruelty charges over their handling of inmates at the new facilities. The American Civil Liberties Union asked Nevada Governor Fred Balzar to investigate the charges after the organization received a letter from a former stockade prisoner who claimed terrible conditions and maltreatment of inmates who did not work as ordered by police. District Attorney Harley A. Harmon found the allegations exaggerated and reported to the governor that many inmates he interviewed found the stockade better than other jails they had experienced. In response to the inquiry's findings, Al Cahlan wondered "whether we aren't treating the prisoners too well."⁴⁹

In addition to the chain gang and stockade, the police force under Williams also focused attention on cleaning up the "jungles" and "tent cities" that had sprung up within the city. In July 1931, police broke up a camp of African Americans living on the city dump, raided several other smaller camps, and ordered the inhabitants to leave Las Vegas. That October, police ramped up efforts and moved to clear out a larger camp along Las Vegas Creek north of downtown. More than two hundred individuals inhabited the latter jungles, finding homes in thick underbrush or in makeshift huts of old boards and boxes. Chief Williams ordered the area cleared of all squatters, citing poor sanitation and the "danger of contagion" for the whole of Las Vegas; he gave jungles residents twenty-four hours to comply with the order, after which the police would take all wood left in the area to the stockade to be used, and then



Figure 5. A man walks through a tent city for unemployed people living in Las Vegas, 1931. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

burn the remaining brush and shacks. On Halloween, ironically, the “jungle clean-up campaign” yielded the partially decomposed body of a well-dressed man from Spokane, Washington, who had apparently been murdered. Police suspected that the killer had thrown the man in the brush of the jungles after robbing him, and left poison by his body to make it look like a suicide; yet they found no conclusive evidence and the death remained a mystery⁵⁰ (Figure 5).

In early 1932, Las Vegas police attacked the vagrancy problem with increased fervor, but this time with a different motive. Dam workers complained that hordes of vagrant moochers “harassed” them as they cashed their paychecks and spent their money and off time relaxing in Las Vegas. City leaders recognized the need for the steady stream of tourist dollars from dam workers, and so police began a renewed “drive” in mid January. Those convicted were typically given the option of a suspended sentence if they would leave town immediately. If the panhandlers refused to leave or simply left and then came back to town, they went to jail.⁵¹

By March 1932, with the stockade overcrowded and petty crimes at a low point (relative to the large numbers of "idle men" in town) Las Vegas police work seemed effective. The governor of Nevada lauded and supported them (after the investigation noted above was completed) and their bread-and-water-only treatment of prisoners unwilling to leave town or do labor in the stockade. Editors at the *Tonopah Times-Bonanza* (owned by the *Review-Journal's* co-owner, Frank Garside) added their support for Las Vegas's treatment of the vagrants, noting that Las Vegas had successfully moved from being the "mecca" for bums appearing on their "black list."⁵²

The fight to keep the streets clear of vagrants, moochers, and hangers-on, however, went on. On March 14, 1932, dam workers "declared war" on hangers-on, this time focusing on those who begged money from them as they visited the "party houses" on Block 16. Once again afraid to lose the steady stream of income from Boulder City visitors, Las Vegas officials immediately clamped down on the vagrant problem. A little over a week later, Block 16 had been cleared of hangers-on, and, in a statement pointed at the district's clientele, the police announced that any undesirables who came back after the "heat is gone," would again be promptly removed from the city.⁵³

Police continued rounding up the "vags" throughout 1932 and into 1933. Reports surfaced in local papers of police sending upwards of twenty-three people to the courts in a single day. And local judges stiffened their sentencing for seemingly benign offenses such as vagrancy and panhandling. Instead of being more lenient in offering the alleged criminal an opportunity to leave town, judges punished many with hard labor and sent some of the obstinate offenders into solitary confinement.⁵⁴ The story of the itinerant James Watson is both amusing and representative. In November 1932, Watson approached Frank McNamee, a municipal judge, who bought him lunch and instructed him to leave town, a condition that Watson ignored. Ten days later, Watson approached McNamee again and asked for money. He was arrested, apparently for mooching and failure to leave town as instructed. In the courtroom, Judge McNamee stepped down from his usual place on the bench to testify against Watson. Another judge sentenced Watson to ninety days hard labor for the city.⁵⁵ Adding to this experience, the *Review-Journal* ran a series of front-page articles in the first part of 1933 that kept tabs on who was Las Vegas's "most arrested" vagrant.⁵⁶

Reviewing Watson's specific experience and how Las Vegas responded to the vagrancy problem through these years reveals a sense of ambivalence. Their treatment of such people seems unusually harsh. Forcing a man to perform hard labor for sixty or ninety days for simply begging for a meal or for stealing a blanket, especially during a depression, is over-punishment for his crime. Echoing this sentiment, Al Cahlan opined: "It is hard to condemn any one for stealing food if he's hungry."⁵⁷ Yet Cahlan also supported the stockade as a way to keep the undesirables off local streets. This dichotomy of opinion

highlights the desire of local officials to keep the city clean, ostensibly for the benefit of a visitor population, as well as for the image portrayed beyond the region of Boulder Dam's gateway city. Given city officials' early tactics of forcing vagrants out of town, it also seems that Las Vegans were trying to ignore a problem they did not expect (at least with such magnitude) as a result of the Depression. Later, as the severity of punishment increased, the desire of local officials to keep the city attractive for dam workers who spent their salaries in Las Vegas became apparent. At the same time, the Watson/McNamee experience shows that vagrants approached both visitors and residents, and many in the latter group were willing to help. Indeed, many locals offered to personally help those in need without questioning whether or not they were vagrants or merely needy people.⁵⁸

INDIGENT RELIEF

Some of the inconsistency evident in Las Vegas' disdain for vagrants extended to their treatment of that part of the jobless population termed "indigents." Whereas drawing a line between "vagrants" and "indigents" is a difficult task at best, writings in the newspapers—and by implication feelings in the community—made the differentiation seem simple. Absent an indicator of crime, the jobless were regarded as indigent. If a person broke the law, however, whether through stealing, mooching, or living in a hut made of mesquite-tree scrub within city limits, that person was considered a vagrant or hobo. All others were simply down-on-their-luck indigents.

In the Depression years preceding implementation of Roosevelt's New Deal, the burden for providing relief to the needy lay largely with the local community. In Las Vegas, much of the weight of indigent relief in the community rested on the shoulders of Clark County. This arrangement was, in part, based on the structure of the county, which maintained a taxpayer-supported indigent fund as a standing budget line item.⁵⁹ Another ostensible reason for the county's role in indigent relief may be, at least in the early days of the dam construction period, the desire of Las Vegas city officials to pass on to their county commission counterparts the responsibility for maintaining the city's clean image as the gateway town to Boulder Dam.

One of the first examples to underscore the latter point occurred during the summer of 1931, when Las Vegas police cleared squatter settlements within Las Vegas city limits.⁶⁰ The *Review-Journal* had reported in April that the building inspector was going to push tent-dwellers out of Las Vegas for violating city code. What remained was a tent city—similar to the jungles described previously—just outside the city limits and adjacent to Woodlawn Cemetery, a few blocks north of downtown Las Vegas. Dubbed "Hoover City," it was named, like many of the



Figure 6. A man hangs clothes to dry outside his tent while waiting for work at Boulder Dam, 1931. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

Hooverilles throughout the country during the Depression, after then President Herbert Hoover. In Las Vegas it was where many of the men and families settled in tents or other quarters made of materials (boxes, bushes, trees, etc.) available to the homeless (Figure 6). Hundreds of people eked out an existence here with the help of charitable groups while they waited for jobs at the dam.⁶¹

Even though moving the homeless outside of city boundaries may have solved some of the city's concerns, in June 1931 Las Vegas recognized other potential problems in Hoover City. First, no sanitation facilities existed there, and the only source of water for the squatters was a well that served the nearby cemetery. This situation brought with it the threat of disease and epidemics that would affect not only the indigent population, but also Las Vegas as a whole. A plan (debated by county commissioners) to remove the squalid settlement apparently did not come to fruition, but the concern over sanitation never went away.⁶²

Just over a year later, two cases of typhoid fever surfaced among children living in Hoover City, sending a louder warning about potential problems. At this point, however, no one recommended removing the squatters, a position based on a general understanding that the homeless people had nowhere to go and should not be forced to leave. At the same time, some regulation was needed. A short time later, a committee investigated sanitation within Hoover City. The report that followed, published in early 1933, summarized: "The community does not present a serious health problem." At the same time, the report also "determined" that the tent community was "not to the advantage of Las Vegas."⁶³

Medical care for the indigents was another burden the county assumed. Prior to July 1931, the county handled all indigent cases of medical need through local hospitals. The costs, however, grew too great, resulting in a county-sponsored renovation of its medical facility to increase patient capacity. Leaders charged a nurse, Ruth James, with handling all indigent medical situations, excepting emergencies, which were sent to hospitals. But as the local population of indigents grew, so did the number needing medical attention. By January 1932, that number exceeded the capacity of the improved facilities, and patients were being placed in all available "nooks and crannies" of the building. The Red Cross assisted with minor cases, but additional funding and space were desperately needed. Whereas county leaders understood that they could not dodge this burden and continued support by placing some of the "overflow" cases in private hospitals and paying the bill with public funds, a sense of apprehension remained. In the words of the *Review-Journal's* editor: "This type of indigent relief hits the pocketbook of the taxpayers . . . it is costing plenty of money and there is a limit to the ability of the county to pay. Just where it will end time alone will tell."⁶⁴

Whereas Las Vegans may have relegated to the county the responsibility for indigent relief, the newspaper archive holds several examples of locals who personally assisted the needy within their community. The following letter to the editor of the *Review-Journal* is one pointed example that represents such empathy:

Tramps? A Few. Hoboes? Yes, some; but for the most part just folks—even as you and I—Americans out of work. Husbands, wives with their children, single men, all eager to pay their way in some manner until that job at Hoover dam materializes. Hungry? Yes. Starving? Not yet.

When they offer to do your laundry, clean your yard, fix your watch, sell you something you may not even want—listen, and help, if you can. You may go broke sometime yourself.

Have a heart!⁶⁵

Other Las Vegans exhibited similar compassion. The *Review-Journal* reported how one single woman brought her two children and ailing mother to the area in hopes that the dryer climate would help her mother's condition while she looked for work in the prosperous town. But without immediate prospects for a job, she waited, leaning on the Salvation Army and the charity of the owners of a tourist auto court who provided them with a place to live. Seeing the report, a local woman offered the destitute mother a job as housekeeper.⁶⁶

The Houck family, consisting of a father unable to find work, a mother with heart troubles, a girl, age eleven, and a boy of eight, also fell on hard times. While the family attended a doctor's appointment for the mother, thieves stole their tent and only shelter. With no more than the two children's income from selling papers, the family badly needed help. Again responding to the family's story in the newspaper, Mrs. H. C. Qunitard and Mrs. Leo A. McNamee (the municipal judge's sister-in-law) gathered clothing from their own homes and solicited their friends to do the same, while C. J. Addie, a local rancher, contributed a quart of milk every day to the family. The father eventually found work and later expressed his thanks in a letter to the newspaper:

"Dear Sir: We wish to thank you and all the people that have been so kind as to help us during our sickness and hard luck. Also the people who have furnished me work, making it possible for me to take care of my family and keep. Very Truly, JAMES HOUCK."⁶⁷

Not all individual efforts to help unfortunate people, however, prompted such genuine gratitude. In many cases, the response was the opposite. Ernest Eden, a local Union Pacific employee, gave money to a beggar once; when Eden refused to do so a second time, the beggar struck him in the nose with a beer bottle. Several other Las Vegans opened their hearts and homes to provide food and a place to sleep in return for some labor around the house or yard. Some of the needy, after receiving such help and moving on, claimed unjust treatment in their informal employment, filing "labor claims" with the employment office "against their benefactors, in many instances running as high as \$150." Such claims, upon investigation, were thrown out, but the ingratitude left a sting on generous local families. One Las Vegas man "swore off" his daily giving after one of those he had been helping allegedly stole a "new suit of clothes" from his car. William Dowder joined the ranks of duped locals in February 1933 when he had sixteen dollars, two blankets, two suits, a jeweled watch, and a Colt .32 automatic stolen from his home while he slept. Dowder claimed that the culprit was surely the man he had befriended.⁶⁸

Individual generosity should not be overshadowed, but Las Vegans also performed admirable work through charitable organizations. Local business and individual donations, taxpayer-funded indigent relief from the county, or local service groups like the Elks, Rotary, and the American Legion and

its Auxiliary supported such work. In fact, as noted earlier, Las Vegans were encouraged numerous times to contribute what they might normally give to someone on the street to one or more of the various relief organizations. That way, editors argued, locals might avoid the fate of the hoodwinked individuals they read about in the paper. And since relief workers at such organizations were trained to interview and understand the *real* need of those seeking aid (e.g., they would not give help to professional beggars who might use the aid to support their alcohol or gambling tendencies), locals could also avoid supporting those who might squander their benefactor's generosity.⁶⁹ In sum, relief organizations were a crucial part of managing and administering assistance to the victims of the Depression within the Las Vegas Valley.

The Salvation Army's role in this effort was particularly significant. As the incoming flood of unemployed people intensified in the fall of 1930, Captain R. M. Griffin set up a local branch of the organization to handle the needs of the hungry and destitute. Griffin's efforts complemented the county-run indigent fund, which began to dwindle despite having been increased several times to cope with growing need. Adding to the Salvation Army's importance, county officials lacked the training and resources to discern between the needy and the beggar, especially considering the immense volume of applicants for aid. Furthermore, Captain Griffin's group was able to stretch "dimes into dollars"; based on its administrative organization and the professional training it provided its workers, it was able to do more than the county could with the same amount of money. Finally, with the demand for donations overwhelming local businesses and individuals, the nationally sponsored organization's arrival was welcome.⁷⁰

Examples of the Salvation Army's success became apparent soon after it began work, and continued through the winter. In early October 1930, its workers found and aided two elderly women, nearly dead from starvation. One, who had been in Las Vegas for some time, was unable to find work, and neither had eaten in several days. Both were too weak to leave their tent in Hoover City. The women had tears in their eyes as they ate the food the relief workers gave them.⁷¹ They were not alone. By the end of November 1930, after five weeks of service, the Salvation Army had recorded over 10,745 applications for aid, and responded to 7,089 of them. They provided 6,162 meals, 393 in private restaurants; distributed clothing to 114 people; supplied groceries to 54 families and 293 individuals; offered medical aid to 30 people; provided transportation for 442 transients; and placed 37 people into jobs, 12 of them permanent.⁷²

By the end of 1930, Las Vegans had joined hands with the Salvation Army in an outpouring of holiday giving to the needy. "All of Las Vegas Joins in 1930 Thanksgiving, Rich, Poor Alike," read a Thanksgiving Day headline. Several churches joined in a "Union Thanksgiving" service, the offering from which was donated to the Salvation Army. In addition, several local organizations, including the Elks, the Methodist church, the American Legion, the Union Pa-

cific, the General Construction company, and the S. and L. Cafe, worked with the Salvation Army to provide a full Thanksgiving dinner spread for nearly 300 "less fortunate persons . . . about half of them to women and children." Several individuals donated time and energy for the effort, in particular the local women who baked the forty-nine pies and nine "big, juicy turkeys."⁷³

Like many small towns, Las Vegas had a tradition of celebrating Christmas as a community. In 1928, the community celebration was charged with the enthusiasm and elation that was maintained following the December 21 announcement of the Boulder Canyon Project Act. The 1929 Christmas continued that tradition with a community tree, sponsored by Rotary, and a visit from Santa Claus, who handed out presents to local children.⁷⁴ Las Vegans once again observed Christmas as a community in 1930, but, with a growing indigent population, that year's celebrations took on a new and different character.

Las Vegans spread the 1930 holiday joy throughout the valley, once again to both rich and poor. On Christmas Eve, Santa Claus visited more than three hundred area children at the Elks' hall and gave gifts of fruit and toys. J. C. Penney donated many of the toys; others came through the generosity of local residents. Four boy scouts gathered and repaired several broken toys. In addition, prominent Las Vegans from church, civic, and service organizations filled forty-two food baskets with all the fixings for a large Christmas dinner, along with some extra supplies, and distributed them to needy families. On Christmas Day, nearly three hundred less fortunate people were treated to a turkey dinner served by local girls and complete with piano music to set a festive tone (Figure 7).⁷⁵

Whereas the Salvation Army did excellent and needed work, even going beyond expectations during the holidays, it seems that after their initial warm welcome for the charity, Las Vegans became complacent. The newspaper record implies a feeling within the community that Captain Griffin, his organization, and the county money that supported its work were doing all that needed to be done for the indigent population. More than two hundred and thirty people received grocery assistance from the Salvation Army in December 1930. But throughout January 1931, the organization did little more than operate its soup kitchen that catered mainly to hungry men. Indeed, the funds under which the Salvation Army operated, including the mere \$350 provided from the county indigent fund, barely allowed it to operate the bread line itself. But with women and children starving (and the latter unable to attend school for lack of proper clothing), and the county hesitant to increase the fund because of its own budget pressures, the *Review-Journal* encouraged all of Las Vegas to give what they could to remedy the situation. The newspaper noted that Las Vegans had "never failed to meet a situation of this character yet," and the charity provided during the Christmas season was "freely dispensed," but "here is an opportunity for REAL charity." Finally, the editors called for creating a locally based, centralized organization to see to it that no need was left unanswered.⁷⁶



Figure 7. A mother with her three children live in a tent shelter near Las Vegas while her husband waits for work at Boulder Dam, 1931. Children like these were recipients of holiday giving from residents in Las Vegas. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

The day after the newspaper's call, Captain Griffin announced that the Salvation Army would discontinue the soup kitchen, citing criticism of how the program operated and a general lack of support from the county and the local population. One of the county commissioners lent weight to Griffin's argument, saying, "The unaided support of the soup kitchen and other similar institutions here have become too great a burden for the county to handle, from a financial standpoint, so we're washing our hands of the matter entirely." This harsh remark pushed the burden from the county to the city, as the *Review-Journal* editor had suggested a day earlier. Las Vegas faced a true test of its ability to provide for its needy population.⁷⁷

The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce called a meeting the next day and reached a temporary solution. The special assembly determined that the Salva-

tion Army should continue to handle all cases of charity for the needy population in and around Las Vegas, and decided that the bread line must continue to prevent a horde of hungry men from exacerbating an already difficult crime battle in the city. They recommended continuing public funding of the Army's efforts for the next four months, and rejected a drive for private funds based on the opinion that the burden should be spread evenly throughout the public with a county tax levy. In addition, upon approval of a budget to be submitted by Griffin, the county commissioners provided additional needed funds through an emergency county loan that eventually amounted to \$20,000.⁷⁸ Once again, the city itself dodged taking a direct role (outside of its tax-based support) in the responsibility for care of the indigents.

Recognizing a permanent need for local management, however, Las Vegas civic leaders organized a committee in late 1931 to oversee relief of unemployed in the city. The newly formed group, made up of local citizens under the direction of Nye Wilson of the Chamber of Commerce, requested a \$500-per-month allowance from the county indigent fund, which was approved in October 1931 for the next six months. This would take them halfway toward a proposed \$1000-per-month budget, with a popular fund drive to raise the rest. Under the budget, the city added a soup kitchen to the stockade, where meals were provided for those who worked doing "odd jobs of all types." Leonard Blood's federal employment office assisted the committee by pledging its help to find employment for local jobless.⁷⁹

The committee also decided that after October 1931, most charity work within the community would be handled under the flag of the Red Cross. Reasons for this change are unclear in newspaper accounts, but may have resulted from several factors, including an increased local dissatisfaction with the Salvation Army's handling of the indigent problem in early 1931, and the local relief committee's view that the Red Cross was more capable of achieving goals of *local* support for the indigent problem. Although the Salvation Army vowed to continue work regardless, and thanked the local population for their efforts and support, the Red Cross assumed the leading role in meeting the needs of the indigent population in Las Vegas.⁸⁰

Further local contributions were made to this new relief effort. The city, through the police department, provided the salaries for the two aid workers—a man to handle the transient male population, and a woman to work with needy women and children. Funds donated by individuals and businesses in Las Vegas were to remain in the city, along with the already pledged amount from the county. The Red Cross called on the help of volunteers, and invited all of Las Vegas to join the relief group by paying a membership fee of one dollar per year.⁸¹ After a year of floundering, Las Vegasans were, it seems, finally taking local responsibility for the burden of providing for the unemployed and indigent living in and around their city.

The immense weight of this responsibility became apparent in short order. In October 1931, the *Review-Journal* reported that word had spread about Las

Vegas's willingness to assist the needy. An editorial announced: "There have been more itinerants drift into this city in the last two or three days, than have arrived during all of the four months preceding." The paper further advised taking extreme care to meet needs, but not to "undertake the feeding of all the itinerants in the west." In the initial plans, the relief committee decided to feed the "floating population" only when absolutely necessary and not for a prolonged period.⁸² The Red Cross undoubtedly faced a formidable task in determining the difference between the truly needy and the freeloader. By the end of November 1931, however, relief workers with the organization reported success in placing the people who were willing to work in jobs cleaning up the jungles and the local streets. They also requested that locals report to the Red Cross any odd jobs that the jobless could do, rather than independently offering work to an unemployed person. This, like the Salvation Army's previous efforts, would mitigate against the undesired support of the beggar. Such a move would also limit the number of people receiving public support by removing the nonworking vagrant from the pool of aid requesters, thus lessening the burden on the community.⁸³

Soon after arriving in Las Vegas, the Red Cross called on Las Vegans to assist in providing clothing and funds for the winter months. The initial mail-in drive for donations was reported to be rather successful, the relief committee collecting "scores of checks for amounts both large and small." It seemed that Las Vegans were, in the words of the committee treasurer Ed W. Clark, "fully cognizant of the duty they owe to those less fortunate than themselves." Clark's early observations would, however, prove inaccurate. A few weeks later, the goal of \$400 in community Red Cross membership was far from being met. In fact, several of the local volunteers who scoured the community soliciting donations door to door were unsuccessful. Al Cahlan pleaded with locals to donate to this "worthy cause." He cited a man who asked for aid at the Red Cross. All the needy man desired was gas money to get him and his half-ton truck to Utah for work at a freight-hauling job. The relief agency gave him what he needed, whereupon he willingly offered to donate all he had in his possession, aside from his truck, a total of fifty cents.⁸⁴

It is difficult to conclude why Las Vegans were not more supportive of the fund drive. Less than two months after his own admonitions, Cahlan commented that possibly 85 percent of "REAL residents of Las Vegas, those who were citizens of the community before the Hoover dam employment hysteria began are happily engaged in the business of making a living and are doing a good job of it." Surely this relative prosperity meant that Las Vegans had the wherewithal to give even a little money to aid those without any work.⁸⁵ It could have been a case of donation fatigue: Because the Salvation Army was concurrently running a fund drive, the ability of Las Vegans to support both it *and* the Red Cross was "placing an undue burden on the community as a whole."⁸⁶ Perhaps the Depression had affected southern Nevadans more than

the newspapers optimistically portrayed. The answer may never be found, but, as Las Vegas approached the holidays in 1931, the community's increased spirit of giving became apparent once more.

Las Vegas provided Thanksgiving for hundreds of less fortunate individuals who surrounded their small desert city. The Elks lodge, Lions Club, and Red Cross, with further donations from local businesses, fed more than three hundred and fifty people a Thanksgiving dinner. Even a hundred and ninety men at the stockade enjoyed a turkey feast. Hundreds of locals once again put together Thanksgiving packages to give to families in "straightened circumstances." But perhaps the most touching of Las Vegas's holiday endeavors was the fete held at the Rainbow Club. The manager, K. H. Fong, put together a turkey and cranberry dinner for seventy-five needy children "as carefully as if he were feeding royalty" in hopes of giving the "kiddies a treat they'll not forget for many a day." Cahlan praised the citywide effort: "Las Vegas can look with pride at its observance of Thanksgiving . . . and should take its hat of [sic] to the Lions Club, the Red Cross, employees of the Rainbow, and the Elks lodge."⁸⁷ Children were again treated to a special event on Christmas Eve. The community tree was once again the site of a Rotary-sponsored visit from Santa to twenty-two hundred children of all races, rich and poor.⁸⁸

The Red Cross continued to feed and clothe unemployed men and families through April 1932, but seemed doomed to the same fate as the Salvation Army a year earlier. The six months of \$500 per month promised the organization through the county indigent fund had expired, and the Red Cross faced an uncertain future. While promising to evaluate the budget to find some way to continue the fund, county leaders lacked the money to continue it. The uneasy prospect of taking out another emergency loan appeared to be the only option.⁸⁹

Some Las Vegas placed a portion of the responsibility for taking care of the unemployed on the Boulder Dam contractor Six Companies. They claimed that their city had taken on the indigent burden that should have been placed on the companies' shoulders. On these grounds, Clark County's commissioners requested that Six Companies support relief efforts with a monthly donation. The contractors responded with a one-time \$300 contribution, a small sum when compared with their huge (net) profits from the project, estimated at between \$10.5 million and \$18 million by the end of construction. At the same time, other local business donations that earlier had matched the \$500 from the county's indigent fund dwindled. The summer of 1932 was particularly difficult for the city's businesses as the number of dam workers decreased significantly. By June 2, unable to cover its expenses from the past two months, the Red Cross decided "to give up the ghost and cease activity immediately"; the hundred and twenty-three families and more than a hundred men the relief group had assisted in May were left with nowhere to turn for aid.⁹⁰

To continue helping homeless and hungry people, Las Vegas officials sought federal aid. Indeed, a *Review-Journal* editorial the day after the Red Cross was to close reiterated what had been discussed for several months: Hoover's plan for

leaving relief or the unemployed to the state and local authorities was unsuccessful. Even with the huge public works project at their doorstep, Las Vegans still believed federal aid was required. On June 7, 1932, the Red Cross announced that its national headquarters would cover the salaries of workers and some of the foodstuffs to be given to families in Las Vegas, and that the county could continue support with whatever funding officials were able to offer.⁹¹

Several months later additional assistance arrived from Washington D.C. through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). Although the RFC typically provided loans to businesses, and not direct aid to indigent individuals, Clark County was able to secure from Nevada's allotment a \$14,000 loan to assist with relief work in the valley for the remainder of the year. The RFC money specifically allowed the Red Cross to administer direct relief to needy individuals and families. The relief agency was also able to provide wages for various civic improvement projects, allowing it to continue efforts to pay able-bodied homeless individuals for work rather than simply providing handouts. Not only did several of the jobless, including some "old-time residents," benefit from the new funds, but the city was able to improve its streets, its courthouse, and the county medical facilities.⁹²

Even with RFC contributions, Red Cross volunteers again needed to solicit donations from Las Vegans in the fall of 1932, so as to carry their work through the winter and into 1933. The plea went out in the newspaper: "Enroll as a member of the greatest friend of the downtrodden and the needy. It is not only your duty, but your pleasure to do so." Further encouragement came from news columns describing specific examples of the success of the Red Cross in helping the needy. But locals, in a pattern similar to the year before, gave only \$100 in the first three days of donation drives.⁹³ Based on the difficulty in eliciting local donations from private parties in 1931 and 1932, it seems logical that southern Nevadans may have indeed been feeling the effects of the Depression more than the newspapers let on. For local officials to have sought assistance in caring for the needy in the community both from Six Companies and the federal government (through the RFC) suggests a similar conclusion as the community, in a sense, seemed to cry out for help.

As the focus of the 1932 Red Cross fund drive shifted to local business owners, however, their spirit of giving became evident once again. Volunteers asked each local company to make a goal of 100 percent membership in the Red Cross, meaning that all employees in a particular establishment would donate his or her one-dollar membership fee to the relief organization; school leaders were asked to do the same with their staffs. As an additional incentive, *The Review-Journal* promised that the businesses in this "100% club" would have their names printed in the newspaper. The tactic worked. Two days later more than \$800 had been collected. Several local businesses had reached the 100 percent goal, as did the school district. All local teachers contributed their share and half of the students at the high school added their dollar apiece.⁹⁴

The giving spirit that finally brought life to the fund drive carried over into the holidays in 1932. The Red Cross, together with the Pair O' Dice (a local nightclub), sponsored a fine Thanksgiving dinner for sixty needy families, and Christmas giving for the indigent population once again was extended by the entire community. Plans for a "White Christmas"—ironically named, since Las Vegas rarely experiences a true white Christmas—went into effect: All service organizations, following the lead of the local schools, were to promote giving throughout Las Vegas. High school students contributed to the affair by preparing hundreds of white-wrapped food items to be given to poor families. Over the course of three evenings, a series of events at the high school added to this store. During the first two, students performed in benefit concerts at which additional food items were gathered, and at the third, the faculty attended a Christmas party, each member bringing a contribution to the growing food bank.⁹⁵

The El Portal, the local movie theater owned by Las Vegas's mayor, Ernie Cragin, joined the effort by sponsoring several movie showings where a contribution of food to the White Christmas store would provide admittance. In the end, around a thousand food items were collected and assembled into gift baskets that were handed out by the Elks Club on Christmas Eve. With the customary visit from Santa at the community tree, the event was considered the largest Christmas program Las Vegas had ever seen.⁹⁶ Even with the local difficulties apparent from the Depression, Las Vegas showed a willingness to see to the needs of the unemployed and indigent population that since 1930 had become part of their community.

The Red Cross continued its work into 1933, but early that year the American Legion Auxiliary mounted perhaps the most pronounced charitable effort by locals during the dam construction years. Las Vegas had previously recognized that some children came to school hungry, and some arrived barefoot or stayed home for lack of proper shoes. On January 10, 1933, eight women of the American Legion Auxiliary made a concerted effort to remedy both. On that day, they provided, with the help of donations from local companies, a wholesome meal of "rich vegetable soup, rice cooked with raisins, and plenty of milk" to fifty of the most needy children in the elementary school. Many of the kids appeared to be starving, having not eaten in several days. Seeing the meal in front of them, the wide eyes of many children filled with tears. Several had second and even third helpings. With politeness the "innocent young victims of the depression" thanked "members of the committee for 'the fine dinner.'" One child even offered to help clean up the table. She said, "I always do at home.... You see I have a brother that's blind, my mother is sick in bed, and my father hasn't worked in a long time. So you see I'm used to helping with things around the house." Not more than two of the plates had a scrap of food remaining after the meal, and the two that did contained leftovers from second helpings. With the inauguration of the daily lunch program, the Auxiliary also put out requests for donations of money and clothing, particularly shoes, to help with the care of the children.⁹⁷

The entire community, extending to Boulder City, embraced the efforts of the Auxiliary, each person contributing in his or her own way. Harold Anderson of Anderson Brothers in Boulder City donated all of the milk the kids could drink—"Oh, boy! how they do drink!" exclaimed the *Review-Journal*—and Anderson in conjunction with a local ranch provided desserts for the meals. Tower Markets and Mesquite Grocery donated soup and vegetables, and the local five-and-ten-cent store provided utensils. The Ed Von Tobel Lumber Company supplied lumber from which they constructed benches and tables for the lunchroom, and twenty-eight additional individuals and service groups gave a measure of material or volunteer help—from donating an icebox to providing fruits—to the Auxiliary. Local boxing promoters even planned a "benefit fistic card" event. With a ticket containing the fighters Johnny Martinez, Indian Johnny Smith, Dick Schwartz, and Poison Smith, all proceeds from the matches went to the lunch program. By February 1, 1933, the Auxiliary had provided clothing for many needy children and had fed around 96 children "their one REAL meal each day," having filled a total of 1,302 bellies since the program's start.⁹⁸

An overall view of Las Vegas's response to the indigent problem reveals several different faces of charity. The touching work of the American Legion Auxiliary, the various efforts of individuals, businesses, and service organizations to spread holiday cheer, and the individual giving by Las Vegas to their needy neighbors all speak of sharing prosperity with those who were less fortunate. These instances cannot be dismissed, but taken alone give an overly optimistic view of the situation between 1930 and 1933. Several individuals failed to respond when personally asked to give money to the indigent relief cause, and the city as a whole relied on the county's ability to support the charitable organizations, eventually turning to the federal government. While Las Vegas prospered relative to other places in the country, the Depression apparently caused this intermittent failure to share. Las Vegas, it seems, knew how precious their income was and hesitated to give it away for fear of being unable to take care of themselves. Furthermore, the one time the private fund drive was successful during this period came at the hands of volunteers (and the local newspaper) who pressured businesses that, in turn, pressured their employees. Locals may have been willing to give more freely under these circumstances for fear of losing their jobs. In sum, given a specific cause toward which donations and charity were put, Las Vegas were willing to donate, but for general, everyday aspects of charity, the locals felt their tax-based contribution to the indigent fund (local or federal) was enough.

A DEVELOPING PERSONALITY

The Las Vegas of the early 1930s is characterized in the 1933 report of a locally organized committee charged with investigating the sanitary situation in Hoover City as well as the general condition of relief work in Las Vegas

and Clark County. "There seems no doubt that a considerable part of the relief problem facing Clark County has been due to the activities attending the construction of the Boulder canyon project, aggravated [*sic*], of course, by the general condition of unemployment over the country."⁹⁹ This statement easily could be ascribed to the situation Las Vegas has faced as the valley's population has exploded to two million people in recent decades. The chances for success in Las Vegas, largely driven by the success of the tourism and gambling industries, brings thousands of new residents to the region each month, even during the Great Recession of the early twenty-first century. For many new Las Vegas, opportunity lies in a new job; for others, the city represents a new start in life in a town that has plentiful good-wage jobs with lower formal education requirements. And even though unemployment figures comparable to the Depression's are not driving the same numbers of jobless migrants to southern Nevada today, it remains a mecca for many homeless people from around the country. In fact, recent figures show that Nevada has more homeless people by percentage than any other state.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, today's Las Vegas remains subject to influential outside forces. The dam and the tourism it brought enlivened the town in the early 1930s, and tourism drives its economy today. An outsider may see the present changes and challenges simply as a result of the incessantly re-applied face-lift on the Strip, which continually evolves to more fully entice the tourism revenue that has been so central since the 1940s. More important, however, are those changes that the progeny of 1930s residents of Las Vegas confront today. In many ways, the challenges locals face have changed little since Hoover Dam was built. And Las Vegas cope with such struggles in ways similar to those of their forebears. On the one hand, many locals and civic leaders view homelessness with contempt, considering what it might do to the city's tourist image, as documented by the sociologist Kurt Borchard in his book, *The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas*.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, other Las Vegas and local charity groups strive to meet the needs of jobless and homeless residents through a variety of compassionate endeavors, including providing beds or blankets for the homeless and feeding the needy during the holidays.¹⁰² Such a personality, one that may be familiar in other tourist spaces,¹⁰³ developed with the coming of the area's first real tourist crowds, during the dam's construction.

The modern influx of thousands of people per month moving to the desert metropolis also presents the new difficulty of a disintegrating sense of local community.¹⁰⁴ A lack of water to sustain the two million people in the Las Vegas Valley, a growing lack of available affordable housing, and a scrambling to fill the educational needs of children from the growing, and ethnically diverse, population are also new dilemmas for Las Vegas. As in the Las Vegas experience between 1928 and 1933, many of the issues have been anticipated and expected, some of them completely unexpected and unwanted. All of them, however, must be dealt with.

In words still relevant for Las Vegas today, the *Review-Journal's* editor, Al Cahlan, responded in 1930 to a request to stop printing "unfavorable publicity" about the city: "The sooner Las Vegas awakens to the fact that instead of being an ordinary town, it has suddenly become the cynosure of the eyes of the United States, the better we will be able to meet problems facing us at the moment." He criticized the local Chamber of Commerce, and by implication the entirety of Las Vegas, for overly naïve expectations. "The statement was freely made, 'let them come, we'll take the consequences,' and now that they're here we're not willing to take those consequences."¹⁰⁵ It would be well for today's Las Vegas, and citizens from other cities in the West, to heed Cahlan's words from eighty years ago. Before declaring, "we'll take the consequences," any community should re-evaluate whether or not it is willing to face those consequences when they actually arrive.

NOTES

¹Elbert Edwards, in Andrew J. Dunar and Dennis McBride, *Building Hoover Dam: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Twayne, 1993), 16.

²Leon Rockwell, manuscript of oral history, Leon Rockwell Papers, MS13 (Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada, Las Vegas), 125-26. See also Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 76.

³*Las Vegas Age* (hereafter cited as *Age*) (22 December 1928), p. 1.

⁴The naming of the dam is a turbulent story. The reclamation bureau had narrowed down potential Colorado River dam sites to Black Canyon and Boulder Canyon. Boulder Canyon was the early winning candidate for the dam, although Black Canyon eventually became the actual location based on its quality of rock and closer proximity to major rail lines. Since Nevadans and the federal government had been so used to calling it Boulder Dam, the name stuck. It took on the name Hoover Dam during the Herbert Hoover administration, but Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes started referring to it as Boulder Dam after taking office as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration in 1933, and when it was dedicated, in September of 1935, Roosevelt called it Boulder Dam. The name was officially changed to Hoover Dam once again by a Republican congress, in 1947. See Ralph J. Roske, *Las Vegas: A Desert Paradise*. (Tulsa, Okla.: Continental Heritage Press, 1986), 72-73, 78. This article will use both names as it was—and still is by many Nevadans today—referred to by both names in the newspapers during the time of its construction.

⁵*Age* (5 September 1929), p. 2; *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (hereafter cited as *Review-Journal*), (16 September 1929), p. 2; (17 September 1930), sec. I, p. 12. The 16 September 1929, editorial in the *Review-Journal* gives the particularly high estimates.

⁶*Review-Journal* (17 September 1930), sec. IV, pp. 1, 8; (1 January 1931), sec. IV, p. 1.

⁷*Age* (11 May 1929), p. 8. Denver had more than 250,000 people counted in the 1930 census.

⁸*Age* (27 April 1929), sec. II, p. 1.

⁹For further reference on how overly optimistic the estimates were, look at Reno, the largest city in Nevada until Las Vegas took that spot in 1960. Reno had a population of 18,529 in 1930, and 21,317 in 1940.

¹⁰John M. Findlay, *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 111-12.

¹¹Eric Nystrom, "Labor Strife in Las Vegas: The Union Pacific Shopmen's Strike of 1922," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 44:4 (Winter 2001), 330; Findlay, *People of Chance*, 112; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*, 60; Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

¹²Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 14; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*, 78-79, 91; Roske, *Las Vegas: Desert Paradise*, 85.

¹³The only information in the *Las Vegas Age* regarding the event was found on the fourth page of the October 29 paper. The news was more prominent in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, where it received a front-page mention in an actual news article on the day of the crash. "Stock Prices Collapse Again," *Age* (29 October 1929), p. 4; "Mart Breaks Anew," *Review-Journal* (29 October 1929), p. 1. In the fall of 1932, after Las Vegas went through a relatively slow period, the stock market became the subject of several major front-page headline stories (e.g., "Stock Market in Sensational Rise," *Review-Journal* (2 September 1932), p. 1). It seems that when they finally realized they were somewhat vulnerable after all, Las Vegans paid more attention to the stock market.

¹⁴*Review-Journal* (30 November 1929), p. 2; *Review-Journal* (3 December 1929), p. 2; *Review-Journal* (11 December 1929), p. 1. Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*, 83-84.

¹⁵See *Review-Journal* (26 November 1931), p. 6; (13 April 1932), p. 1; (17 May 1932), p. 1; (8 August 1932), p. 1; (4 August 1932), p. 6; (12 August 1932), p. 8; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt, Las Vegas, 1930-2000*, 2nd ed. (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), 24.

¹⁶Phyllis M. Leavitt, "Depression Pioneers of Boulder City," in *Nevada Official Bicentennial Book*, Stanley W. Paher, ed. (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1976), 287; Tommy Nelson, interview, "Las Vegas: The Las Vegas I Remember Series," Nevada State Museum and Historical Society, and KNPR Studios, <http://www.knpr.org/LVIR/detail.cfm?FeatureID=2273> (accessed 18 September 2009); *Review-Journal* (23 December 1932), p. 6.

¹⁷Roske, *Las Vegas: Desert Paradise*, 87; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*, 86.

¹⁸*Review-Journal* (1 January 1932), p. 6.

¹⁹Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 6; See also *Review-Journal* (11 February 1930), p. 6. This editorial compares Las Vegas to Needles, California, a short boat trip down the Colorado River from the Boulder Dam site. Both had a railroad line through town, both were near the Colorado (Needles decidedly closer to the river than Las Vegas), but Las Vegas was able to grow, with the dam. Without it, Las Vegas might have had the fate of Needles. Needles still is a small town today with 4,844 people, according to the 2010 census. Las Vegas and its environs had 2,304 people in 1920, and 5,165 in 1930; according to the 2010 census, the City of Las Vegas had a population of 538,756, and the surrounding area, Clark County, a population of 1,951,269. This comparison shows the important influence of geography in the existence of Las Vegas, particularly taking into account Boulder Dam.

²⁰*Review-Journal* (25 September 1930), p. 1; *Age* (2 October 1930), p. 2; Mary Eaton, in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 26; Harry Hall, in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 27; *Review-Journal* (24 November 1932), p. 10.

²¹*Review-Journal* (25 November 1930), pp. 1-2.

²²*Ibid.*; (25 June 1930), p. 6; (13 June 1930), p. 6; *Age* (27 November 1930), p. 2.

²³Moehring, *Resort City*. Chapter 1 in this book, entitled "The Federal Trigger," is the best published description of the challenges that Las Vegans faced during the dam construction period, but such a description is only peripheral to the story of the coming of the dam. Outside of general descriptions of the time in other book-length histories of the city, surprisingly little has been written about the city during the Boulder Dam construction period: Roske, *Desert Paradise*; Findlay, *People of Chance*; Stanley W. Paher, *Las Vegas, As It Began—As It Grew* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1971); Gary E. Elliott, *The New Western Frontier: An Illustrated History of Greater Las Vegas* (Carlsbad, Calif: Heritage Media Corp., 1999); Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*; and Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*. Noted exceptions are Roosevelt Fitzgerald, "Blacks and the Boulder Dam Project," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 24:3 (Autumn 1981), 255-60; and Eugene P. Moehring, "Public Works and the New Deal in Las Vegas, 1933-1940," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 24:2 (Summer 1981), 107-29. Finally, refer to Eugene P. Moehring, "Las Vegas History: A Research Agenda," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 47:4 (Winter 2004), 259-82 for a comprehensive review of literature on Las Vegas history and for holes as seen by the article's author.

²⁴As part of a larger ethnographic study about local perceptions of identity, community, and sense of place in Las Vegas, I found that growth, opportunity for success, and the accompanying challenges were among those most frequently identified by residents interviewed. See Rex J. Rowley, "Bright Light City: Sense of Place Beyond the Las Vegas Strip" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2009), 176-226.

²⁵Larry Gragg, "Selling 'Sin City': Successfully Promoting Las Vegas during the Great Depression, 1935-1941," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 49:2 (Summer 2006): 83-106; Moehring, *Resort City*, 28-29; Roske, *Desert Paradise*, 88-89; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: Centennial History*, 91-92. The impacts of Boulder Dam construction and the Great Depression are part of a long list of externalities that include the railroad, the mob, Wall Street investment, worldwide tourist visitation, and a constant stream of incoming residents. See Joseph E. Stevens, *Hoover Dam: An American Adventure* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 25; Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 6-22.

²⁶Joan Burkhardt Whitely, *Young Las Vegas, 1905-1931: Before the Future Found Us* (Las Vegas: Stevens Press, 2005).

²⁷Although the building of the dam is often associated with New Deal programs because its construction took place during that time period, the actual construction started several years before the New Deal reached southern Nevada.

²⁸This is contrary to the claim of John Findlay, who wrote that Las Vegans, in their prosperity, overlooked the unemployed who came looking for work at the dam (see *People of Chance*, 113).

²⁹Las Vegas had experienced something of a largely speculative boom in early 1929 following the announcement of the dam, but the influx of people came after the money was appropriated and shovels went in the ground.

³⁰Stevens, *Hoover Dam*, 32-33, 44-46; Roske, *Desert Paradise*, 78; Moehring, *Resort City*, 19; *idem*, "Public Works." In the latter work, Moehring does an excellent job discussing the New

Deal's impact in Las Vegas; but however the community response to the challenges and rewards from the flood of federal monies and projects into the area, and how they affected the job seekers, still needs to be explored further, and would be a good addition to Moehring's work.

³¹*Review-Journal* (23 September 1930), p. 1; (24 September 1930), p. 8; (24 November 1930), p. 1; Stevens, *Hoover Dam*, 125; *Review-Journal* (27 May 1931), p. 1; (1 September 1930), p. 2; (11 September 1931), pp. 1–2.

³²*Review-Journal* (20 October 1931), p. 8.

³³Warnings came initially from newspapers (see *Age*, (5 June 1930), p. 2; (7 June 1930), p. 2; (8 July 1930), p. 2; (10 July 1930), p. 2). Later the president of the American Federation of Labor warned against a sudden migration, *Review-Journal* (3 November 1930), p. 1. Leonard Blood's several warnings followed: *Review-Journal* (25 November 1930), pp. 1–2; (1 January 1931), sec. II, p. 4; (17 February 1931), p. 1.

³⁴*Review-Journal* (25 September 1930), p. 1; *Age* (2 October 1930), p. 2; Mary Eaton, in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 26; Harry Hall, in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 27; Hal G. Curtis, interview. "Las Vegas: The Las Vegas I Remember Series," Nevada State Museum and Historical Society and KNPR Studios, <http://www.knpr.org/LVIR/detail.cfm?FeatureID=2273> (accessed 18 September 2009); *Review-Journal* (24 November 1932), p. 10.

³⁵*Review-Journal* (22 April 1930), p. 1; John Cahlan, in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 28–29; *Review-Journal* (21 October 1931), p. 8; Thomas Wilson in Dunar and McBride, *Building Hoover Dam*, 28.

³⁶These categories and the names I give them are consistent with how the *Review-Journal*, in its news and editorial coverage of the various incidences, classified and described them. Obviously some crossover between the two exists, but within the papers, there is a fairly defined difference that is apparent to the reader as he or she sees them from today.

³⁷*Age* (9 December 1930), p. 1; *Review-Journal*, 30 October 1930, p. 1; (29 January 1931), p. 1; (24 March 1931), p. 1.

³⁸*Review-Journal* (17 June 1931), p. 8.

³⁹*Age* (8 January 1929), p. 1; *Review-Journal* (8 October 1930), p. 8.

⁴⁰*Age* (27 November 1930), p. 1.

⁴¹*Review-Journal* (4 October 1930), p. 8; (7 October 1930), p. 1; (8 October 1930), p. 8; *Age* (27 November 1930), p. 1; *Review-Journal* (9 October 1930), p. 8.

⁴²*Review-Journal* (10 October 1930), p. 10; (7 February 1931), p. 2.

⁴³*Ibid.* (2 July 1931), p. 1.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* (18 July 1931), p. 1; (23 October 1931), p. 1.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* (21 October 1931), p. 8; (27 November 1931), p. 1.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* (24 October 1931), p. 1.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* (6 July 1931), p. 8; (24 July 1931), p. 6.

⁴⁸*Ibid.* (21 October 1931), p. 8; (27 November 1931), p. 1.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* (2 March 1932), p. 1; (5 March 1932), p. 1; (5 March 1932), p. 6.

⁵⁰*Ibid.* (18 July 1931), p. 1; (21 October 1931), p. 8; (29 October 1931), p. 1; (31 October 1931), p. 1; (2 November 1931), pp. 1, 3.

⁵¹*Ibid.* (14 January 1932), p. 6; (15 January 1932), p. 5; (21 January 1932), p. 1.

⁵²*Ibid.* (26 January 1932), p. 6; (12 February 1932), p. 8; (5 March 1932), p. 1; quotation from *Tonopah Times-Bonanza* in *Review-Journal* (10 March 1932), p. 6.

⁵³*Ibid.* (14 March 1932), p. 1; (16 March 1932), p. 1; (23 March 1932), p. 1.

⁵⁴*Ibid.* (16 September 1932), p. 2; (21 February 1933), p. 1; (26 September 1932), p. 1; (20 February 1933), p. 1.

⁵⁵*Ibid.* (22 November 1932), p. 1.

⁵⁶For example, "Seeking Title of Most Arrested Man," *Review-Journal* (1 March 1933), p. 1.

⁵⁷*Review-Journal* (17 June 1931), p. 8.

⁵⁸See *ibid.* (10 March 1932), p. 6.

⁵⁹See, for example, *ibid.* (12 February 1931), pp. 1–2; (6 April 1932), p. 1.

⁶⁰While it is not totally clear if such efforts were performed strictly on tent cities within city limits, it appears so based on the phrasing used in the handful of articles reporting on the police actions. See *Review-Journal* (21 October 1931), p. 8; (29 October 1931), p. 1; (31 October 1931), p. 1; (2 November 1931), pp. 1, 3.

- ⁶¹*Ibid.* (29 April 1931), p. 4.
- ⁶²*Ibid.* (22 June 1931), p. 8; (24 June 1931), p. 1.
- ⁶³*Ibid.* (9 August 1932), p. 1; (10 August 1932), p. 6; (22 October 1932), p. 1; (16 February 1933), p. 6.
- ⁶⁴*Ibid.* (16 July 1931), p. 1; (26 January 1932), pp. 1-2; (26 January 1932), p. 6.
- ⁶⁵*Ibid.* (30 October 1931), p. 2.
- ⁶⁶*Ibid.* (4 February 1931), p. 1; (6 February 1931), p. 2.
- ⁶⁷*Ibid.* (1 September 1931), p. 1; (2 September 1931), p. 1; (22 September 1931), p. 6.
- ⁶⁸*Ibid.* (30 January 1931), p. 1; (10 March 1932), p. 6; (22 September 1932), p. 8; (22 February 1933), p. 1.
- ⁶⁹See *ibid.* (24 September 1930), p. 8; *Age* (2 October 1930), p. 1; *Review-Journal* (9 October 1930), p. 8; (21 November 1931), sec. I, p. 2; (10 March 1932), p. 6.
- ⁷⁰*Review-Journal* (24 September 1930), p. 8;
- ⁷¹*Age* (2 October 1930), p. 1.
- ⁷²*Review-Journal* (24 November 1930), p. 1; (25 November 1930), pp. 1-2.
- ⁷³*Ibid.* (27 November 1930), pp. 1-2. See also *ibid.* (26 November 1930), p. 1; *Age* (29 November 1930), p. 1.
- ⁷⁴*Age* (22 December 1928), p. 2; (25 December 1928), p. 2; (24 December 1929), pp. 1, 2.
- ⁷⁵*Review-Journal* (4 December 1930), p. 8; (24 December 1930), p. 1; (25 December 1930), p. 1.
- ⁷⁶*Ibid.* (9 January 1931), p. 1; (10 February 1931), p. 6; (12 February 1931), pp. 1-2. It would be some time, however, before this final recommendation was actually embraced.
- ⁷⁷*Ibid.* (11 February 1931), p. 1.
- ⁷⁸*Ibid.* (12 February 1931), pp. 1-2, 8; (1 October 1932), p. 8.
- ⁷⁹*Ibid.* (6 October 1931), p. 4; (10 October 1931), pp. 1-2; (12 October 1931), p. 1.
- ⁸⁰It was later discussed that having both agencies would overlap the efforts to provide for the needy in Las Vegas, and that there was some conflict that might have been engendered between the two groups.
- ⁸¹*Review-Journal* (16 October 1931), pp. 1-2.
- ⁸²*Ibid.* (20 October 1931), p. 8; (16 October 1931), pp. 1-2.
- ⁸³*Ibid.* (21 November 1931), sec. I, p. 2.
- ⁸⁴*Ibid.* (21 October 1931), p. 1; (24 October 1931), p. 1; (11 November 1931), p. 1; (16 November 1931), p. 8.
- ⁸⁵*Ibid.* (1 January 1932), p. 6.
- ⁸⁶*Ibid.* (2 November 1931), p. 10.
- ⁸⁷*Ibid.* (28 November 1931), p. 8; (27 November 1931), p. 1; (26 November 1931), p. 6; (26 November 1931), p. 1.
- ⁸⁸*Ibid.* (19 December 1931), p. 1.
- ⁸⁹*Ibid.* (4 February 1932), p. 5; (6 April 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹⁰*Ibid.* (9 April 1932), p. 1; Stevens, *Hoover Dam*, 252; *Review-Journal* (2 June 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹¹*Review-Journal* (2 June 1932), p. 1; (7 June 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹²*Ibid.* (6 October 1932), p. 1; (11 October 1932), p. 1; (22 October 1932), p. 6.
- ⁹³*Ibid.* (11 November 1932), p. 2; (15 November 1932), p. 6; (16 November 1932), p. 2; (17 November 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹⁴*Ibid.* (17 November 1932), p. 1; (19 November 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹⁵*Ibid.* (23 November 1932), p. 5; (6 December 1932), p. 2; (13 December 1932), p. 1; (14 December 1932), p. 1.
- ⁹⁶*Ibid.* (23 December 1932), p. 2.
- ⁹⁷*Ibid.* (12 March 1932), p. 1; (23 November 1932), p. 1; (10 January 1933), pp. 1, 4.
- ⁹⁸*Ibid.* (12 January 1933), p. 8; (23 January 1933), p. 1; (2 February 1933), p. 2; (13 February 1933), p. 4.
- ⁹⁹*Ibid.* (16 February 1933), p. 6.
- ¹⁰⁰Lynnette Curtis, "Report: Nevada Has Highest Percentage of Homeless in U.S.," *Review-Journal* (11 January 2007), http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2007/Jan-11-Thu-2007/11910691.html (accessed 28 April 2008).
- ¹⁰¹Kurt Borchard, *The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005). For examples of how the current homeless situation relates to what I have documented for the early 1930s, see pages xxiii, 6, 8, 19-27, 81, and 130.

¹⁰²John L. Smith, "'Best' People Often Found Helping Others," *Review-Journal*, 2003, no date, <http://www.reviewjournal.com/bestoflv/2003/smith.jsp> (accessed 14 September 2009); Lynnette Curtis, "Jolly Quilters," *Review-Journal*, 6 November 2006, http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2006/Nov-06Mon-2006/news/10577644.html (accessed 23 April 2008); Jane Ann Morrison, "Let's Not Forget 17,000 Kids Counting on Salvation Army's Angel Tree," *Review-Journal*, 10 November 2005, http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2005/Nov-10Thu-2005/news/4235396.html (accessed 9 June 2007); Molly Ball, "Lots To Be Thankful For," *Review-Journal*, 24 November 2006, http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2006/Nov-24Fri-2006/news/11029252.html (accessed 24 April 2008).

¹⁰³See Borchard, *Word on the Street*, 27.

¹⁰⁴Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 293.

¹⁰⁵*Review-Journal* (3 December 1930), p. 8.

*Governor James G. Scrugham
and Nevada's First Highway Construction Boom
1923-1927*

PAUL BRUNO

Nevada's fourteenth governor, James G. Scrugham (Figure 1), began his administration in January 1923. Elected the previous fall, Scrugham, an engineer, was popular two-term Governor Emmet D. Boyle's hand-picked successor, and took office confronted by the challenges presented by the economic downturn following World War I. During the so-called Progressive Era, engineers were highly sought after by state and local officials across the nation for their expertise in planning and efficient administration. Boyle, himself an engineer, had appointed Scrugham as state engineer in 1917, and the former engineering professor had impressed Boyle to the point that he wanted Scrugham to succeed him.

Scrugham was not a native Nevadan. Born in 1880 in Lexington, Kentucky, he studied engineering at the University of Kentucky, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees. He worked at firms in Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco before moving to Nevada in 1903, when he accepted a position as assistant professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Nevada in Reno. Scrugham quickly rose through the academic ranks, becoming an

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Figure 1: Governor James Graves Scrugham.
Photographer unknown. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

associate professor in 1906 and a full professor one year afterward. The future governor moved to a position in the Electrical Engineering Department in 1912. Two years later, he was appointed dean of the College of Engineering, which today bears his name. Scrugham served as dean until Governor Boyle made him state engineer in 1917, a powerful position with authority to determine water rights. Following his return from a leave of absence to serve in the U. S. Army Reserves during World War I, Scrugham enthusiastically plunged into his duties. He was involved early in the effort to develop Nevada's highways and his detail-driven, micromanager, workaholic personality produced a state engineer who immersed himself in all aspects of his job.¹

From 1900 to 1920, reform swept the nation and state during the Progressive Era. Progressivism, while difficult to define, encapsulated a desire among its adherents to provide the underprivileged with the ability to achieve human dignity, to have the institutions of government more responsive to the desires of all people, and to ensure that America's industrial economy should serve the interests of the general public.² Progressives possessed an inherent need to

move forward as well as to have a sense of mastery over events.³ Scrugham's ideology and actions mirrored these principles, and the programs he initiated during his term attempted to achieve these ideals.

Since the 1870s and 1880s, railroads had served as the conduit for moving people and goods to Nevada, but by the 1920s, the assembly lines of Henry Ford and Ramsome Olds had eclipsed the iron horse. The catalyst for improving Nevada's highways was progressive legislation enacted at the federal level during the 1910s. The need for improving the nation's roads became apparent in the late nineteenth century because of problems in delivering mail to rural areas, the increased need to transport manufactured goods from the nation's factories, and the emergence of gasoline-powered vehicles such as the car, bus, and truck.⁴ The system of earthen highways, which were impassable muddy messes in the spring and fall, was inadequate to support an industrial economy. Congressional leaders realized that state and local revenues were insufficient to address the problem.⁵ The first decade of the twentieth century marked the first attempts to create a federal highway bill, but the Panic of 1907 and local battles over highway routing slowed progress.⁶

As assembly lines poured more cars and tractors into America's urban and rural roads, the pressure on Congress and President Woodrow Wilson (1913-21) intensified. The U. S. Department of Agriculture in particular recognized the importance of linking farmers in rural areas to big city food markets, thereby liberating small towns from the burden of using wagons that hauled food and other goods at five miles per hour and at high cost. The pressure led to the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act, in 1916, which provided for \$5 million in federal-aid funds in 1917, increasing by \$5 million per year to a maximum of \$25 million in 1921.⁷ Nevada had created a state highway department in 1917 to qualify for funding as stipulated in the legislation. Scrugham was in the vortex of road construction as state engineer from 1917 to 1922.

The need for food, clothing, ordnance, and other supplies following America's military entry into World War I completely overwhelmed the nation's antiquated road system and helped catalyze America's road-building program.⁸ The massive introduction of heavy trucks to transport war materials severely damaged the existing roads,⁹ but the urgency of meeting the needs of fighting World War I delayed any action on the issue until after the Armistice in November 1918. By that time, the nation's roads were in horrific condition. Congress recognized that the flaws in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1916 had slowed progress.

With the enactment of the Federal Highway Act of 1921, Congress corrected the problems with the 1916 bill and spurred the nation's highway building program.¹⁰ The 1921 legislation stipulated a "7 percent system" which mandated that the 7 percent of the roads in a state be designated as state highways, three-sevenths of which had to be "interstate in character." The 7 percent provision was the impetus for the designations of the key



Figure 2: A typical highway project in Nevada. Photographer unknown. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

routes throughout the state that remain in effect today (see Figure 7). On the “interstate” fraction, 60 percent of the federal funds could be spent, which ensured the creation of a national highway system.¹¹ Congress appropriated \$75 million to fund the bill, a staggering sum at that time.¹²

Nevada benefited tremendously from the provision of a matching formula that gave an advantage to states in which the unappropriated and unreserved public domain exceeded 5 percent of the state’s total area. This meant that Nevada had to pay only sixteen cents on the dollar for its U. S. Highways.¹³ As Scrugham noted, “the year 1922 was the first full year’s operation by the Department under the new graduated scale of federal aid, and it may be confidently predicted that future years will see a continually increasing ratio of federal aid and a consequent reduction of state expenditures.”¹⁴ He also reported that the “activities of the Highway Department have been made on the basis of taking up the maximum amount of Federal aid accruing to the state and at the rate which it will be absorbed if it is not to revert to the Federal Government.”¹⁵

Governor Scrugham recognized that highways connecting Nevada’s major towns would promote commercial development, especially for those places not served by railroads. Realizing that the automobile age had arrived,

Scrugham prioritized building more highways to connect with the emerging national network. In 1923, soon after taking office, he noted that “at the present time, the activities just mentioned have resulted in the partial construction of two east and west highways and two north and south highways.”¹⁶ Scrugham knew that in a geographically large and sparsely populated state, a well-built, well-maintained system of thoroughfares was crucial to long-term prosperity (Figure 2).

The new chief executive proposed an aggressive legislative agenda to maintain the momentum of highway construction, including enacting a two-cents-per-gallon tax on gasoline to fund building, transferring automobile license fees to the State Highway Fund, legally regulating overloaded trucks and narrow-steel-tired wagons, raising license fees for truck transportation lines using highways as common carriers, amending state law to allow tapping of the County-State Highway Fund for maintenance as well as construction, and by eliminating the State Highway Board, having the Highway Department report only to the state highway engineer.¹⁷ The legislators enacted most of Scrugham’s proposals which, combined with other policies and funding already in place, led to the greatest period of road building in the state’s history up to that time.

Scrugham was actively involved in highway routing, funding, designing and building. Routing was critical and meant determining where state and county roads would be built to plug local towns into U.S. 91, and U.S. 95, and other national roads that linked Nevada to regional and national markets. This was a politically charged process, as towns throughout Nevada jockeyed for position to get a road leading to Salt Lake City, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, or Phoenix.

Almost immediately upon taking office, the new governor found himself embroiled in a bitter routing dispute involving the Lincoln Highway Association, headquartered in Detroit, Michigan. Formed in 1913 by the Indianapolis Motor Speedway builder Carl Fisher, the association’s mission was to construct a “Coast to Coast Rock Highway” from New York City to San Francisco.¹⁸ Henry Joy, president and principal stockholder of the Packard Motor Car Company (Figure 3) and Frank Seiberling, head of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, joined Fisher in his quest.¹⁹ The group spent the next ten years raising funds, building the highway, and promoting its route throughout the country.²⁰ Thanks to the 1921 federal-aid act, the monies became available to complete Fisher’s vision.²¹

The Lincoln Highway Association was the most prominent highway proponent at the time, but other organizations also actively promoted their vision of a transcontinental roadway. The Victory Highway Association, while less ambitious than the Detroit group, had strong support in Utah, Nevada, and northern California.²² The Victory Highway’s planned route roughly followed the Old Emigrant Trail of the gold rush era, from Salt Lake City through the desert due west to Wendover, Utah, then across northern



Figure 3: Henry Joy on the Lincoln Highway, ca. 1915. Photographer unknown. (*Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, Transportation History Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan*)



Figure 4: The Nevada-Utah State Line on the Lincoln Highway, ca. 1915. Photographer unknown. (*Holden Collection, Lincoln Highway Association*)



Figure 5: The Lincoln Highway through Ely, ca. 1923 Photographer unknown. (Nevada Historical Society)

Nevada via Elko, Winnemucca, and Reno.²³ Utah had initially supported the Detroit group's road, but in 1921 had switched allegiance to the Victory Highway and designated that road for the 7 percent funding. The Lincoln Highway consortium had invested heavily in an alternative route, known as the Goodyear Cutoff, that ran southwest of Salt Lake City to Ely (Figure 4). The Lincoln Highway boosters knew that if the Victory Highway path received federal funding under the 7 percent plan, completion of the Goodyear Cutoff would never occur, and their investment would vanish.

The stakes for Nevada were local because whichever route was chosen, one part of the state would benefit over the other from increased auto and truck traffic. But Nevada as a whole would prosper because, as in the railroad age, it would host the transcontinental road linking California to the rest of America. However, there were ardent supporters of the Lincoln Highway routing in Nevada, especially in Ely, which stood to benefit if the main east-west road ran through their town (Figure 5). These proponents secured passage of a bill in the 1923 legislature that supported designating the Lincoln Highway route as a primary road as part of Nevada's 7 percent system.²⁴ Scrugham vetoed the bill on the grounds that "such action was not properly a legislative

function.”²⁵ The governor was caught in the middle between the Lincoln Highway Association, its supporters in eastern Nevada, and Utah officials who had changed the routing to favor the Victory Highway.

The Detroit group pressured Scrugham to designate “that section of route Two, east of Ely, as part of Nevada’s 7 percent system.”²⁶ This step was critical to the Lincoln Highway: The vice-president of the Association wrote to the governor that “the only weak point in our argument and in our position has resulted from the fact that Nevada has not designated the Lincoln Highway, from Ely to the Utah State line near Ibapah, as a portion of its seven percent Federal aid system.”²⁷ The key was to persuade Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace, whose department oversaw highway construction at the federal level, to overturn Utah’s decision.²⁸ A summit meeting was scheduled for May 14, 1923, in Washington, D.C., to decide the issue.²⁹ James Lockhart, a key Democratic operative in the Ely area, advised Scrugham that “unless Nevada does include this piece of road as a federal aid project that the Lincoln Highway will have mighty little chance at the hearing.”³⁰

The highly emotional stakes for the Lincoln supporters, and the pressure they exerted on Scrugham, were expressed by Henry Joy in a letter to Gael S. Hoag, a former Nevada state consul for the Lincoln Highway Association who had become the organization’s field secretary. Joy declared that “Utah wants to turn the Sou [*sic*] Calif travel south thru Utah and we want to turn it into Nevada via Ely. It sure means a good many thousands of dollars to which ever state wins.”³¹ He desperately wanted the new governor to join the battle, writing that “I can fight pretty stiff for what I think is right, but I wouldn’t mind having all the help we can get from Gov. Scrugham.”³² Joy was not shy about describing what he wanted the governor to do, exclaiming that “if Gov Scrugham should see the situation as we see it I hope he will give Utah a kick in the slats that can be heard around the world!”³³ He exhorted Hoag to push hard so that “Gov’r Scrugham would get on the war-path for the Lincoln Way like Utah is against it.”³⁴ Joy did offer to assist in the process by being willing to “cuss Utah friends of mine good and proper and with some rare ability from long training at sea and in the west.”³⁵

Utah favored the Victory Highway routing because it followed established routes and was the most logical choice, given the region’s topography. The Goodyear Cutoff routed traffic through Nevada, which ignored the current road system that led south to Saint George and then across the Mojave Desert to Los Angeles. Lincoln Highway proponents minimized the difficulties of traveling over the mountainous terrain through Ely in the central part of Nevada. The engineer in Scrugham knew that the northern route was the best option, and although the Victory Highway was costly to build through the desert, the Lincoln route faced significant expense because of the steep terrain.³⁶ While the desert route was more expensive in the short term and the Lincoln route in better condition at that time, the cost of maintaining the hilly route over the long term in a permanent highway system would eventually dwarf the short-term benefits.³⁷

Joy spent \$4,000 funding a 172-page report entitled "A Brief for the Lincoln Highway in Utah and Nevada" and had it distributed to interested parties.³⁸ The governor took a cautious approach on the issue, writing to Secretary Wallace that "the brief appears to have merit and I commend it to your careful consideration."³⁹ Not anxious to alienate Joy or the Utah authorities, whose support he needed for any road feeding traffic into Nevada from the east, Scrugham was content to let the federal authorities settle the routing issue.

Joy's report was an elaborate attempt to reframe the debate. Wallace's engineering experts had studied the problem in the context of determining "which of two main routes connecting Main Forks, Utah, with Wadsworth, Nevada is to be named as the primary Federal aid route and which as the secondary."⁴⁰ Their report recommended the northern route because it was the least costly alternative. This supported Utah's decision to build directly west of Salt Lake City to Wendover.

The Lincoln Highway Association, however, believed that designating Wadsworth as the western terminus was arbitrary and that it unfairly biased the argument against their route.⁴¹ The Ely-route boosters argued that the majority of traffic heading west from Salt Lake was traveling to California, and that Sacramento, not Wadsworth, was the appropriate western terminus.⁴² They therefore concluded that the best route for travelers who wanted the option of heading to either Los Angeles or San Francisco went through central Nevada, with the "fork in the road" at Ely. At this mountainous mining town, one branch went south to Los Angeles using the Midland Trail and another road carried traffic west and then north to Sacramento and San Francisco.⁴³

The Lincoln Highway Association based its brief on the assumption that serving the best interests of the through traffic was the determining factor; it considered that the time element of building a connecting highway now was of primary importance and that both roads across Nevada would eventually be built.⁴⁴ Therefore, the decision was which route should open first.⁴⁵ The report purported to prove that the road most important to open first was the route through Ely; that the path through Ely could be "most quickly put in a thoroughly travelable condition"; that the Lincoln Highway was the most economical as well as the path that could be most quickly opened; and that this route "from every standpoint" best served the traffic then and into the future.⁴⁶ The report also contended that the Lincoln Highway route was shorter and safer, and followed the natural topography, and, finally, that this was the route Nevada wanted because it cost the state nothing versus having to spend \$900,000 if the Wendover path were chosen.⁴⁷

The Association's portrayal of the Battle Born State's support was overblown, given that Scrugham had only asked Wallace to give the Lincoln Highway's report "every consideration." More important, their arguments failed to address the key finding by Wallace's engineer that building through central Nevada's mountainous terrain would cost more in the long term than

the northern route. Joy's group admitted that "much space is devoted in the engineering report to the tabulation of summits, to tabulations showing mileage of grades of various percentages and to the question of relative 'rise and fall.'"⁴⁸ The Detroit organization also argued that Wallace's experts had erred by approaching the problem from the perspective of "locating a railroad for economical operations of freight and passenger trains."⁴⁹

The Association asserted that 90 percent of the travel on the route consisted of "foreign cars" traveling for pleasure. Therefore, local traffic was not an issue and approaching the problem from the "railroad" vantage point emphasized saving on the cost of construction and of operation.⁵⁰ The Association insisted that "highway engineers in planning a route for tourist traffic cannot ... be governed by such considerations" and must "consider the pleasure, comfort and attractiveness of the route."⁵¹ The Detroit group conceded that the topography made building a railroad across central Nevada impractical, but building a highway over the same terrain was practical because educational, recreational, and scenic inspiration were paramount in routing roads for tourism.⁵² Joy's men also argued that building their choice of road first was the right decision because the railroad already served local traffic in northern Nevada.⁵³

The Lincoln Highway's routing ignored the already developed paths to California established in the nineteenth century, as well as the obvious engineering advantages of the northern route. These previously traveled paths included the Arrowhead Trail, which ran from Salt Lake to Saint George, then west across the Mojave to Los Angeles, as well as the established northern railroad route. The Detroit group's leaders argued that their routing served all travel to California. That assertion ignored their own data, which showed that most traffic went to Los Angeles or San Francisco, and tourists could choose how to reach either city before crossing the rugged Nevada landscape to Ely.⁵⁴ Further weakening the Association's argument, Nevada failed to designate the Midland Trail as a primary route under the 7 percent system.⁵⁵

The Detroit group also responded to accusations that its financial investment in one of the routes under consideration made it biased. The group declared that "the basic principles upon which the Lincoln Way was laid out, and to which, with such difficulty and care, the Association has adhered for ten years, are the same principles which will govern the picture of the road situation west of Salt Lake City we propose to present to you."⁵⁶ From that point of view, "this picture has not changed since 1913."⁵⁷

Utah had strongly supported the Lincoln Highway routing from 1913 through 1921.⁵⁸ The Lincoln Highway's proponents asserted that Utah's primary reason for changing the routing previously agreed upon was to divert tourist traffic south through Utah.⁵⁹ While this assertion might have merit, the primary factor in Utah's change of heart was funding. The Beehive State was parsimonious in regard to highway construction projects; therefore, when

the only funds available were from Joy's group, Utah was more than willing to support their routing. However, after the passage of the Federal Highway Act and the institution of the 7 percent system, funds were available to study other paths west of Salt Lake City. The engineering analysis supported using the established northern and southern routes branching from Salt Lake City to California. With the funds available to examine other options, Utah chose to follow established routing precedent and the paths that were the most logical, based upon highway engineering.

The big meeting in Washington, D.C., was held on May 14, 1923. Although Scrugham was personally invited by Secretary Wallace to attend the summit, he sent the state highway engineer, George W. Borden, to represent Nevada's interests.⁶⁰ After a tumultuous hearing, Secretary Wallace informed Joy that he only had the authority to approve or disapprove Utah's choice and could not determine an alternate path; therefore, Utah's routing would stand.⁶¹ The secretary's decision had determined the matter, but Joy continued to press the issue. The governor took a diplomatic approach, knowing that the state's interests were served as long as a road was built and that the fight with Utah was the Lincoln Highway Association's and not Nevada's.

While he wanted to avoid too much personal involvement, Scrugham wrote to Ely's leaders to determine their willingness to fight Joy's battle, declaring, "At this writing it appears to me that it might be more advantageous to ask for the Ibapah-Wendover road than to accept the Silver Zone connection."⁶² But the response from Ely officials to the governor was not encouraging. Lockhart, Scrugham's Ely confidant, wrote that "within the next few days the citizens of Ely have to make their choice, and take their stand, one way or the other, or else I shall feel very much like quitting and letting them continue their waiting policy, and see where they are going to land, which will be, no doubt, nowhere."⁶³ Scrugham, however, realized the matter was already decided and told Lockhart that "under the circumstances, I am of the opinion that it would not be desirable for me to do anything further in the matter at this time."⁶⁴ While Joy and Hoag fought on throughout 1923, in the end, Utah won. The northern route through Nevada passed through Elko, Winnemucca, and Reno.

The historian Thomas Cox has argued that "to make matters worse, Nevada lost its battle with Utah over highway routing. By 1927, Salt Lake City, not Ely, had become the dividing point for transcontinental travel, and the main north-south highway ran through St. George rather than the Pahrnagat Valley."⁶⁵ He concludes that this meant that Salt Lake City became a major transportation hub rather than Ely because the road forked there, with one path going to San Francisco and the other to Los Angeles.⁶⁶ Cox's argument, like the Lincoln Highway Association's, fails to take into account the development of western transportation routes that had occurred from the mid nineteenth century onward. Salt Lake City's geographical location situated it perfectly to become a regional passenger and shipping hub. The

railroads confirmed and solidified this as the transcontinental route came together just north of Utah's capital at Ogden. The topography led travelers from the northern and eastern sections of the country to travel to Denver as the eastern gateway to the Rockies, then through Salt Lake City to California. The primary north-south route through Saint George was long established as the path to the southern portion of the Golden State, while due west out of Salt Lake City through northern Nevada was the most direct route to San Francisco because this path wound through the Humboldt and Carson river valleys and many mountain ranges.

The assertion that Wallace's acquiescence to Utah's highway routing was what cost Ely the opportunity to become a major transportation hub ignored the actual developments of transportation routes as well as the area's topography. As Wallace's engineers had pointed out, the mountainous terrain leading in and out of Ely made that route more expensive to maintain in the long run and a more difficult path to travel. Traversing this route was completely impractical for reaching southern California; however, venturing south out of Salt Lake City to Saint George and then across the Mojave to Los Angeles was sensible, given the topography.

Despite what some Nevada proponents of the Lincoln Highway might have believed, Ely's location and surrounding rugged terrain meant that the town never was and never would have become, a major transportation hub. The Lincoln Highway route boosters ignored both history and geography in their routing, and Utah was correct to choose the Victory Highway as part of its 7 percent federal funding. Cox's assertion that "Nevada lost its battle with Utah" neglects the fact that the routing battle was the Lincoln Highway's versus the Beehive State. Scrugham, as Nevada's official representative, took a diplomatic, low-key stance in this matter and wisely expended no political capital on a losing proposition. When Ely residents were unwilling to pursue the issue further, the governor quickly moved on.

Cox also concludes that the interests of road routing and parks development were intertwined and that the Beehive State's routing bypassed Lehman Caves and other scenic attractions Scrugham had emphasized. These developments eventually turned the governor's grand vision for parks into sites visited primarily by locals from Reno and Las Vegas.⁶⁷ Cox is correct, but the problem occurred because Scrugham's parks were located at the sites of Nevada's best scenic wonders, which unfortunately sat in virtually inaccessible places. The governor's natural wonders were also in close proximity to the much grander Yellowstone and Zion regions. Scrugham's parks-creation program, though laudable, had limited economic potential because of the parks' locations far from the emerging regional transportation network.

While state routes drew the most attention because of their strategic importance, county highway construction was also critical. Local residents were particularly concerned that their farms, ranches, and businesses have cheap access

to regional markets. As the chief executive in a small and sparsely populated state, Scrugham was the person to whom Nevadans expressed their concerns, and he faced numerous routing challenges throughout his term. Typical was a dispute in Lincoln County when the county commissioners wrote of their wish that "the state highway go through the town of Panaca and hereby respectfully request your excellency [sic] that you use your influence to that end."⁶⁸ Scrugham was in Winnemucca when the crisis broke out. Homer Moody, the governor's secretary, conferred with State Highway Engineer Borden, with whom Scrugham worked closely on all matters related to road construction. Moody then wired the governor that "Borden says also that approval was necessary to get money which would lapse June 30, 1923 as it is a 'find' or 'pick-up' under the 1919 federal-aid statute."⁶⁹

Borden opposed the commissioners' wishes because he did not want to waste Nevada's share of the federal funds, and he knew that "the movement in Panaca was fomented by [the] Wadsworth District Attorney who owns property there."⁷⁰ Moody relayed Borden's observation that "R.R. does not go any nearer to Wadsworth premises than road survey does. Connecting road can be built later by county of 1½ miles whereas standard federal highway to take in loop would be expensive and impractical."⁷¹ Individual interests and local politics often intertwined in road routing controversies. The issue of federal funding was so critical that the governor deferred to Borden's judgment in this case. Scrugham formally apprised the Lincoln County Commissioners that "I have investigated the matter of the route to the Federal Aid Highway from Pioche to Caliente. I regret that it appears impracticable to change this route if we are to receive Federal aid on the project."⁷² Engineering sometimes overrode personal benefit and politics.

The Panaca road controversy was repeated all over the state. Indeed, one Nye County resident in 1923 wrote that "it looks very much like we people along the Nyala road from Warm Springs to Currant are going to be left with out any road as the talk is now, of building the road over what is noan [sic] as the Siler cutoff."⁷³ Nevadans took highway routing seriously: That same citizen declared that "I think it would be a shame for us people to be left with out a road or even be cut off from the main highway as you no [sic] yourself that the people living in an icelated [sic] country like this is intitled [sic] to all of the road services that can be given us."⁷⁴ Once again, the intrepid Borden had to shine the light of reason on the situation and take the heat for Scrugham as he wrote, "We regret very much that we cannot serve all of these people by our highway." However, with reference to discussion with a Mr. John Evans, Borden added that "if Mr. Evans' road can be placed in such excellent repair at so low a cost that the Valley in that section might just as well have two roads as one—we are building the one via Hot Creek, and the County Commissioners [are] repairing the road via Nyala."⁷⁵ Once more acting as the go-between, Scrugham sided with Borden: "Herewith enclosed is a copy of a letter recently received from Mr. George W. Borden, State Highway Engineer, which explains the situation from the point of view of the State Highway Department."⁷⁶

That department's 1923-24 biennial report noted that "in road location, construction and maintenance, the public takes a greater interest than in any other governmental activity." Accordingly, many considered themselves "an amateur or professional road builder, either active or inactive."⁷⁷ This "greater interest" was often emotional and generated heated debate as political considerations intruded upon routing, road design, purchasing, and building.

The governor and his staff worked diligently to resolve each case as amicably as possible. Highway officials worked conscientiously on public relations and wrote in the department's biennial report that convincing some Nevadans in routing matters had "sometimes been a difficult task in the past," but through efforts to work together, mutual understanding of each side's perspective had increased.⁷⁸ The state highway engineer reported that the department's representatives were welcome visitors at any official or unofficial gathering in the state and that Nevadans had come to consult with highway officials "before any important work is planned."⁷⁹ Public feedback helped Borden's staff devise a highway construction process that welcomed citizen input without being paralyzed by it. As a result, the last two years of Scrugham's term included fewer highway location controversies as the construction boom slowed.

Expensive road projects helped deplete state revenues and caused budget shortfalls, both of which Scrugham had to address. In 1922, Borden projected a budget deficit for the next two years and recommended borrowing money through the bond markets. As the state highway engineer wrote to governor-elect Scrugham, "you will note that we show a deficit for both years 1923 and 1924 in our general operations which if left as the budget shows would mean the issuing of \$200,000 in bonds remaining from the \$1,000,000 issue."⁸⁰ The governor addressed this problem by asking the 1923 Legislature for, and getting, a two-cent-per-gallon tax on gasoline.

Scrugham also had to work with local merchants eager to sell highway construction materials to the state, as he declared that "it is the policy of the state departments to purchase goods from the local dealers whenever it can be done at a price comparable to that paid to outside agencies."⁸¹ The chief executive handled numerous issues related to federal aid. Rumor and innuendo sometimes overrode fact as Scrugham repeatedly found it necessary to reassure local residents. In 1926, for example, the governor wrote to one concerned citizen, "I understand that there is some talk in Goldfield of the money available for highway purposes being spent on some line away from Goldfield," and told the man to calm his neighbors' concerns. "You may state for me that the highway construction, which is already budgeted and approved for 1927, contemplates spending the available money on the highway from Tonopah to Goldfield and South."⁸² Despite numerous obstacles, Nevada's highway construction program progressed rapidly during Scrugham's term.

Scrugham the engineer enjoyed supervising the details of how the roads were built and maintained (Figure 6). Borden, for instance, informed him of an



Figure 6: Road construction in Nevada, ca. 1920s. Photographer unknown. (*Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, Transportation History Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan*)

agreement reached for “the placing of light gravel surface on a section of the L. V. & T. Grade leading northward from Las Vegas to the north Clark County line, involving a total estimated expenditure of \$20,000., \$10,000. to be paid by Clark County and \$10,000. by this department.”⁸³ The governor even waded into construction minutiae, refereeing a quality dispute over piping, managing gravel supplies, and taking recommendations on concrete.⁸⁴ Even railroad spikes lying on a road drew his attention, as he responded to a complaint that “I have requested the Maintenance Engineer to immediately order a large electromagnet of the most improved type to be used in picking up these spikes.”⁸⁵

The inflow of federal highway funds and the resulting construction boom provided much needed employment in an economically depressed state. Scrugham even evaluated the qualifications of some applicants, both for full-time and part-time positions that were available throughout the state. He was therefore deluged throughout his term with requests for jobs.⁸⁶ These opportunities helped offset depressed conditions in other industries. Indeed, the governor himself acknowledged the depressed state of Nevada’s economy in a letter to the highway department supporting the candidacy of a mining engineer, William Donovan, for employment in that department, “due to a recent slump in the mining business there appears to be very little employment

available along such line."⁸⁷ As was the case in many state public works projects, politics often played a role in the hiring process. Mr. Harry Warren of Winnemucca wrote the governor to recommend H. H. Sheldon of that city for the position of engineer in charge of state highway work for Humboldt County. While touting Mr. Warren's credentials, he also felt it prudent to point out that the applicant was singularly "qualified" from a political standpoint, "As to Mr. Sheldon's politics, while I am not a strong partisan myself, he is, and I personally and actually know that he was very active in your support both at the primary and the general election, and as far as I am informed, but not stating as fact, I believe he was the only support you had among the engineering fraternity here."⁸⁸

Highway construction encompassed a variety of other issues that included requests for equipment, tracking violators of motor vehicle statutes, correcting improper water usage by the highway department, and obtaining a tent for use during inspection of while inspecting construction work at the Lehman Caves. In one case Scrugham arranged for the transportation of six steel cots, twelve cot pad mattresses, and one nine-by-fourteen-foot tent, among numerous other requests. The demands, even for the energetic governor, were considerable.

The 1923-24 biennial report of the Department of Highways was a 114-page document that detailed the substantial progress made on the state's roads during Scrugham's first two years in office. The report noted that "highway construction in Nevada reached its peak during the years 1923-1924, and this biennium represents the greatest two-year construction program so far attempted by the Nevada State Highway Department."⁸⁹ The mileage completed included "915.11 miles of highways of various types complete and under contract."⁹⁰ This required "3,436 linear feet of bridges with seven grade separation structures for the purpose of separating railroad and highway traffic," with the cost amounting to \$10,892,658.58.⁹¹ Bridges were particularly necessary in a state whose rugged topography and myriad washes constantly challenged the skill of engineers. All of Nevada's state highways improved because of Scrugham's determined leadership (Figure 7), and the report concluded that "we are rapidly approaching a time when we can see the completion of at least 1,500 miles of our State Highway System."⁹²

In his 1925 message to the legislature, Scrugham declared that "very substantial progress has been made by the State Highway Department, during the biennium just past, in the improvement of the federal-aid 7 percent and the state highway system."⁹³ The governor told legislators that "this mileage will offer an excellent foundation for further highway expansion in the State after completion of the seven percent federal-aid highway system as now designated."⁹⁴ State residents paid for highway construction through direct taxation, automobile license fees, gasoline tax, state racing commission fees, and county bonds, but federal funds were critical. Without this aid, "Nevada could never have attempted a program of highway improvement

of appreciable extent on account of the sparse population and limited taxable wealth of the State."⁹⁵ The "Governor on Wheels" now had a significantly improved highway system on which to visit all areas of the state.

While Scrugham credited federal aid with being the catalyst for improved roads, he wrongly assumed that road funding would remain consistent for years and provide stability for planning construction well into the future.⁹⁶ The crash of 1929 and President Herbert Hoover's administration's refusal to fund major highway projects to employ the nation's jobless dashed these hopes until 1933. But in 1925, money was available and the governor credited the federal government with bearing most of the cost for building Nevada's highways, declaring that "in 1919 federal aid represented 27 percent of the Department's income, whereas in 1924 federal aid represented approximately 69 percent of the total."⁹⁷ By 1925, it was obvious that the Progressives' dream of improving the nation's roads had come true in the Silver State.

As the 1925 legislative session began, the governor looked forward to federal funding of \$2 million in addition to the \$5.2 million the government already had committed to Nevada.⁹⁸ Of course, the additional miles of highways increased maintenance costs. While the Highway Department "found its maintenance costs during 1923 and 1924 to average approximately two hundred and fifty dollars per mile," the former state engineer believed that "no reason can be foreseen at this time for increasing these costs in the future."⁹⁹ The governor placed his faith in government efficiency to keep future costs under control.

Scrugham's legislative agenda for the coming biennium was more modest than his ambitious 1923 effort. He sought authorization for new roads and adjustments in various statutes to address issues arising during his previous two years in office.¹⁰⁰ To this end, he made "definitive recommendations," including raising the gasoline tax by a penny to offset the elimination of the personal property tax on automobiles, transferring to the state highway fund the remainder of automobile license fees over and above the annual requirements to meet the state highway bond interest and redemption schedule, allowing the state treasurer and state controller to give the State Highway Department a credit equivalent to 50 percent of the federal-aid vouchers in the process of payment, and eliminating the ninety-day exemption on license fees for out-of-state vehicles.¹⁰¹

Once again, the governor affirmed the benefits of road construction, declaring that the state highway department "is a large business concern with ramified activities reaching every portion of the state."¹⁰² He emphasized that "the benefit thereby accruing to the merchants, bankers, and business men of the State as a result of this activity is very great, and during the past several years has done much to stabilize employment and trade conditions throughout the State."¹⁰³ Scrugham went on to suggest that all of these advantages justified the expense, concluding that the boom in building highways had greatly profited "the merchants, bankers, and business men of the State" and had stabilized employment and trade conditions in Nevada.¹⁰⁴

The rate of highway construction lessened during the last two years of Scrugham's administration. As the highway department reported in 1927, "the Department of Highways of the State of Nevada has progressed with its highway construction and maintenance on a scale somewhat less than during the previous biennium."¹⁰⁵ The mileage of constructed highway had increased from 915.11 miles to 1,297.11.¹⁰⁶ Of that total, 1,072.67 came under the federal-aid 7 percent system, with 447.91 miles left for completion through that funding source and 1,700 miles of the entire state highway system still left for building.¹⁰⁷ The comprehensive approach to road development had promoted construction on all major routes.¹⁰⁸

Agency officials were quick to cite that progress as a reason for entrusting them with more funds. They noted in the report that "the highway problem of Nevada is one which needs earnest consideration during the next biennium in order that sufficient mileage may be constructed to complete the Federal aid system," and "other important roads, now badly needed" could "be added to the federal-aid system and constructed in the future."¹⁰⁹ The funds collected from the two-cent property tax, the four-cent gasoline tax, automobile license fees, bonds, and county funds, along with federal aid had "made possible the road building program which has been carried out through the past two years."¹¹⁰ This had resulted in "a very rapid increase in travel in the State and our highways being used more and more for transcontinental purposes."¹¹¹ The completion of a traffic census in 1926 had provided key information on the extent of travel over the newly built highways and provided direction on where to focus next.¹¹²

The state highway system had grown substantially during Scrugham's term. The highway department's goal had been "to develop within the State, as rapidly as possible, highways joining one community with another," so that "our people may be drawn closer together and enjoy the benefits of such social relationships as are possible through good highways."¹¹³ This included connecting with neighboring states and the rest of the country.¹¹⁴ Scrugham had overseen the construction of a highway network that linked many of the towns spread throughout Nevada, liberating residents from the isolation caused by needing to use the horse and wagon across long distances. He also established the foundation for the larger highway system that the state and nation would build over the next half century.

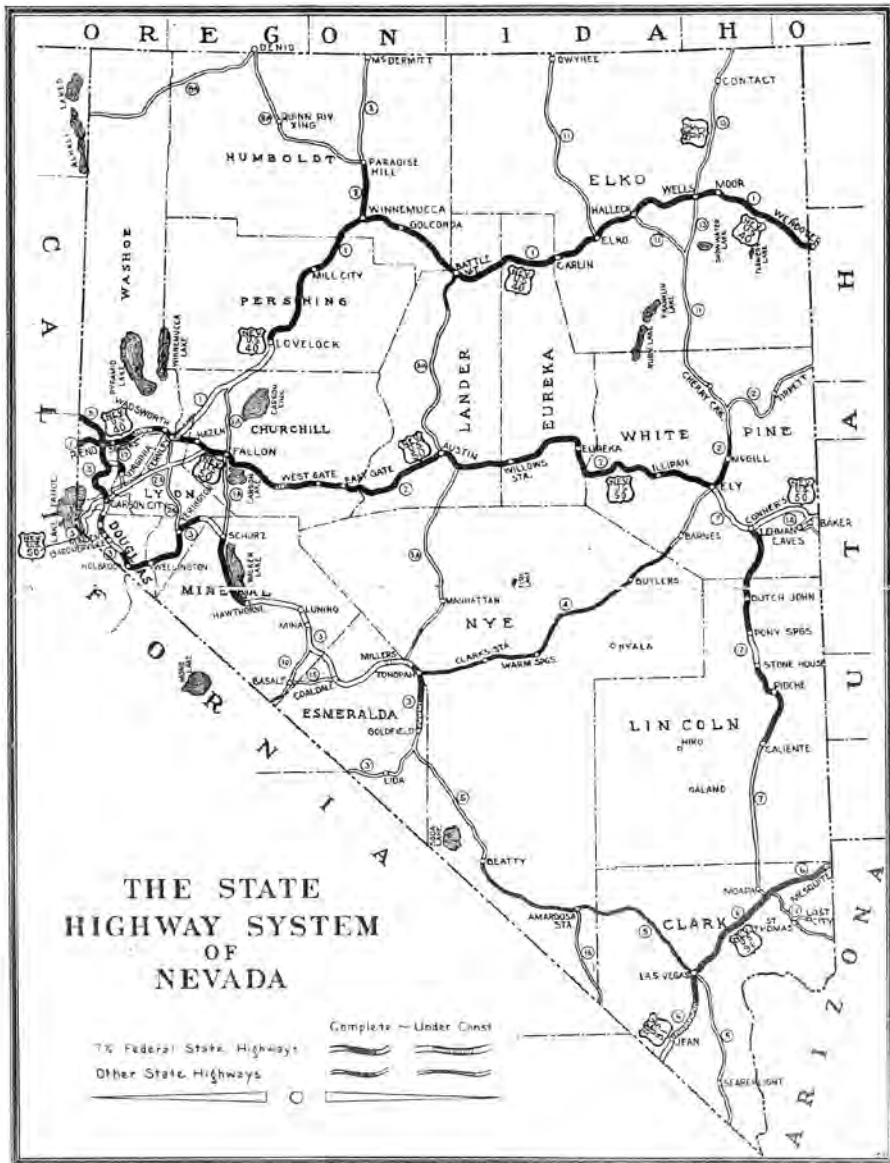


Figure 7: Nevada Highway Map, ca. 1926. (State of Nevada, *Fifth Biennial Report of the Department of Highways, 1925-26*)

NOTES

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⁴U. S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *America's Highways 1776-1976: A History of the Federal-Aid Program* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 80-110.

⁵*Ibid.*, 44-52, 84.

⁶*Ibid.*, 80-86.

⁷*Ibid.*, 86-88.

⁸*Ibid.*, 90-101.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Russell R. Elliott and William D. Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 2d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 264.

¹⁴Governor's Message, *Appendices to the Journals of the Senate and the Assembly* (Carson City: State Printing Office, 1923), 9, 11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Governor's Message 1923, 8.

¹⁷State of Nevada, Fourth Biennial Report of the Department of Highways 1923-1924, *Appendices to the Journals of the Senate and the Assembly* (Carson City: State Printing Office, 1925), 10-11.

¹⁸Gregory M. Franzwa and Jesse G. Petersen, *The Lincoln Highway: Nevada* (Tucson: The Patrice Press, 2004), ix.

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²⁰*Ibid.*, ix-x.

²¹*Ibid.*, x.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴James G. Scrugham to G. S. Hoag, 24 April 1923, Nevada State Archives, Carson City, Nevada (hereafter cited as NSA).

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶G. S. Hoag to James G. Scrugham, 24 April 1923, NSA.

²⁷A. F. Bement to James G. Scrugham, 27 April 1923, NSA.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰James M. Lockhart to James G. Scrugham, 4 May 1924, NSA.

³¹Henry B. Joy to Gael S. Hoag, Esq., 10 April 1923, NSA.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Drake Hokanson, *The Lincoln Highway* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 100-101.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 98-101.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹James G. Scrugham to Henry Wallace, 24 April 1923, NSA.

⁴⁰The Lincoln Highway Association, Inc., *A Brief for the Lincoln Highway in Utah and Nevada, March 15, 1923*, Governor's Records, Carson City, Nevada, 37.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 39, 42.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 128-129.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 52, 55-56.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 25-29.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 29-31.

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⁶¹Hokanson, *Lincoln Highway*, 102.

⁶²James G. Scrugham to Vail Pittman, J. M. Lockhart and W. S. Elliott, 12 June 1924, NSA.

⁶³James M. Lockhart to James G. Scrugham, 18 June 1924, NSA.

⁶⁴James G. Scrugham to James M. Lockhart, 20 June 1924, NSA.

⁶⁵Thomas R. Cox, "Before the Casino: James G. Scrugham, State Parks, and Nevada's Quest for Tourism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 24:3 (Summer 1993), 349.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Board of County Commissioners of Lincoln County to James G. Scrugham, 6 June 1923, NSA.

⁶⁹Homer Moody to James G. Scrugham, 6 June 1923, NSA.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²James G. Scrugham to Board of County Commissioners of Lincoln County, 12 June 1923, NSA.

⁷³E. E. Garrett to James G. Scrugham, 15 June 1923, NSA.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵George W. Borden to James G. Scrugham, 26 June 1923, NSA.

⁷⁶James G. Scrugham to John W. Evans, 27 June 1923, NSA.

⁷⁷State of Nevada, Fourth Biennial Report of the Department of Highways 1923-1924, 19.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰George W. Borden to James G. Scrugham, 26 November 1922, NSA.

⁸¹James G. Scrugham to E. W. Shirk, 8 May 1923, NSA.

⁸²James G. Scrugham to Frank Davison, 5 August 1926, NSA.

⁸³George W. Borden to James G. Scrugham, 20 April 1923, NSA.

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⁸⁷James G. Scrugham to Howard M. Loy, 17 May 1923, NSA.

⁸⁸Harry Warren to James G. Scrugham, 20 March 1923, NSA.

⁸⁹State of Nevada, Fourth Biennial Report of the Department of Highways, 1923-1924, 15.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²*Ibid.*, 16.

⁹³Governor's Message 1925, 14.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 23, 29-40.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵State of Nevada, Fifth Biennial Report of the Department of Highways, 1925-1926, *Appendices to the Journals of the Senate and the Assembly* (Carson City: State Printing Office, 1925), 7.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 9-10.

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Pico, Frankie, and The Meadows

PATRICK GAFFEY

John Cahlan, who was news editor of the *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* when it happened, told the story of The Meadows again and again. He recorded the story for the last time in a 1986 oral history, when he was eighty-four years old and had a year to live. That last time, in a failure of memory or of integrity, he finally gave the public what it wanted.

People wanted to hear that Tony Cornero built The Meadows hotel and casino. The 1931 Las Vegas resort, named for the English translation of the town's Spanish name, set the pattern and the standard for Las Vegas hotels to come. When construction began, Prohibition was still in force, and most gambling games were illegal in Nevada; this enabled the builders of The Meadows to cut a deal with influential politicians for a monopoly in Las Vegas gambling, liquor, and prostitution. But the politicians could not deliver. Then an unexpected political tide swept "wide open gambling" into law just thirty-two days before The Meadows casino opened.

In a town full of tiny gambling clubs that used sawdust to trap the dust from dirt or board floors, The Meadows became more than Las Vegas's first carpet joint. It brought the vision of men who knew the big city into a little town. Its architect designed the building for style and elegance, and its grand opening became the first in Las Vegas to require formal dress for guests and staff. It used beautiful women as part of the decor and atmosphere. It presented

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the first Las Vegas floor show. It set in place the elements that would define Las Vegas. People felt that The Meadows should have been built by the fabulous, outrageous, insouciant Tony Cornero, who, stylish in his trademark white Stetson, thumbed his nose at the state of California, the federal government, and everyone who tried to stop him. A legendary gambler, he had bet the *Tango*, his first gambling boat, on one roll of the dice. He lost with grace and walked away without regret.¹

So, after five decades of resistance, Cahlan finally gave in. He said, "In the late 1930s the Meadows was built by Tony Cornero and his two brothers, Frankie and Louie."² The badly wrong date signaled that Cahlan's thinking had lost its edge. He told the story he had told before and tossed in Tony for seasoning. Though his new story could not be true, it was received as gospel and enshrined in historical studies of Las Vegas.

In one way, Cahlan's final telling was an improvement: He revealed more about the deal that Tony's brothers, Louis and Frank Cornero, made as they planned The Meadows. In early 1931, the federal government pressed Las Vegas to honor its agreement to move the brothels out of infamous Block 16 and out of downtown in return for a new federal office building and post office. "It was about the time that the city commission and the city were about to turn loose the prostitutes and run them out of town. Cornero promised that if he came up here and built the hotel, he would see that it was run correctly and everything, but he would have to have control of the prostitution, the gambling, and the liquor," Cahlan said. "And there was a leading legal firm here in Las Vegas, which I will not name, who made a promise to him, but the firm could not come through with their promise...."

Almost overnight, one of the members of the law firm disappeared. Nobody knew what happened until he popped out as a district judge in another county of the state of Nevada.... This attorney who disappeared was the front man for the other attorneys. When they couldn't pull a deal off, why, they just said, 'You'd better leave town. And we'll see that you're taken care of where you go.'³

Although he had explained the deal before, this time Cahlan provided enough information to identify the firm. Thomas Jefferson Durham Salter could credibly promise Block 16 would be closed, because his law partner was District Attorney Harley A. Harmon,⁴ and Salter had earlier been assistant district attorney. When the deal with the Corneros fell through, Salter left town for Winnemucca, whence he came. Salter became a district court judge in 1942.⁵ Though Harley A. Harmon had been dead for nearly forty years by 1986, the Harmon family presumably remained powerful enough that Cahlan would not want to offend them by connecting their patriarch's law firm with a scheme to create a monopoly in liquor, gambling, and prostitution.

The *Las Vegas Age* editor Charles "Pop" Squires was first to write about The Meadows and its hoped-for monopolies. He had been concerned for some time that the city might not close Block 16; this could damage relations with the federal government, which was about to build the biggest and most expensive dam in the history of the world just thirty miles away. Squires wanted nothing as minor as prostitution to divert from his city the expected river of money. On December 30, 1930, he sounded an alarm: "The Age is informed upon what seems to be good authority that parties are preparing under the guise of a hotel project to locate the red light district on a tract east of Vegas not far from the city limits and close to the main highway to Boulder Dam."⁶ Squires insisted the project be stopped and railed against it for the next week, warning that if prostitution were allowed to relocate there, "it will flaunt itself in the face of every visitor to Boulder Dam."⁷ On January 10, after the businessmen of Block 16 exerted their power, Squires made clear that the deal with the Corneros had collapsed.⁸

In his first oral history in 1968, John Cahlan told a similar story. He recalled that "the Cornero brothers" built The Meadows, adding, "Tony Cornero, at that time, was serving time in the federal penitentiary in Washington," meaning the State of Washington. He said, "When they had the opening night, Tony wasn't here. He was still in Washington."⁹ In that telling, Cahlan recounted the monopoly agreement this way:

"...the then powers that be in the city of Las Vegas promised them that if they would come up and build the nightclub here in Las Vegas, that they could have exclusive rights to the prostitution. The city of Las Vegas would close down prostitution on Block Sixteen, move it up to their hotel, and that [*sic*] they could set up gambling out there. At that time, gambling was not legal. But they could set up gambling out there and run gambling, liquor, and prostitution exclusively in this area. So they... started construction, and the city commissioners backed off from closing off Block Sixteen and closing all the bootlegging joints downtown."¹⁰

The brothel owners proved powerful enough to continue operating downtown for another decade.

Although Cahlan stuck to the facts in 1968, Tony Cornero's fame had already begun to seduce the newsman. Cornero had earned national notoriety in 1939, holding off the law with fire hoses for nine days from his new gambling ship, the *Rex*, in Santa Monica Bay.¹¹ Cary Grant portrayed him in RKO Pictures' second-biggest hit of 1943, *Mr. Lucky*,¹² which later became a television series. In Las Vegas he built the Stardust, the world's biggest hotel and casino, though he died before it opened. While admitting that Tony was far from The Meadows during its construction and debut, in this first oral history, Cahlan still could not resist insinuating such a romantic

figure into his tale. He said that “Frankie and Louis, [Tony’s] two brothers, were up here in charge of construction,”¹³ implying they were Tony’s agents, when he knew they were not.

In 1955, Tony’s death by heart attack in the casino of the Desert Inn Hotel made him a Las Vegas icon.¹⁴ The next day, The Meadows myth appeared for the first time. So eager was a *Review-Journal* writer, covering the death, to connect Tony to The Meadows that he and his editor (by then, Cahlan was the newspaper’s managing editor) let his story refute itself: “He and his brothers, Frank and Louis, constructed the establishment on East Charleston” and two sentences later: “During the time of the construction of the Meadows, he was in McNeil’s [sic] Island federal penitentiary serving a term for rum running and, after his release, came to Las Vegas to aid his brothers in the operation of the Meadows.”¹⁵

The zeal to make Tony the father of The Meadows may be gauged by the fact that such a respected historian as Russell R. Elliott conflated the contradictory sentences of that poorly written article into his 1973 *History of Nevada*: “The Meadows was built and operated by Tony Cornero and his brothers Frankie and Louie.”¹⁶ After reading Professor Elliott, Cahlan may have questioned his own memory. Not only did Tony Cornero’s incarceration in the far Northwest make his participation in creating The Meadows impossible, but other factors limited his ability and his desire to even assist with the completed hotel.

Frank Cornero and his younger brother Tony began bootlegging Canadian liquor into San Francisco in 1921 near the beginning of Prohibition, then moved to Los Angeles. There they did so well that several family members followed them south: their mother, Madeline Cornero Stralla; one of their older sisters, Katherine; their younger sister, Esther; and the youngest brother, Louis. The family came from Italy, a few miles from France, with two exceptions. Because their father, the incorrigible gambler Luigi Cornero, was drawn to Monaco’s Monte Carlo gambling zone, and because their mother had family in Nice, France, eight miles down the coast, Frank Joseph (Francesco Giuseppe) was born in the French principality of Monaco,¹⁷ the gambling capital of the world. Esther was born in Los Gatos, California,¹⁸ after her father’s gambling drove the family from their Italian farm to the Golden State. After Luigi died in an accident in Los Gatos in 1911 and Madeline remarried, the children took the name of her second husband, Giacomo Stralla,¹⁹ and used it to varying degrees.

By 1926, federal prohibition agents were pursuing Tony Cornero as “King of the Los Angeles Bootleggers.”²⁰ After a federal grand jury indicted him that year, he disappeared into the Los Angeles underground.²¹ Then Los Angeles policemen mistakenly arrested him in an unrelated case. Unaware of his federal warrant, they quickly released him, but federal agents were alerted.

Cornero hopped a train north with agents pursuing him so hotly that he was forced to jump from the moving cars in northern California. According to *The Los Angeles Times*, he then caught an airplane and re-boarded the same train farther north, then had to leap from it again in Washington.²² He made his way

into Canada, then Europe and South America, before returning to Los Angeles to surrender.²³ He pled guilty and was sentenced to two years at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Puget Sound, Washington. He arrived at the prison on December 7, 1929,²⁴ a year before his brothers traveled to Las Vegas to negotiate with Tom Salter for favorable treatment of their planned hotel.

Frank and Louis surely kept in touch with their brother during his incarceration, and Tony may have invested in their plan, as their mother and sister Katherine likely did. But Tony could be no help in building The Meadows. He had gone underground December 22, 1926,²⁵ fleeing the country at the end of April 1927.²⁶ He had surrendered to federal authorities in October 1929, was sentenced November 12, and remained in prison until after The Meadows opened. When Frank and Louis began negotiations with Salter, Tony had been either out of the country or in prison during the past four and a half years, while Frank ran the Cornero bootlegging operations in California and Nevada. Frank and Louis knew Las Vegas well enough to negotiate for favored treatment, but Tony was a thousand miles away and years out of touch.

The deal Frank and Louis made with Salter and—presumably—Harmon failed in January 1931.²⁷ The grand opening of The Meadows casino and its first twenty-five rooms attracted large crowds May 2 as the *Las Vegas Age* announced that the casino was “designed and built by Paul Warner for Louis D. and Frank J. Cornero.”²⁸ The start of work on the hundred-room Meadows hotel and bungalow addition was delayed through June, and was finally begun²⁹ around the day Tony was released from McNeil Island, July 1, 1931.³⁰

When he arrived in Las Vegas that July, Tony’s mind was not on The Meadows. He was eager to get back to his California smuggling operation. He seems to have stayed at The Meadows for two months at most before returning to California.

More than a decade and a half later, when Tony answered a knock at his Beverly Hills front door in 1948 and stopped a bullet that nearly killed him, the *Review-Journal* ran a story reviewing his Las Vegas connections. John Cahlan clearly wrote it; he described details of The Meadows just as he did later. In 1948, Cahlan’s memories of The Meadows were only seventeen years old, and, as in 1968, he gave Tony no role in creating The Meadows. Cahlan explained how Frank and Louis negotiated with politicians, then built and opened the resort. Tony appears in the article only after The Meadows was filled with patrons: “During the climactic days of its operation, Frankie and Louie were the hosts supreme. Frankie was the front man and, dressed in his tuxedo, greeted all of the customers. Louie was the inside man, who took care of the guests after they entered the establishment, while Tony was more or less of a silent partner.”³¹

Tony Cornero, one of the flashiest hoods in the country, was not prone to silence. If The Meadows had been even partly his project, everyone would have known. By the time Tony arrived, The Meadows was designed, built, and filled with guests, with its hotel addition under way. It would stand or fall as Frank and Louis created it.

In 1948, Cahlan remembered The Meadows as Frank's achievement, apparently because he knew Frank better than Louis. Cahlan recalled the Rex, the gambling club Tony opened in 1944 inside the Apache Hotel in memory of his seagoing *Rex*, as Tony's contribution to Las Vegas.³²

In early September 1931, when The Meadows was four months old, a fire was discovered in the attic of its new and (luckily) separate hotel building. The Las Vegas Fire Department refused to respond to the Corneros' repeated calls for help because the hotel sat outside the city limits—by less than half a mile. After the \$31,000 building burned to the ground with its state-of-the-art kitchen, Louis spoke bitterly to the press.³³ Frank lost his watch fighting the fire.³⁴ No account mentioned Tony. Apparently, he already had left for Los Angeles, where he quickly regained his place in California bootlegging: In December, Los Angeles police confiscated 620 cases of his smuggled bourbon.³⁵ Tony was demonstrating to his brothers that as Prohibition drew to a close, they were missing a lucrative opportunity.

Although their casino and original rooms survived, Frank and Louis got the point. Without a hotel filled with captive gamblers or prostitutes, income from The Meadows did not compare to the profits of smuggled alcohol. In February the brothers leased the club to three of their employees for \$5,000 a year and left town.³⁶ A *Review-Journal* reporter wrote, "Louis Cornero, proprietor of the Meadows, popular local resort, is giving up his Las Vegas connections, and with his brother, Frank, who has also been a resident of this city for several months past, is returning to Los Angeles to make his home."³⁷ The *Las Vegas Age* reported that "Frank and Louis Cornero, the brothers who built the casino, and the hotel ... plan to return to Los Angeles immediately."³⁸ No one referred to Tony Cornero as the creator or builder of The Meadows.

Some inventive writers claim that Frank and Louis were front men for Tony in The Meadows because of their clean police records. Actually, the evidence makes clear that Louis was the front man for Frank.

Louis Donald (Luigi Donato) Cornero grew up fast. At age twenty-three in 1926, he was known in Los Angeles bootlegging and police circles as "Pico" Cornero. A federal complaint charged him under that name with violating the Volstead Act, which banned the sale of alcohol.³⁹ He vanished. Two weeks later, federal officials decided that Pico must have fled to Mexico.⁴⁰ For the next two years the news was filled with Tony, Frank, Katherine, Esther, and her husband, but nothing from Pico, and police stopped looking for him.

After four years lying low, he could appear in Las Vegas as Louis Cornero without a conviction on his record and could act as the front man for The Meadows. John Cahlan said that Frank "was a real nice little Italian guy. He was about five feet seven inches tall [that would be two inches taller than Tony], and had a very dashing mustache, which he waxed."⁴¹ But Frank apparently had killed people. He had certainly pistol-whipped a Los Angeles neighbor bloody with a .45 in an argument over a puppy.⁴²

When Frank Cornero arrived in Las Vegas at age thirty-three to build The Meadows, he was a convicted felon, free on a \$20,000 appeal bond. Like Tony, he had been sentenced to two years at McNeil Island; in Frank's case it was for his operations in Orange County, where he had bribed public officials for "protection" while smuggling in millions of dollars worth of booze.⁴³

In early February, as The Meadows was being built, Frank—called "Frankie" in the Los Angeles newspapers—left Louis to oversee construction, while he returned to Los Angeles to stand trial with their sister, Esther, on charges of smuggling liquor into San Diego. Despite strong evidence, Esther's charges were dropped,⁴⁴ and Frank was acquitted. Esther's husband was convicted.⁴⁵

The next month, Frankie Cornero again left Las Vegas, this time for San Francisco to appeal his two-year prison sentence. In his original trial, prosecution witnesses were missing, and the Los Angeles District Attorney asked that the jury be dismissed; a second jury convicted Frank. In San Francisco, the United States Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the existence of the two juries constituted double jeopardy.⁴⁶ Frank's conviction was reversed forty days before the grand opening of The Meadows. Frank's absences from the construction site threw responsibility onto the shoulders of twenty-eight-year-old Louis, but the younger man handled the job, and construction finished on schedule.

After Frank and Louis leased out The Meadows and returned to Los Angeles, Louis returned to smuggling and made more headlines as "Pico Cornero." The next year, when Prohibition ended, he moved to Napa Valley with his second wife⁴⁷ and began using his stepfather's surname. "Louis Stralla" buried Pico Cornero and became a pioneer and eventually a grand old man of the legal California wine industry.⁴⁸ As Napa Valley wine became widely known, Louis was elected mayor of St. Helena, where today his name graces the Louis Stralla Water Treatment Facility.

Leaving Las Vegas, Frank rose again to the top of the list of federal targets. In what *The Los Angeles Times* called "the last major liquor conspiracy case to be tried before the Eighteenth Amendment is repealed,"⁴⁹ Frank and his sister Katherine were each sentenced to two years in prison, but because Prohibition was ending, their prison terms were suspended; instead, they paid fines.⁵⁰

With his legal struggles over, Frankie Cornero was not finished with Las Vegas. By 1938, The Meadows had closed under its new operators. Frank returned to Las Vegas to reopen it as a nightclub on weekends, but it failed again and stayed vacant until 1940, when KENO, Las Vegas's first successful radio station, rented the building for its studios. The next year KENO moved to the El Rancho Vegas Hotel.⁵¹ At the time, Frank was engaged to Gladys Thompson of Elko; they planned to live in Las Vegas. In the hot summer of 1941, he drove there to see what could be done with The Meadows.

Gladys waited in Elko that July as Frank looked for a deal for the building. He took a breather for a few days in a cottage on cool Mount Charleston, less than forty miles from town. Then his break was over; his wedding was eight days away. John Cahlan and his wife, Florence Lee Jones Cahlan, drove up to take over the cottage. The three chatted, and then Frank started alone down the twisting mountain road. It was nearly midnight. Part way down the mountain, Frank's right front tire blew. His car plunged down a fifteen-foot slope, turning trunk over hood; he flew out the door into a pile of limestone, smashing the back of his skull. The pioneer Las Vegas casino owner was only forty-three.⁵²

Louis sold The Meadows to the Las Vegas businessmen Nate Mack and R. J. Kaltenborn,⁵³ and Frank's dream began to blossom—for someone else. Las Vegas attorney J. R. Lewis bought Block 16's landmark Arizona Club, and then The Pastime next door, converting the upstairs brothels to hotels.⁵⁴ In early 1941 he complained to the city commission that prostitution on the block was a public nuisance that violated both the city's recently passed Ordinance 194 and a state law banning brothels within forty yards of a church. Two churches sat fewer than forty yards from Block 16.⁵⁵ Neither law mattered until Lewis took the issues to court. His cases moved slowly, but he steadily prevailed.⁵⁶ With downtown prostitution ending, Mack and Kaltenborn leased The Meadows to Edward Clippinger,⁵⁷ an experienced pimp who renovated and reopened the resort as a brothel.

As the legal noose tightened on Block 16, attorneys for its brothel owners pointed out that the city charter gave Las Vegas power over prostitution within a mile of city limits. They demanded that the city exercise that power and close The Meadows, too.⁵⁸ The city commission listened, then passed an ordinance taking control of prostitution within a mile of city limits and banning it everywhere—except at The Meadows.⁵⁹ The resort finally had its monopoly. It would last thirty-six days.

By the time Block 16 was closed, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and the nation was at war. Nothing could be allowed to impede the war effort, and the Army saw venereal disease as an impediment. The Army was building an air base outside of town and demanded that The Meadows be closed.⁶⁰ Patriotism and the threat of declaring Las Vegas off limits were a pair of heavy hammers; two weeks later the city commission repealed its new ordinance and surrendered jurisdiction to Clark County.⁶¹ The Army then turned to the county, pressing until Sheriff Gene Ward closed the brothel in July 1942.⁶²

Clippinger moved his business to Four Mile Springs, sitting just that distance from downtown along the highway to the dam. There, in a romantic gesture, he named his new establishment after his new wife, Roxie. The Roxie Motel thrived until April 28, 1954, when the FBI closed it in a sensational raid.⁶³

The original Meadows building, which had housed the first Las Vegas club with tuxedo-clad staff and customers, the first Las Vegas floor show, and

Judy Garland's Las Vegas debut under her birth name, Frances Gumm, then became a cheap rooming house for single men. In the early hours of February 9, 1943, it burned to the ground. It survived Frankie by a year and a half.⁶⁴

Frank and Louis Cornero had shown Las Vegas what it could be. After 1931 the city and its environs hosted more sleazy sawdust joints than ever, but local gamblers had seen the future: posh decor, formal dress, musicians, singers, showgirls, the works. Frank and Louis had paved the trail to Babylon.

NOTES

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- ²John F. Cahlan; *Fifty Years in Journalism and Community Development*, interviewed and edited by Jamie Coughtry (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 1987), 138.
- ³*Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.
- ⁴"Professional Cards," *Las Vegas Age* (1 January 1931), 5.
- ⁵"Salter Wins Post as District Judge," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (4 August 1942), 7.
- ⁶"New Redlight," *Las Vegas Age* (30 December 1929), 2.
- ⁷"New Redlight," *Las Vegas Age* (8 January 1930), 2.
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- ¹¹Vickey Kalambakal, "The Battle of Santa Monica Bay," *American History* (April 2002), pp. 36-40.
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- ¹⁴Florence Lee Jones (Cahlan) in her "Las Vegas History, Year—1931," published in a special edition of the *Review-Journal* in February, 1955 wrote that The Meadows was built by "the Cornero brothers" and specifically mentions only Louis. *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (February 1955), "Transportation Section," p.12.
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- ¹⁶Russell R. Elliott and William D. Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 2d ed., rev., (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 284.
- ¹⁷Application for Admission, Francesco Joseph Cornero, St. Vincent's Asylum, Marin County, California, August 22, 1909.
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- ²¹"Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," *Los Angeles Times* (29 October 1929), p. A5.
- ²²"Cornero Slips Law's Clutch," *Los Angeles Times* (30 April 1927), p. A2.
- ²³"Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," p. A5.
- ²⁴Record of Prisoners Received at the United States Penitentiary, McNeil Island, Washington, p. 49.
- ²⁵"Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," p. A5.
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- ²⁷"Cleaning Up Process," p. 2.
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- ³⁰Record of Prisoners Received, p. 49.
- ³¹"Recall Cornero 'Enterprises' in Las Vegas," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (10 February 1948), p. 2.
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- ³⁵"Rum Seizures Set High Mark," *Los Angeles Times* (11 December 1931), p. A5.
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- ³⁷"Meadows Casino Is Changing Hands," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (29 February 1932), p. 1.
- ³⁸"Meadows Club Under Lease," p. 4.
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⁴⁸James Conway, *Napa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 44-431.

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⁵¹"KENO' Radio Station Making Plans for Important Expansion," *Las Vegas Age* (18 July 1941), p. 1.

⁵²"Former Operator of Meadows Is Killed Instantly," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (14 July 1941), p. 1.

⁵³"Meadows Razed Last Night by Big Conflagration," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (9 February 1943), p. 2.

⁵⁴Lewis, Miller Buy Block 16 Building," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (8 August 1941), p. 1.

⁵⁵"Block 16 Cases Again Delayed," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (17 July 1941), p. 1.

⁵⁶Marie K. Rowley, "The Restricted District: Prostitution and Place in Las Vegas, 1905-1946," presented at the Urban History Association Biennial Conference, October 22, 2010. Rowley's paper debunks the long-held belief that the U.S. Army forced the closure of Block 16.

⁵⁷"Meadows Troubles Move Further Along Jurisprudence Trail Today," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (31 October 1941), p. 1.

⁵⁸"Battle of Block 16 Moves Further in Tortuous Ground," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (22 October 1941), p.1.

⁵⁹"Meadows Resort Now Sole Spot for Bawdy Houses," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (17 December 1941), p. 3.

⁶⁰Cooley, Edwin James. "Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada," (14 March 1942). Vertical File, "Prostitution-Las Vegas." Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

⁶¹"City Repeals Rule On Bawdy Houses Near Las Vegas," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* (1 January 1942), p. 1.

⁶²"Meadows Closed by Sheriff Ward," *Las Vegas Age* (24 July 1942), p. 1.

⁶³Hank Greenspun with Alex Pelle, *Where I Stand, The Record of a Reckless Man* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 245-46.

⁶⁴"Meadows Razed Last Night," p. 2.

*Nevada Rubber in War and Peace:
A Century of Efforts to Develop a
Nevada Source of Natural Rubber*

MARK FINLAY

At first glance, the notion that Nevada could become an important producer of natural rubber might seem absurd. *Hevea brasiliensis*, the species that yields virtually all of the world's natural rubber—and more today than ever before—is an immense tree, often over one hundred feet tall, one that would look out of place in most of Nevada. Rubber trees require climates that are consistently very hot, with mean temperatures of 23° to 35°C (73° to 95°F), and with rainfall that is both high and consistent, generally over one hundred inches per year.¹ A native of the deepest jungles of the Amazon, the plant thrives only within ten to fifteen degrees latitude of the equator. It is now commercially grown in Indonesia, Malaya, and southern Thailand, but none of these places has a climate that resembles Nevada's, where the mean temperature ranges from 3° to 21°C (35° to 70°F), and the mean annual rainfall is less than ten inches.² Nevada's sparse and relatively small population would

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Illustration on left: Rubber bearing stems trimmed, ready for extraction. Illustration on right: Young rabbit brush showing typical root system. (Nevada Historical Society Library Series, S. B. Doten, *Rubber from Rabbit Brush* (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), University of Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 157, March 1942)

seem another handicap, for the rubber industry remains a very labor-intensive one. In 1940, when Nevada's total population was fewer than 110,000, the rubber industry in Southeast Asia employed some 3,600,000 workers, most of whom toiled daily to manually collect the latex that drips from hand-made cuts in the rubber trees.³

Nevertheless, for nearly a century, some Nevadans have hoped to make the state a source of natural rubber. The catch, of course, is that rubber may be obtained from scores if not thousands of species other than *Hevea brasiliensis*. Between World War I and World War II, scientists, industrialists, and politicians repeatedly sought alternative and domestic sources of rubber, typically focusing on guayule (*Parthenium argentatum*), a desert shrub native to northern Mexico and seemingly adaptable to several regions in the American

Southwest. Nevada's search for a native rubber source has had a somewhat distinct history, for experts there repeatedly turned to a common western wildflower, the rubber rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), as the species that gave the state an important advantage over others. Common in the foothills and plains of the Great Basin, rabbitbrush is almost the converse of the rubber tree: It thrives in arid climates, tolerates high winds and severe temperature fluctuations, and it can grow on poor soils. Indeed, early settlers learned that the presence of rabbitbrush often indicated the poorest, most alkaline of soils.⁴ Characterized by a dense collection of vivid yellow flowers that brighten the fall landscape, rabbitbrush contains some latex in the inner bark of the stems; a small percentage of rubber can be extracted through mechanical crushing combined with chemical solvents. Despite some obvious challenges in bringing such a plant into commercial production, it has repeatedly emerged as an intriguing possible addition to Nevada's agriculture.

These efforts also point to other important issues, ones that could prove significant again in the future. First, the search for natural and domestic sources of rubber represents a deliberate effort to reduce the nation's dependence on imported raw materials, including plants that yield starches, dyes, gums, resins, sweeteners, and other valuable commodities. Because synthetic substitutes for many of these natural products did not exist until the twentieth century, such plants had profound strategic value, and shortages could be devastating to the industrial economy or to military operations. For centuries, western leaders and entrepreneurs have used various strategies of trade, plunder, and exploitation to get their hands on valuable botanic and agricultural resources, particularly those native to overseas colonies and other tropical regions. But the notion that domestic plants might become alternatives to exotic imports has long been an intriguing possibility, perhaps more so today as modern biotechnologies make the prospects of plant improvement even more tantalizing. Above all of this, Nevada's vast stands of wild rubber rabbitbrush seemed to offer one additional advantage: They might be viewed as a natural biological reserve, one that could be left idle and untended, always ready to be harvested in the case of an extreme national emergency.

WORLD WAR I AND THE RUBBER RABBITBRUSH OPTION

The notion that Nevada could become a profitable home for unconventional agricultural crops has a long, if quixotic, history. In his classic study of the arid lands, for instance, William E. Smyth predicted in 1900 that Nevada might produce olives, figs, pomegranates, and other "delicate fruits of the semi-tropics."⁵ But the issue became a national priority during World War I. As wartime circumstances disrupted global trade, Nevada's Council for National Defense helped mobilize the homefront and generate support for the war effort from miners, farmers, ranchers, and other common citizens.⁶ California's Council for National Defense (CCND) went a step further and funded scientific expeditions to evaluate the scale

and scope of the region's natural reserves of valuable resources. In particular, the CCND hoped to "add to the nation's resources through the utility of waste lands" and find among the "vast number of hitherto unused wild plants" species that might yield oils, waxes, gums, and animal feeds. The Carnegie Institution of Washington (CIW) also sponsored several studies of western botanic sources of rubber and other materials, eventually testing some 2,450 species.⁷ Similarly, the National Research Council (NRC) formed a Botanical Raw Products Committee that investigated thousands of species of "economic plants" that could provide raw materials for wartime industries, while the NRC's Chemistry Committee focused some of its investigations upon the desert shrub guayule.⁸ In all, many scientists were hopeful that arid lands in the American West might reduce the nation's dependence upon strategic imports.

The University of California botanist Harvey Monroe Hall led the largest of these expeditions. As the CCND decided to focus on rubber crops, it sent Hall into the Sierra foothills of California and Nevada. After stops near Reno, Carson City, and Pyramid Lake, Hall became convinced that a sea of rabbitbrush plants was ready for harvest and that the dry beds of Lake Lahontan would make "a splendid place for a rubber factory."⁹ Botanizing through Mina in Mineral County, Hall told his wife he was struck by the "absurd hallucination" that he was on such a serious quest for rabbitbrush, and that he would fall to his knees when he found a promising sample. In another letter, after describing his work of pulling rabbitbrush roots from the snow drifts of the High Sierra, he compared his work with that of the miners who had panned for gold two generations earlier.¹⁰ But as Hall camped amid snowstorms in the Sierra and sandstorms in the southern California desert, he became confident that he could make a difference in the global conflict. "This work is a great thing for me," he boasted, "in that it makes me think I am doing something against that d___ Kaiser." "The possibilities of the investigations are almost limitless," Hall asserted.¹¹

In 1918, the search for a domestic rubber crop extended beyond the Great Basin. First, Hall convinced the editor of the nation's most influential rubber trade periodical that the rabbitbrush possibilities had no resemblance to the fads led by the past's "chasers of rubber weed."¹² That summer, Hall joined the prominent American ecologists Frederic and Edith Clements in a three-month journey across the mountains and deserts of six western states in search of rabbitbrush and other potentially valuable plants.¹³ The overwhelming extent of rabbitbrush astounded Hall. Although rubber yields were poor—supposedly around 3 percent or less—and much of the rubber was of a "low grade" quality, Hall remained enthusiastic because the total amount of rabbitbrush in the western states proved greater than ever imagined.¹⁴ Passing through Nevada in autumn 1918, Hall again saw oceans of rabbitbrush near Caliente and Las Vegas and continued the enthusiastic refrain for his work "What a fine thing this war is in some ways," he explained, for "even botanists" played their part in the war effort.

Officials stationed beyond rural Nevada, however, could not be convinced that rabbitbrush could really help address the nation's long-term needs. As the war came to a close, those who wanted a rapid demobilization of the American war economy prevailed. The ever more productive rubber plantations in the East Indies seemed destined to drive rubber prices down to levels that could not support investments on the search for alternatives. The CIW ended its support for rabbitbrush field trials even before the Armistice was signed.¹⁵ Then the CCND cut off its portion of Hall's research funds in December 1918, one month after the hostilities ceased. Hall begged the council to reconsider, and he did not come home for Christmas that year as he continued his quest in the cold and windy high plains of central Nevada.¹⁶

In his final report, submitted in January 1919, Hall expressed relief that the "removal of the submarine menace" had eliminated any immediate fears of a rubber shortage. He warned, though, that the potential for future rubber shortages remained, and rabbitbrush had several important advantages over other potential rubber crops: It was larger in size than most native latex plants (and thus had a higher potential rubber yield per acre); it was already acclimatized to poor environments unsuitable for agriculture; it could be easily and cheaply propagated; and, as confirmed by certain rubber chemists, it offered a relatively high grade of rubber. In summary, Hall concluded that a plant that grew naturally on "land now considered worthless" might make the "the nation practically independent of all foreign countries if the item of expense and harvesting is not considered."¹⁷

Hall and his Berkeley colleague, Thomas H. Goodspeed, co-wrote another report published later in 1919. It offered a similarly plain conclusion: "It is eminently desirable that a portion of the rubber consumed in the U.S. should be produced within our own borders. It is the only important commodity to modern warfare which we have not yet learned to produce."¹⁸ In another report, Goodspeed asserted that he and Hall had succeeded in their mission, for they definitively had located an emergency supply of rubber within the continental United States. Goodspeed concluded, "It can now be said with certainty that a considerable amount of rubber is available in the United States," and the nation could be "practically independent of all foreign countries." Hall and Goodspeed admitted that *Chrysothamnus* could not compete with *Hevea* rubber in normal times, but in an emergency situation, the plant could help Americans "render ourselves independent of other needs." According to Goodspeed, the discovery of rabbitbrush "should remove any fear among the American people" of a possible future rubber shortage.¹⁹

Although Hall's own research interests turned toward other botanical issues, he continued to push for western rubber plants. In 1921, he and his colleague Frances L. Long released *Rubber-Content of North American Plants*, a lengthy study that went beyond his previous reports on rabbitbrush.²⁰ His main message was simple, and he urged those who would listen to think in terms

of future rubber shortages, rather than the one that had just passed. He scored a few minor victories, as when the tire magnate Harvey Firestone's scientists concluded that rabbitbrush offered a potential substitute for imported rubber. Hall's visit to the United States Rubber Company in Connecticut secured similar encouraging promises of further testing, including the funding of new trials at Fallon, Nevada.²¹ Others showed more interest, especially after Great Britain implemented policies that, as intended, drove up rubber prices for the benefit of planters in the East Indies. Even in peacetime, it seemed, the United States had reason to develop its own sources of natural rubber. At small experiment stations in Bard, Shafter, and Torrey Pines, California, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists planted small stands of rabbitbrush, milkweed, *Euphorbia*, *Cryptostegia*, and other potential rubber plants to see if such species might be suitable for western climates.²² The CIW also returned to the search, asking for Hall's help in re-establishing the research project near Fallon. For the next two years, one of Hall's former students conducted studies there on rabbitbrush propagation under controlled breeding conditions.²³

GOVERNOR SCRUGHAM, THOMAS EDISON, AND THE CHRYSLI INDUSTRY

The continued high rubber prices, driven up by Britain's price-control policies, revived interest in rabbitbrush in other circles. Beginning in August 1925, F. W. Bolzendahl, a representative of the Chrysil Rubber Association (so named for the botanic name of rubber rabbitbrush, *Chrysothamnus*), urged Nevada's Governor James G. Scrugham to re-examine this plant's economic potential. The governor was interested immediately. With an engineering background, Scrugham had already shown a special interest in strategic materials and helped the Naval Consulting Board conduct its survey of the nation's vital mineral resources during World War I.²⁴ The governor also hoped to broaden the Silver State's mining-centered economy and reverse the trends of a declining population.²⁵ So he traveled to the Omaha, Nebraska, hotel where Bolzendahl based his operations to learn more.²⁶

Things moved quickly from there. Scrugham immediately ordered a copy of Hall's 1919 report and engaged President Walter Clark and other leaders at the University of Nevada, as well as the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station to direct rabbitbrush studies.²⁷ Scrugham also brought several experts to the state in August 1925, including J. C. Merriam of the CIW, E. B. Babcock, a leading plant geneticist at the University of California, and Harvey Monroe Hall.²⁸ Within two weeks, Hall botanized across the state, selecting promising rabbitbrush specimens near Austin, Beowawe, Winnemucca, and Reno. He also covered the Washoe and Carson valleys, returned to the CIW's research stands near Fallon, and conducted some surveys in eastern Oregon and southern Idaho.²⁹

Hall's new report, delivered on September 11, 1925, contained the optimistic predictions that Governor Scrugham had hoped to hear. Hall pronounced that the total area and density of areas covered with the plant was considerably greater than previously realized; in the Genoa and Minden regions, for instance, the yield was nearly ten thousand pounds of trimmed plants per acre. Hall also stated that chemists foresaw no real problem in extracting the rubber, and that intelligent use of plant genetics would likely increase rubber yields even further.³⁰ "It appeared possible, even probable," Hall reported, "that chrysil rubber could be extracted [sic] and marketed with profit." Hall urged the governor to seek federal funding for an experiment station devoted to rubber-crop research. With high rubber prices a national concern even in peacetime, Hall presumed that federal support for rabbitbrush would materialize.³¹

Meanwhile, Governor Scrugham mobilized Samuel B. Doten, the longtime head of Nevada's Agricultural Experiment Station and other personnel to coordinate a large research program. Doten employed chemists to conduct extraction experiments, ranchers to grub for rabbitbrush by the ton, and appealed to both public institutions and private companies to invest in the research.³² The university president Clark was confident that the project might prove to be the "biggest animal to date in the [experiment] station[s] menagerie!"³³ According to Doten, "Gov. Scrugham is so full of chrysil rubber these days that it puts new elasticity into his step and he is beginning to bounce when he goes up and down stairs." Putting the jokes aside, Doten admitted that the governor might be right, and that he was becoming a rabbitbrush enthusiast himself.³⁴

Bringing the project to the next step proved difficult, however. Reports from the field suggested that harvesting the plant was no easy task in view of the state's poor roads and ranchers' desire that soils not be turned over by mechanical harvesting.³⁵ The governor's overtures to federal funding agencies could not quickly release funds for this new project. Similarly, hopes that major rubber companies would flock to the state proved somewhat premature, for firms demanded more convincing evidence of fast-growing and high-yielding rubber plants before they could invest in large-scale factories.³⁶ In Doten's colorful words, they might not do so until the plants contained so much rubber that they would "stretch and snap back" when pulled.³⁷ Even shipping Nevada samples to the promoters of chrysil rubber in Nebraska proved difficult because of the latter state's quarantine against any plants suspected of carrying an alfalfa beetle.³⁸ Promoter Bolzendahl also became discouraged as his hopes to win access to thirty thousand acres in Nevada did not materialize.³⁹ He then turned to the United States Congress, lobbying for a bill that would grant nearly four hundred thousand acres from federal grazing lands (not necessarily in Nevada) to his Chrysil Rubber Association for twenty-five years. That bill did not pass.⁴⁰

By 1926, research results dashed Hall's promises of high rubber yields and Scrugham's enthusiastic hopes for a new Nevada industry. The experiment station chief Doten might have been the first to give up, writing in November 1925 that it

seemed "quite possible to make money from chrysil if you know how to market the stock."⁴¹ In January 1926, he concluded that "to my mind the whole matter of *Chrysothamnus* rubber is very doubtful, even as a war-time resource."⁴² Doten reported to Governor Scrugham that rabbitbrush's prospects as a commercial crop were "exceedingly doubtful"; in view of rural Nevada's sparse population and other handicaps, costs for growing, harvesting, and hauling to the mill would deter investors. As Doten put it, "I don't say it cannot be done, but me, I'm gonna send to Montgomery Ward for my tires."⁴³ At about the same time, the CIW scaled back its botanic rubber research in Fallon.⁴⁴ Even Hall started to look elsewhere, particularly toward milkweed and some other potential rubber plants of the arid West.⁴⁵ Before closing the case, however, Doten pointed to one more possibility: Nevada's millions of unimproved wild rabbitbrush plants could be seen as an emergency reserve, one that could be harvested if a future war brought such a crisis that the one-time harvest of the plants could help.⁴⁶

The widespread news that the inventor Thomas Edison had decided to make the search for a domestic rubber species his final project also had an impact on Nevada. With the help of his friends Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, the Edison Botanic Research Corporation was created in mid-1927 with the mission to find a domestic source of natural rubber that could be sown and harvested by machine within one year of a war emergency.⁴⁷ That summer, two Nevadans, John T. Reid, a mining engineer and geologist from Lovelock, and M. H. Berg, who operated a garage at Round Mountain, both became interested and tried to help Edison's cause.⁴⁸ Reid approached Doten in search of seeds of rabbitbrush and other species, but Doten brushed him off with the declaration that he was completely finished with that project and that rubber production in Nevada could never be financially feasible. Reid was not put off, however, hinting that his "eastern friends" had deep pockets and were eager to test various milkweeds and thistles, as well as rabbitbrush, as part of their research.⁴⁹ Reid sent several packages of seeds and plant specimen for Edison to test at his homes in New Jersey and Florida. Edison had originally discounted rabbitbrush, but eventually came to appreciate the plant's potential advantages as one that could survive drought conditions, tolerate alkaline soils, and, unlike many rubber plants, be able to survive a frost.⁵⁰ In the end, though, Edison abandoned Nevada's plant species and proclaimed that a species of goldenrod offered the most practical domestic source of rubber for a potential war emergency.

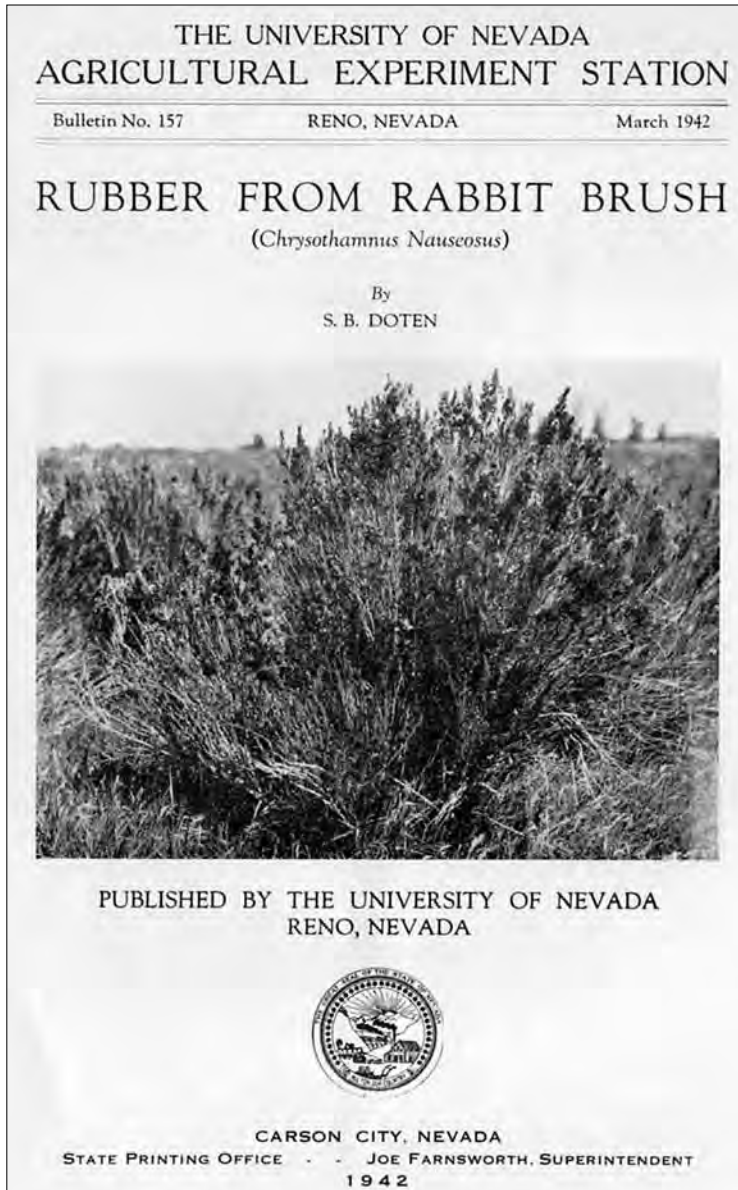
WORLD WAR II

That emergency materialized about fifteen years later, soon after the smoke had cleared from Pearl Harbor. As Japanese military advances in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond threatened the entire rubber industry, James Scrugham again took center stage. Now serving as the state's

lone congressman, the former governor aggressively pushed Washington officials to include Nevada's plant as a potential solution to the wartime emergency.⁵¹ Through his lobbying on Capitol Hill, Scrugham eventually had his colleagues add the phrase "and other crops" to the legislation that funded emergency rubber research in early 1942. As a result, the new Emergency Rubber Project (ERP) was empowered to conduct research on rabbitbrush and other potential rubber crops during the war, rather than only on guayule, the plant with a modest track record of commercial production.⁵²

Samuel Doten, still head of the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station, also re-entered the debate, again with his characteristically frank and colorful assessment of the situation. In March 1942 he published a report on the plant's possibilities, suggesting that times had changed considerably since he abandoned the idea in 1926. Indeed, he saw that "the whole course of American life from the maternity hospital to the cemetery" could be at risk as the nation's rubber-dependent economy came under threat.⁵³ He agreed that millions of pounds of American-grown rubber remained available in Nevada, and he carefully assessed whether or not the time had finally come to harvest the state's living rubber reserve once and for all.⁵⁴ Less optimistic than some of the enthusiasts, Doten noted that harvesting, extracting, and processing technologies remained significant hurdles, and that rubber yields would not be as high or as quickly brought to market as some had hoped. Indeed, Doten—who complained of highway speeds, traffic deaths, and that Americans' legs had grown weak because of their addiction to automotive transport—suggested that a return to the days of horse-drawn transportation remained another good option. Nevertheless, Doten conceded that even a small amount of rabbitbrush rubber could make a difference in the war effort, and he called for immediate research on the possibility of harvesting Nevada's living natural rubber stockpile.⁵⁵

Other Nevadans were less cautious and less willing to bring back the horse and buggy. Mark Butler, an engineer from Lovelock, claimed that rubber just oozed out of rabbitbrush. He predicted the plants would bring easy profits from Nevada's wastelands and he imagined a day when factories across the state would bring new employment for former silver and gold miners.⁵⁶ Thomas H. Goodspeed, the California botanist who had been Hall's colleague during World War I, again lobbied for the quick harvest of the millions of pounds of rubber that already were available in the arid West.⁵⁷ Nevada's Governor Edward Carville joined the campaign as well and urged federal officials to build upon the successful research conducted in the 1920s.⁵⁸ For those concerned about wartime labor shortages, Congressman Scrugham had an answer: the Japanese American "enemy aliens" about to be interned in western camps could be put to work.⁵⁹ (Other Nevadans, however, resisted that idea: Some rubber promoters endorsed Governor Carville's calls that no Japanese Americans be interned within the state, while another jokester suggested that Japanese "aliens" could come into Nevada and literally chew the rabbitbrush to create rubber inside their mouths.)⁶⁰



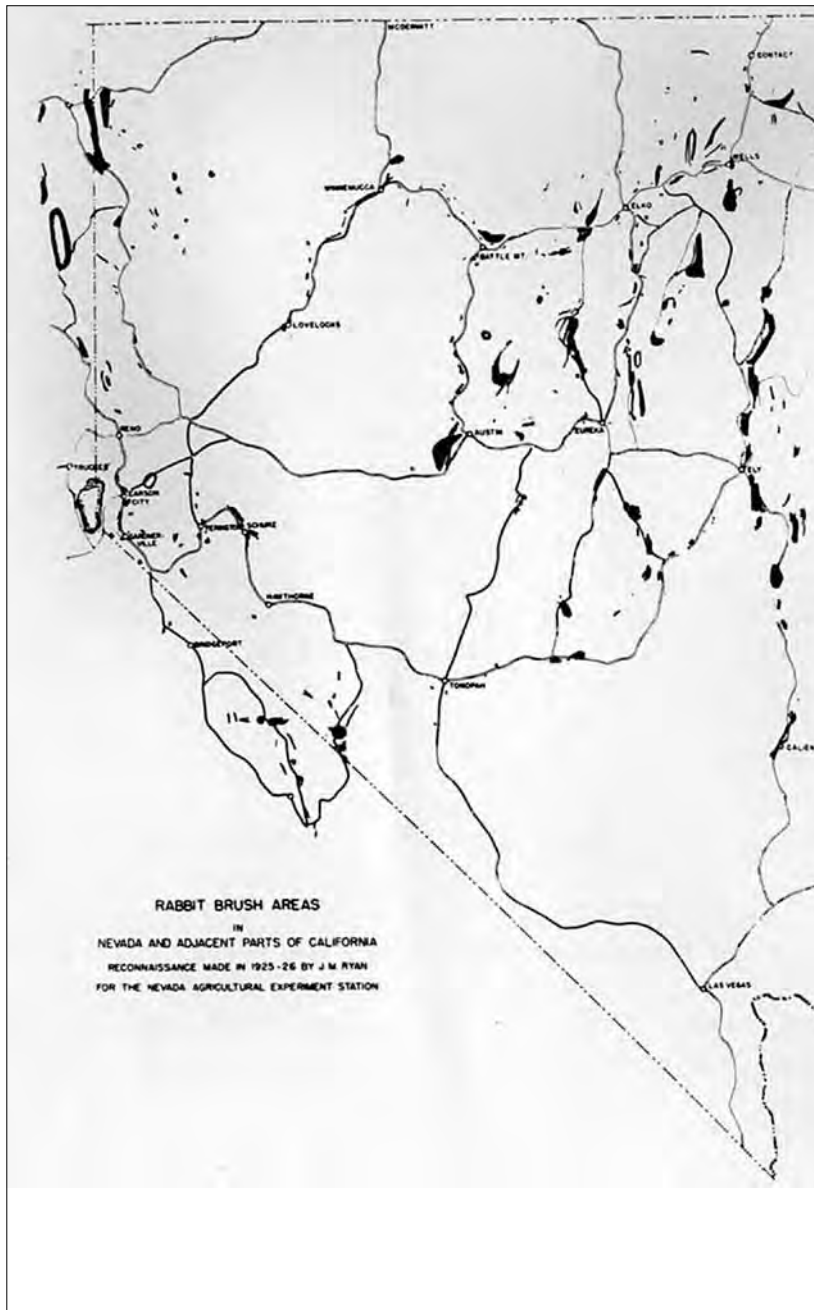
Front cover of S. B. Doten's booklet. (Nevada Historical Society Library Series, S. B. Doten, *Rubber from Rabbit Brush (Chrysothamnus nauseosus)*, University of Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 157, March 1942)

Meanwhile, on March 5, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had signed the bill that created the ERP, a massive search for domestic rubber crops that eventually spent more than \$30 million, and employed more than a thousand scientific and technical experts.⁶¹ Although the ERP was based in Salinas, California, already a home for guayule research, Scrugham continued to pressure officials for research on rabbitbrush. He also arranged several meetings in Reno with forestry and grazing officials to discuss the possibilities, while Reno's Chamber of Commerce leaders also embraced the effort. These moves soon led to a proposal for a \$125,000 research project, funded by federal agencies and with Doten in charge.⁶²

Despite initial tests that suggested rabbitbrush might yield only 0.35 percent rubber, officials in Washington asked Salinas scientists to find the time to address Scrugham's demands for additional study.⁶³ The director of the Salinas project was less convinced, however, and wrote to a colleague in Minnesota that he did not understand the sudden enthusiasm for "proletarian" plants like rabbitbrush.⁶⁴ But the congressman pressed on, demanding that he and other Nevadans travel to Salinas to witness the crucial rubber extraction trials (although experts advised Scrugham to travel alone, for they did not want to put him in an embarrassing position "should the test fall flat.")⁶⁵ Doten also complained of an anti-rabbitbrush bias in the ERP. On April 18, he submitted a request for federal funding to conduct rubber extraction and processing tests in Reno on a large scale. Emergency expenditures and rushed research plans could be justified, Doten said, in part because it could help "diminish civilian discontent" over impending tire shortages.⁶⁶

Remarkably, however, Doten reversed his position on the matter just two weeks later. By May 4, he had reached the conclusion that rabbitbrush could not help the war effort, for the economic, engineering, and chemical extraction questions remained prohibitive. In view of wartime shortages of trucks, rail cars, and labor, it seemed impossible to plan for a major harvest of rabbitbrush, and even if that could be achieved, the nation still lacked proven methods and equipment necessary to process the shrub into useful rubber. Despite his disappointment that all the rubber in Nevada's deserts "must remain useless," Doten wrote "I find myself unable to reach any other conclusion than that whole rabbitbrush plan is impracticable under existing circumstances." He asked USDA officials to ignore his April request for funds and to forgive him for the embarrassment he had caused.⁶⁷

The World War II episode of Nevada's rubber rabbitbrush initiative died soon after that. One USDA official was glad to abandon an idea that cost "more words, numerically counted, than there ever will be pounds of rubber extracted from the brush."⁶⁸ By the end of 1942, the ERP director could write to a Nevada forester: "I will wager you see red every time a letter bearing the rabbitbrush designation reaches your desk—justifiable rage I should say."⁶⁹ As grim results from additional tests came in, Nevada's hopes to become a natural rubber-producing state were dashed once again.⁷⁰



Map from S. B. Doten's booklet. (Nevada Historical Society Library Series, S. B. Doten, *Rubber from Rabbit Brush* (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), University of Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 157, March 1942)

FROM THE 1970S TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Several factors came together in the mid 1970s that again revived interest in the rubber-producing plants of the American West. Oil embargos and rising petroleum prices drove up costs for synthetic rubber, while the introduction of radial-type automobile tires brought increased demand for the relatively more flexible natural rubber. Some predicted that demand for natural rubber was destined to outstrip Southeast Asia's potential supply. Ecological concerns also played a role. As soon as the Jimmy Carter administration took office, some promoters lobbied the new president's advisors in hopes he would be interested in natural rubber as a clean raw material, one that relied on the "natural solar engine" to yield useful industrial products.⁷¹ As in earlier episodes of domestic rubber enthusiasm, the most promising species was the desert shrub *guayule*, a plant more appropriate for the soils and climate of Arizona and southern California. To that end, the Four Corners Regional Commission and a number of scholars, many based at the University of Arizona, devoted years of research to the prospects of the desert shrub. To varying degrees, the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the departments of Defense, Agriculture, Commerce, and Interior all committed funds to the research.

These circumstances generated renewed interest in rubber crops in Nevada, this time with more focus on *guayule*. Private investors considered buying seed and finding an area of ten thousand acres that could become the center for a new processing facility, although experts quashed a proposal to plant *guayule* as far north as Winnemucca.⁷² Officials at the State Division of Forestry also became interested in the desert shrub. According to its director, Robert Long, *guayule* could help with reforestation efforts, and he was convinced the plant could be bred to thrive in the southern part of the state even though it was native to the warmer climates of northern Mexico.⁷³ Long's agency received a \$15,000 grant that funded trials at Tule Springs and in the Washoe Valley to test *guayule*'s response to Nevada's relatively cooler climate, and to see if it could become an alternative crop to alfalfa in some parts of the state.⁷⁴ The project turned out to be somewhat controversial, however, as some experts wanted to be sure that the Division of Forestry did not stray into agricultural research, while others questioned whether Nevada could partake in funds targeted for specific counties in the Four Corners states.⁷⁵ Eventually, *guayule* research in Nevada diminished, although research on the shrub continued in several settings throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the same circumstances of oil embargoes, ecological concerns, and economic development hopes also sparked renewed interest in rubber rabbitbrush. Under one of its grants to encourage innovation among small businesses, the NSF offered funds to Native Plants, Inc., an innovative biotechnology firm based in Salt Lake City. After taking samples from sixty-six sites across the Great Basin, W. Kent Ostler, the lead scientist, found that some specimens yielded close to 7 percent rubber. Ostler predicted that, under careful management, the plant could yield five hundred and perhaps as much as sixteen hundred pounds of rubber per acre.

That yield, along with nuclear magnetic-resonance analysis that suggested a high quality of rubber, seemed enough to encourage hopes for commercial development. Despite the conclusion that the potential was “very promising,” however, the NSF declined to support the second phase of funding.⁷⁷ However, more researchers, many of whom were based at Brigham Young University, conducted similar research later in the 1980s and into the 1990s. In addition to a search for subspecies and varieties that yielded high percentages of rubber, these scholars also touted the plant as a potentially useful source of resins, oils, insecticides, and fungicides.⁷⁸ Today, Ostler and others promote rabbitbrush as a species that can grow quickly on disturbed lands, such as those at the Nevada Test Site, while some western landscaping companies use the plant to add color to autumn gardens.⁷⁹

Research on rubber crops continues in Nevada to the present day. Under the direction of the biochemist David Shintani, a team of researchers at the University of Nevada, Reno, is using advanced genomic techniques to help identify the genes and proteins required for rubber biosynthesis. This time, the researchers’ main focus is on yet another possible botanic source of rubber: *Taraxacum kok-saghyz*, or TKS. This native of Central Asia—also commonly known as the Russian dandelion for its resemblance to the backyard plant—has an important advantage over other arid-land rubber plants: It grows and reseeds quickly, like a weed. Beyond that, Shintani and his team use advanced techniques of plant genomics to identify, isolate, and purify the genes and proteins that regulate the quantity and quality of natural rubber. These genes might be reintroduced into engineered plants, or perhaps even into other species, turning entirely different plants into rubber producers. Meanwhile, researchers elsewhere are trying to improve the size, shape, and yield of TKS roots in order to aid mechanical harvesting.⁸⁰

These episodes may seem to have been fanciful hopes of aggressive land-sales people, boosterish politicians, and a handful of relatively anonymous plant scientists. Yet the possibility remains that Nevada’s century of a search for an alternative rubber crop may still prove to be more than a quixotic quest. Synthetic rubber remains dependent upon global petroleum resources, resources that few believe will be readily affordable and available decades from now. Meanwhile, natural rubber from the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree remains preferable to synthetic rubber for countless applications, and demand for natural rubber will not decrease so long as the industrial and automotive economy spreads across the globe. Yet there remains the risk, for both ecological and geopolitical reasons—including bioterrorism—that the natural rubber industry based in the tropics could collapse. Just as James Scrugham, Samuel Doten, John Reid, David Shintani, and other Nevadans have warned, the United States economy is deeply dependent on a rubber supply that is half a world away. Global climate change provides another inducement to finding crops that can provide valuable resources despite rising temperatures and aridity. Should any or all of these approach critical levels, the notion that Nevada could become a rubber-producing state may not be so absurd after all.

NOTES

¹See http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/duke_energy/Hevea_brasiliensis.html#Ecology (accessed 9 January 2009).

²See http://www.stockmapagency.com/Temperature_Map_Nevada_S-NV-Temp.php (accessed 9 January 2009).

³Alec Gordon, "Dynamics of Labour Transformation: Natural Rubber in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 34:4 (2004), 534.

⁴S. B. Doten, *Rubber from Rabbit Brush (Chrysothamnus nauseosus)*, University of Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 157, (March 1942), 5.

⁵William E Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America* (New York: Harper, 1900), available at <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed 8 December 2009). See also Jay Davison, "Agricultural Diversification," at http://www.ceda-nv.org/documents/Agriculture_diversification_pres.%202006.ppt (accessed 11 January 2010); and C. Wiley Hinman and Jack W. Hinman, *The Plight and Promise of Arid Land Agriculture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 125-26.

⁶Karen Loeffler, "World War I and the Nevada Homefront: Pre-War Rhetoric vs. War-time Reality," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 50:3 (Fall 2007): 215-48.

⁷Carnegie Institution of Washington, *Yearbook No. 17, 1918* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1919), 297; *idem*, *Yearbook No. 18, 1919* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1920), 343.

⁸E. M. East to G. E. Hale, 19 July 1917; and "Report of the Chemistry Committee to the National Research Council," 10 July 1917, both in *Microfilm Edition of the George Ellery Hale Papers 1882-1937* (Washington and Pasadena: Carnegie Institution of Washington and California Institute of Technology, 1968), Reel 50.

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¹⁰HMH to CCH, 7 November 1917; and HMH to Folks at Home, 17 February 1918, Hall Papers.

¹¹See HMH to CCH, 3 November 1917; and HMH to Folks at Home, 4 November 1917, Box 1, Hall Papers. See also HMH to CCH, 5 March 1918, 18 June 1917, 7 November 1917, 15 February 1918, and 21 February 1918, Box 1, Hall Papers. See also HMH, "Report of the Committee on Botany to the Pacific Coast Research Conference," 24 November 1917, Carton 1, California State Defense Papers.

¹²[Henry C. Pearson], "The United States Can Produce Its Own Rubber," *India Rubber World* 58 (June 1918, 517-19). See also A. T. Saunders, "Rubber Found in Milkweed," *India Rubber World*, 43 (1 October 1910), 4; and "Three Hundred Million Pounds of Chrysil Rubber," *India Rubber World*, 61 (January 1920), 203-204.

¹³Edith Clements, "Diary, 1918," Box 52, Edith S. and Frederic E. Clements Papers, Accession 1678, American Heritage Center, Laramie, Wyoming (hereafter cited as Clements Papers).

¹⁴For instance, he estimated that 832,000 acres of the shrub grew in the San Luis Valley of Colorado alone. HMH to CCH, n.d [August 1918], Hall Papers; and HMH, "Report on Rubber Investigations," 12 October 1918, Carton 1, California State Defense Papers.

¹⁵E. M. East to Frederic E. Clements, 7 October 1918; and E. M. East to Frederic E. Clements, 30 October 1918, Box 1, Clements Papers.

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⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 8, 19-22.

⁵⁶*Reno Evening Gazette* (18 March 1942); *Nevada State Journal* (23 March 1942); Mark M. Butler to George W. Malone, 29 January 1942, Carville Papers.

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Where She Stands *Ruthe Deskin and the Las Vegas Sun*

KIMBERLY WILMOT VOSS AND LANCE SPEERE

The history of Las Vegas conjures images of mobsters, megastars, and millionaires such as Bugsy Siegel, Frank Sinatra, and Howard Hughes. Each was instrumental, as were numerous others, in the development of the city of bright lights and big names into what could be considered the world's most famous contemporary boomtown. Newspapers are also often intertwined with the history of a city, and none more so than in Las Vegas. The older of the city's two papers, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, takes a more libertarian perspective on the city and country's development, while its rival, the younger, more liberal, publication, the *Las Vegas Sun*, reflects the personality of its colorful founder and publisher, Hank Greenspun.

Nestled among these towering personalities in Las Vegas was Ruthe Deskin, the longtime assistant to Greenspun, whose story exists in books, articles, and film, including the 2008 documentary, "Where I Stand: The Hank Greenspun

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Story.”¹ Greenspun founded the *Sun* in 1950, Deskin was hired four years later, and she outlived the publisher by fifteen years and continued to contribute to the *Sun* until her death in 2004. Acknowledged by Greenspun himself as the calming force behind his fiery brand of journalism, Deskin held the power of the pen in Las Vegas for a half-century of checks and balances, keeping an eye on the grandstanding, greed, and hubris of the city’s leaders and developers while still finding time to champion her own causes. Yet the men she kept in line have always overshadowed her own important story.

Looking into her family’s video camera in her waning years, Deskin recalled the times that shaped who she was — a penniless college student and a lonely young wife without a job. She recalled wishing she could go off to fight in World War II instead of her husband. These were the experiences that led to her never-ending fight for those less fortunate when she finally attained her position of authority at the *Las Vegas Sun*. Deskin can easily be considered a woman ahead of her time when one looks back at this influential Las Vegas journalist’s career. Her work behind the scenes helped create a sense of community in the city she loved. In her visible role at the *Sun*, she often expected more of the region’s political figures. Yet she was simply living up to the promise she showed at Yerington High School in the early 1930s. In the pioneering spirit of her heritage, she was a high school basketball star well before federal legislation required female equality in education and school athletic programs through Title IX. In fact, Deskin’s basketball team won the state championship. She grew into adulthood two decades before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, and found herself putting aside her college education and potential career opportunities to raise her two daughters. From there, Deskin had to forge a new path for herself as a journalist, thus establishing what would become her lifelong career.

Throughout the post-World War II years, when few women held positions of influence at newspapers, Ruthe Deskin was a groundbreaker. A Nevada native, she used her skills in sports to help pay for college by coaching children in basketball. That love of sports and children was to be a continuing theme in her life — the journalism would develop later. She regularly fought for the rights of others. Her longtime friend and Las Vegas councilwoman Lois Tarkanian said of Deskin, “There was nothing phony about her. She stood up for people who needed help and she made people feel at home.”² In a city of dazzling lights and colorful personalities, Deskin was a steady influence.

Ruthe Goldsworthy (later becoming Deskin) was born on February 20, 1916, in the mining and agricultural community of Pizen Switch (later renamed Yerington), Nevada, about sixty miles southeast of Reno. She was the oldest of three children of Jim and Viola (West) Goldsworthy. She described her father as shy but with a good sense of humor, and her mother, nicknamed “Bambi,” as open and friendly. Her father was a mining engineer who also ran a feed store that was lost in the Depression. He attended the University of Nevada in Reno

until his junior year but had to drop out so that his brother could attend college. Her father's lack of a college degree led to his insistence that his children go to college. He did own a small mine, but it yielded little money. Deskin said her father continued to dream of making it rich in mining but never did. "He was a dreamer and his dreams never came true, unfortunately," she recalled years later in an oral history interview.³

Deskin went to school in a one-room schoolhouse and was a newspaper delivery girl for the *Reno Evening Gazette*. She delivered ten newspapers for 25 cents a day.⁴ All of the cousins she grew up with were male, and she played a lot of baseball and football as a self-described "rough little kid."⁵ Her father wanted a son first, so she became the substitute, accompanying him on his frequent hunting and hiking excursions. She had two siblings: a sister, Ellie, and a brother, Myron, who was eight years younger. Her father insisted that the family eat dinner together every evening. They were a close family. They had little money but she said she was unaware of social class differences as many of the neighborhood families were in the same boat.

She attended Yerington High School, where the tall young woman was an all-state basketball player.⁶ This was the time when female athletes had to play a "three-court" game, with only one bounce of the ball and no dribbling.⁷ She lettered in numerous sports: badminton, basketball, volleyball, and swimming. She was also student-body president and editor of the yearbook. "I was a big deal in high school," she recalled. "Everything you could be, I was."⁸

Her parents were adamant about her attending college and used the little money they had from the mine to pay her tuition. With her father remaining at the Pine Grove mine, Deskin, her mother, and her sister moved to Reno in 1933, so she could attend the University of Nevada. They rented a house for \$25 a month, but before long they could not afford the rent and were evicted. She recalled finding her otherwise strong mother crying and vowed that she would never see her parents struggle like that again. "We were so broke," Deskin said. "That did something to me."⁹ The three women then moved to an apartment near the university. Her father eventually went to work for the state highway department, allowing him to move to Reno and rejoin his family.

Deskin's home life was only one of the challenges she faced when she began attending college. She was no longer the star high school athlete and academic standout, which made the adjustment difficult. The bar had been set high for her, and now she considered herself a failure. "College was an absolute disaster for me. I was so poor, and I had come out of high school as a big shot," she recalled in her later years.¹⁰ She may have been uncomfortable with failure, but she obviously did not let it slow her down. In each case where she proved unable to find the success she expected, she managed to turn it into a positive experience.

Her stellar basketball career became the first casualty that she needed to overcome. School officials at the University of Nevada had decided that basketball was "too strenuous for the girls," so she was no longer able to show off

her abilities by competing head to head against other women at other schools.¹¹ She found a way to use this obstacle to help pay her tuition by assisting in a city-playground basketball program where she taught the finer points of the game to the future well-known Nevada high school basketball coach Harry Paille.¹² In later years, she mentioned that her true career dream had been to be a basketball coach, and she regularly cheered for University of Nevada, Las Vegas's basketball team.

Deskin was further demoralized after her intended major in college also had to be scrapped. She entered college planning to become a social worker, but when classes began, she discovered the school did not offer the major. This setback, however, ended up introducing her to the career that would eventually become her lifelong passion. After an aptitude test highlighted her writing skills, she decided to major in journalism and became a staff member of the *Sagebrush*, the student newspaper. The university's journalism program appears to have regularly enrolled women. Six men and five women are pictured in a 1924 photograph of the University's first journalism graduating class.¹³ But that did not necessarily mean equality. Deskin said that journalism professor A. L. Higginbotham did not like women taking his classes because he believed most would eventually get married and quit journalism — it was a waste of his teaching. Deskin recalled that after she and some of the other women established themselves in journalism, they would later call him to tease, "Professor, I'm still working."¹⁴

In 1937, she graduated and married her college classmate Elwin Jeffers, who also worked for the university's student newspaper, at her parents' house.¹⁵ Deskin (then Jeffers) gave birth to a daughter, Nancy, the following year and another daughter, Terry, the year after that. Elwin Jeffers worked for the United States employment services in Reno and Las Vegas while she, for the first time in her life, found herself homebound, raising her young daughters. This was a foreign idea to her, especially after being told by her parents all her young life that she would attend college to get an education to create opportunities for herself. "Here I had two babies and this education and we didn't have much money," she recalled. "Total frustration with my life — never having done anything with myself."¹⁶

The family was living in Las Vegas when the United States entered World War II, and in March 1943 Jeffers volunteered for the Navy Reserves. Ruth's bitterness toward her husband grew as she watched him leave her at home with the children. "I think that's when I began to pull away from him because he left me and went into the Navy," she recalled. "I wanted to be the one to go."¹⁷ Feeling completely alone at this point, she packed up all their property and her two daughters into her car — the mattress tied to the top — and left for Reno. She was living with her parents when a family friend encouraged her to talk to a military recruiter. Before long she became the employee relations director at the Army Ordnance Depot near Herlong, California, about seventy miles north of Reno. Paid an annual salary of \$1,800, which she described as "very good

for the time," she put out the organization's newspaper and was authorized to administer oaths.¹⁸ She finally had the career that she had been craving. In that position, she received "excellent" ratings from her supervisors and earned the Extra-Meritorious Civilian Service Medal.¹⁹ She was one of the few women in the United States to receive that honor.²⁰

Like many in wartime, the Jeffers' marriage ended in divorce. While working in Herlong, Ruthe met the man who would become her second husband, Jim Deskin. She said they "just kind of fell for each other."²¹ Deskin also got more support from her second husband, and that included her career opportunities. They treated their marriage as a partnership. "Jim was always so supportive of anything I ever did," she said. "I always had a sense of security because of his confidence in my ability."²²

After the war ended, Deskin moved back to Reno and began working for a venereal disease prevention organization. She did not enjoy the job, but it paid well. Soon, she became the women's page editor of the *Reno Evening Gazette*.²³ She described the newspaper as "very business-like." This prevented her from getting truly involved in the community as she later would in Las Vegas.²⁴ The *Gazette's* approach to journalism lacked the advocacy that Greenspun favored. Deskin returned to Las Vegas in 1950 when her husband, Jim, was assigned to establish a work program in the city. Her first husband had worked for the same program before entering the service. Once in Las Vegas, Deskin unexpectedly landed a job in radio by writing a script for her husband to read on the air for a radio program broadcast on KENO. The owner of the station, Max Kelch, wanted to know who wrote the script — he liked it that much — and soon hired her as a copywriter. Deskin called Kelch "a wonderful guy" to work for. "Tough, real tough," she said of her boss. "And if you didn't do your job, you weren't there very long. But he'd back you 100 percent."²⁵ As an example, an advertiser once criticized Deskin's work so severely that she cried. After Kelch heard of the conversation, they both got in the car and visited the advertiser. Kelch said to him, "I want you to know that I have one of the best copywriters in the country."²⁶ There were no problems after that.

Deskin also had the chance to be an on-air announcer. It was unusual for women to be working in radio at the time and rarer still for a woman's voice to be heard over the airwaves. Deskin's break came when the male announcer for the program "Women in the News" had to read an advertisement about a corset. The announcer laughed so hard about the female undergarment that the station had to go off the air for a minute. The laughter bothered the female advertiser, who decided that a woman should do that show instead.²⁷ Deskin was pegged for the new job, which would eventually lead her back to journalism.

Deskin later moved to another radio station, KLAS, and started to do a fifteen-minute current-events radio show, "Southern Nevada Today", which had been started hoping to sell advertising to the Strip hotels. She also interviewed celebrities who were performing at the local hotels, including Liberace, who first

began playing in Las Vegas on a regular basis in the mid 1940s. She struck up a friendship with the famous entertainer and pianist, and the two exchanged greeting cards throughout their lifetimes.²⁸

Deskin enjoyed the invisibility of the radio position. “Nobody was looking at me, and I liked that,” she recalled.²⁹ This was indicative of how Deskin got things done — from behind the scenes. Nor would she be swayed by the celebrity that regularly surrounded her: Her future employer, Greenspun, was a friend of Frank Sinatra, whom Deskin described as a “snob” and an “arrogant so and so.”³⁰

Deskin worked in radio, advertising, and publicity for about four years before newspaper journalism lured her back, but not before turning down an initial offer to join the *Las Vegas Sun* for less money than she was making in radio. She was earning \$65 a week at the radio station and the *Sun* offered her \$50, so she declined. When the *Sun* started its Sunday edition in June 1954, she was approached to be the Sunday editor. She boldly demanded \$100 a week. “I thought that was the last I’d hear from them,” she said. “The next thing I knew I was hired.”³¹ She was to spend the rest of her career at the newspaper.

When Deskin joined the *Sun* in 1954, few women worked in the field of newspaper journalism outside of the women’s pages. As the former *Sun* columnist Susan Snyder has written, “Even for women with experience and talent, journalism of the 1950s remained a career that more often happened by chance than design.”³² Despite editing the Sunday editions, which were traditionally filled with features and other lighter fare, Deskin took advantage of every opportunity to exercise her political chops and hold politicians accountable for their words and actions, which would become a Deskin trademark.

In the early years, Deskin co-wrote the “Sunlight on Politics” column with the *Sun* investigative reporter Alan Jarlson. The column featured the political symbols of a donkey on one side and an elephant on the other — both wearing boxing gloves. It initially appeared under the byline “Charlie Guam.” They used the pseudonym to protect the identification of many of their sources.³³ According to Jarlson: “Our column evolved from the fact that she got scads of phone calls from political tipsters, while I got my stuff out on the street.”³⁴ In an August 2, 1959, column, as an example of the kinds of tips they received, they took on Lyndon Johnson’s bid for the presidency: “SUNlight has sound reason to believe that [Senator Alan] Bible will come out for Johnson and will strongly urge the Nevada delegation to the national convention to cast its vote accordingly.” Their prediction proved to be correct.³⁵

After several years in the news department, Deskin’s no-nonsense, feet-to-the-fire but even-keeled and disciplined approach to newspaper journalism brought a different task from the publisher, Hank Greenspun. He needed her in management and gave her the title of “Assistant to the Publisher.” The job description involved doing a little of everything, from being his eyes and ears to taking his place at meetings and community functions when he was unavailable. She was involved in most news and editorial aspects of the newspaper.

While both believed in the newspaper as having a watchdog role in the community, Greenspun and Deskin were opposites in many ways. He was a maverick journalist, fearlessly tangling with the biggest names in politics, yet at the same time maintaining dubious ties of his own in city politics and engaging in backroom shenanigans.³⁶ As he has been described, "Nobody who knew him was neutral about Hank Greenspun. He was hated or loved, feared or trusted, respected as a crusader or dismissed as a journalistic loose cannon, admired as an entrepreneur or advanced as an example of how not to run a business."³⁷ Deskin noted: "Hank's model for success was to antagonize the other newspaper."³⁸ Among his many causes, Greenspun was one of the first to speak out against Senator Joseph McCarthy's scare tactics in the Communist witch hunts. Deskin said, "Edward R. Murrow gets all the credit, but the *Sun* was in the forefront."³⁹ At one point, the federal government launched an indictment against Greenspun on charges that he had incited an assassination of McCarthy; the publisher was acquitted. In another visible case, Greenspun pled guilty in 1950 to violating the Neutrality Act by conducting clandestine expeditions to buy and supply arms for Israel. He paid a \$10,000 fine but did no prison time. In 1961, he was pardoned by President John F. Kennedy after a hearing in which Deskin traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify on behalf of her boss.

Greenspun was the love-him-or-hate-him maverick, Deskin a quieter, moral-bound journalist who was beloved. Together, they made a powerful partnership, although in many of the stories about the colorful Greenspun, Deskin's role is typically left out.⁴⁰ Deskin called Greenspun one of the most intelligent, compassionate people she ever met. She also stressed his honesty and integrity. She gave the example of a minister who came in to complain about one of Greenspun's columns. The minister said, "I question your motives." This was too much for the outspoken publisher. He lifted the man out of his chair by the shoulders and said, "Sir, you can question my judgment, but never question my motives."⁴¹ As outspoken as Greenspun was, Deskin was the reality check. If not for Deskin, some who knew them have suggested, Greenspun could not have accomplished all that he did. Even his son Brian Greenspun wrote of Deskin, "[S]omeone had to provide balance to Hank Greenspun's passion. Someone had to make sure common sense had a seat at the publisher's table."⁴² Greenspun's wife, Barbara, was the other balancing influence. Deskin said of Barbara Greenspun, "She's got a marvelous business head, and she controlled the business end while Hank did the rest, and it was really the perfect combination."⁴³

Deskin's grounded personality and her roots in Nevada meant that she was valuable to Greenspun. She understood the community and was not shy about telling the truth. She said that what she liked about working for her boss was that he wanted her true views: "When he asked me my opinion about something, he wanted an honest opinion — not the answer I thought he wanted to hear," Deskin said.⁴⁴ Her truth-telling to Greenspun actually ended up on the front page of the *Sun* in the form of the long-running "Memo to Hank" column. It

began as a fluke. Greenspun had been in a car accident and was recuperating at home while his wife had just given birth. To keep the Greenspuns aware of day-to-day operations at the newspaper, Deskin wrote one of her no-holds-barred memos intended for his personal use. Instead, the memo ended up in the hands of a typesetter and was accidentally published.⁴⁵ It was such a hit with readers, and because Greenspun loved the unconventionality of the whole thing that the column became an enduring *Sun* tradition.

Deskin was also a match for Greenspun intellectually. According to the longtime Nevada journalist Jack McCloskey, "Ruthe sure is the *Sun's* brain department. Don't give a damn what Greenspun says, that Ruthe Deskin has been the real backbone and brains of the *Sun*."⁴⁶ There are many stories about their partnership. One commonly told tale was about a devastating fire at the *Las Vegas Sun*. Greenspun was in Europe when the *Sun* building burned to the ground on November 20, 1963, the result of spontaneous combustion. The Deskins got a late-night call from the phone company about the fire and raced to the scene. Deskin was the one who had to make the call to tell her boss of the disaster. Greenspun responded, "Ruthe, it's only money, buildings, and machinery. We'll build a bigger *Sun*, but make sure the paper comes out tomorrow morning, even if it's only four pages."⁴⁷ The newspaper was put out in Deskin's house — with reporters and editors in every room including the kitchen and the garage. "We had reporters waiting in line to use the only phone line we had," Deskin recalled. "There were editors working on the coffee table, the floor — papers everywhere. It was a ball getting the newspaper out under such difficult conditions."⁴⁸

There was a moment in Deskin's career when she might have left her beloved Las Vegas for the academic life. In 1963, she declined a job offer from her former professor, Higginbotham, to teach journalism courses at the University of Nevada, Reno. She wrote that she seriously considered taking the position but her schedule at the newspaper would not allow it.⁴⁹ Her loyalty to the newspaper may have been too strong to let her leave, but she did not abandon her commitment to journalism education. Two decades later she served on a planning committee to redesign the journalism program at the University of Nevada, Reno.⁵⁰ And today a journalism scholarship is given out in Deskin's name at UNLV.

As Deskin's newspaper profile increased, so did her role in the Nevada journalism community. In 1966, she became the second woman elected president of the Nevada State Press Association.⁵¹ These leadership roles were few for women in newspaper organizations during this period. In fact, it was not until 1971 that the National Press Club fully accepted women as members, much less officers. For Deskin, it was likely her role of negotiator as a balance to Greenspun's outspoken passions that won her acceptance. She was the voice of reason. As one journalist put it, "If you can't talk to Hank, talk to Ruthe. She'll listen."⁵²

But she would also hold her ground when necessary. Deskin's first interaction with the eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes, who took up residency in Las Vegas in 1966, occurred during the preparation for a Press Club event — the Branding Iron, an annual dinner similar to the Gridiron Club in Washington, D.C., in which reporters and politicians skewered one another. Some of the Press Club members were rehearsing a skit for the event at the Sahara Hotel during the 1950s when Hughes came in accompanied by several young women. The group watched until the women's giggles got on Deskin's nerves. While the other members were afraid to approach Hughes, Deskin was undeterred. "I don't care who he is," she told her colleagues. "He has no right to be in here." She approached Hughes and told him what she thought of their behavior, and the group soon left.⁵³

Back at the *Sun*, Deskin's influence was not always front and center. It was often her behind-the-scenes roles that led to changes or action.⁵⁴ For example, Deskin was involved with letters to the editor, reading every letter submitted. One unsigned letter lamented the writer's depression at his or her lack of employment and threatened suicide. She put it aside and asked Executive Editor (and former Nevada governor) Mike O'Callaghan to address the letter rather than running his usual column, saying that "this person needs help now."⁵⁵ His column asked the letter writer not to be selfish and to find others who need help. Deskin checked the police logs for any suicides for the days that followed, and none was reported. According to O'Callaghan, "Ruthe's sensitivity to the needs of *Sun* readers continued our legacy as a newspaper that cares."⁵⁶

To that end, Deskin and Greenspun were equally compassionate in their causes, but employed different methods. As an example, Deskin went to Israel in 1972, the country her boss had arranged to send weapons to several years earlier. The trip was meant as a vacation but it led to a series of news stories. She wrote of two Russian immigrants in Jerusalem at an absorption center. They said of President Richard Nixon: "He's our last hope."⁵⁷ When she returned to Las Vegas, she wrote of her trip, "From the moment one arrives in Israel he is aware of the Israeli as a living example of those who fought for and established our United States of America." She concluded the article with her prayer for Israel's peaceful future.⁵⁸

Deskin remained in her position at the *Sun* for nearly fifty years. During that time, her political columnist colleague Jarlson said she never forgot her roots: "She always retained that country town demeanor; never rushed, always calm, no shouting or belaboring people she worked with."⁵⁹ A regular writer submitting columns up until the days before her death, Deskin offered advice on column writing that seemed spicy for the otherwise demure woman. When asked how long she thought a column should be, she responded, "A column is like a woman's skirt. It needs to be long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to be interesting."⁶⁰ Her columns were a collection of different kinds of information, typically beginning



Ruthe Deskin, seated center, wearing a badge that reads, "Volunteer Armstrong's Army." Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

with an extended topic and concluding with tidbits of current-event information — with frequent references to the UNLV basketball team, a holdover from her own glorious, youthful days on the hard court.

Most often, though, her extended topics addressed politics. She was transparent in her alliances and acknowledged when those alliances went awry. Her loyalty always remained with her readers. In her October 23, 2003, column, Deskin wrote: "If County Commission Chairwoman Mary Kincaid-Chauncey needs my help, she has it. Until I am proven wrong, which I don't think will happen, my faith is in Kincaid-Chauncey."⁶¹ A few weeks later, FBI-taped conversations demonstrated potential corruption. Deskin was quick to respond, writing, "How can we ever learn to trust individuals we vote into office? We can't. It's like the roll of dice. What comes up, comes up."⁶²

She also was willing to criticize her industry. In one column, she complained of what she called "saturation journalism," or the constant presence of O. J. Simpson or Michael Jackson in the news.⁶³ Another source of her concern was the popular advertising campaign for the city, "What Happens Here Stays Here," or

what Deskin described as “the latest move to encourage all kinds of hedonistic behavior with the promise that no one will ever know.”⁶⁴ Her column led to a barrage of letters. Writers agreed with Deskin and described the campaign as “sleazy, cheap and no class.”⁶⁵ Like many of her loyal readers, she saw her city differently from those who advertised it or visited it.

In addition to writing political columns, Deskin covered sports such as boxing, including the famous battles between Gene Fullmer and Sugar Ray Robinson for the world middleweight championship, even going to training facilities for both boxers.⁶⁶ In 1975, she accompanied the photographer David Lee Waite to the Muhammad Ali-Ron Lyle world heavyweight championship. In the melee following the fight’s controversial ending in Ali’s favor, Waite was thrown to the ground by a security guard and Deskin was threatened. (Her daughter Nancy went up to the guard and told him that he could not treat her mother that way.⁶⁷) Greenspun addressed the issue in his May 20 column: “To resort to physical force has become an all-too-common phenomenon at all levels of society, to say nothing of the world at large.”⁶⁸ The column led to a quick response, an investigative hearing from the state board that licensed security companies.⁶⁹ She gave a deposition in the case.⁷⁰

Deskin was no stranger to boxing. Her husband was an executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission and a president of the World Boxing Association. While she occasionally covered the big Las Vegas matches, she did not consider herself a fan. At one event, her husband introduced her to Cassius Clay, before he had risen to fame as three-time World Heavyweight Champion Muhammad Ali. She was unimpressed and described the boxer as “a product of hype.”⁷¹

Boxing may not have been her sport, but she and her husband shared a love of bowling. He had taught her the sport when she was in her thirties and she competed for years. She became an accomplished amateur bowler who won several local and state titles. In 1995, she was named to the Las Vegas Women’s Bowling Association Hall of Fame. Hank Greenspun’s son Brian recalled the many hours that Deskin and her husband spent teaching him how to bowl at the Showboat bowling lanes when he was a child. He described it as symbolic of Deskin’s interest in the lives of children, “especially those who you did not know but who you knew needed help because no one else made the effort. You did...,” he wrote in a tribute upon her death.⁷²

Indeed, outside of the newspaper, Deskin was active in various youth causes. She was a member of the Clark County Juvenile Probation Committee and instrumental in the development of the Child Haven shelter for abused and neglected children. She helped start both the *Sun* Youth Forum for high school students and the *Sun* Camp Fund for underprivileged youths. She also worked behind the scenes in the hopes of finding a solution by making sure that readers learned about the needy children. In one example, Deskin said that whenever she put an appeal for a cause in the newspaper, she was sure to receive an envelope with at least \$100 from Maury Friedman of the New Frontier



Ruthe Deskin receiving an award from the Women's Political Caucus of Nevada, October 1980. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

Hotel.⁷³ This was also a cause close to Greenspun's heart. The *Sun's* newsroom included a "magic closet" full of toys for children in case a youngster visited. "Hank was such a patsy for children," Deskin said. "He adored children."⁷⁴

Deskin's long career led to numerous honors. In March 1980, she earned the Distinguished Nevadan Award, and later that year, on October 12, "Ruthe Deskin Day" was proclaimed in Nevada. This prompted one Nevada newspaper editorial writer to describe what it was that made Deskin unique: "She can be sympathetic, and as sweet as honey. But she also can breathe fire and brimstone and get on her high horse — particularly for a worthy cause, or if someone has been wronged."⁷⁵ By 1987, she was named a Nevada Woman of Achievement. In the midst of all these accolades for Deskin, Hank Greenspun paid tribute to his valuable assistant in a column, acknowledging her influence on him and the *Sun*: "In an industry filled with prima donnas and deep-enders, Ruthe is the balance wheel that keeps the stories in proper focus with objectivity and responsibility. And ... she is probably the only [one who] keeps this editor quasi-rational and under some restraint."⁷⁶

In 1984, the politician Harry Reid, in his second year as a United States representative for Nevada, paid tribute to Deskin on the floor of the House, calling her a "premier journalist and communicator." Deskin first met Reid in 1956 when he was a student taking part in the *Sun* Youth Forum — a program designed to give local high school students a voice in their community. (He also worked as a professional boxing judge under Deskin's husband when he was the executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission.) That connection did not mean that Deskin would give Reid immunity for a bad decision. In a February 24, 2000, column, she criticized Reid, by now a United States senator, for not disclosing the sources of donations for a political action committee. Within a few days, Reid revealed the names. He credited Deskin for his decision. "I was under no legal obligation to make the disclosure," he said, "but if Ruthe Deskin didn't like it, then I had better not be doing it. I didn't want Ruthe to be disappointed in me."⁷⁷

Her high standards translated into the newsroom, too. The senior *Las Vegas Sun* reporter Mary Manning recalled Deskin's mentoring role when Manning started in the business. Manning was competing for a story with a female reporter from a Reno newspaper when the executive they were both trying to interview refused to come out of the men's room. After a wait, Manning called the newsroom and Deskin instructed her to go into the men's room and get her questions answered. It helped establish Manning's reputation as a reporter who would work hard to get a story.⁷⁸ Manning recalled another time when an official would not speak to her, and she questioned whether she should have yelled at him. Deskin responded, "Remember, Mary, don't get into a pissing match with a skunk."⁷⁹ Deskin also shared her advice with the *Sun's* executive editor O'Callaghan: "If you feel uncomfortable with something in your column or news story, then take it out. Trust your instincts and past experience."⁸⁰

In 1989, Hank Greenspun died, and his wife, Barbara, took over as publisher. Deskin stayed on as her assistant as the two women had a long friendship. A favorite story of son Brian Greenspun involved a campaign trip that his parents and Deskin took when Hank Greenspun was running for governor. The three of them had to share the only available room, which luckily sported a king-size bed. As he wrote in his remembrance column to Deskin upon her death, "My mother — acting as wife and a very good friend — preserved harmony by sleeping between you and my dad in this one big bed."⁸¹

As Las Vegas entered the new century, Deskin was eighty-three years old, with the last fifty of those years spent watching the city blossom into the entertainment capital of the world. And she, like the city around her, was not slowing down. Her editor, John Katsilometes, rightly noted her institutional knowledge: "There weren't many who knew more about the city."⁸² She used this knowledge to continue speaking out as forcefully as ever whenever she perceived an injustice was going unchecked. In 2001, she noted her anger over a local hearing, writing in her column: "We came. We saw. They conquered. The Department of Justice's public hearing on the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste plan was a farce. If ever a fight was rigged, this was it."⁸³ Having lived through several wars, her views on Iraq were clear in 2002. She wrote about her concern for her nephew who was headed to the Middle East. She asked the questions, "What are we really doing there? How long will it last? How many casualties before someone has the courage to tell President Bush and egomaniacal Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that enough is enough?" She concluded by quoting Shakespeare: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when we first practice to deceive."⁸⁴

Deskin died in February of 2004, after suffering for many months from a heart condition, a few days before her eighty-eighth birthday. In her last week, she said, "Just tell people I love the world."⁸⁵ She wrote a final, unpublished, column that she dictated to her daughter. In it, she said, "Readers have been gracious in accepting my opinions and quick to criticize. There's a very special place in my bruised old heart for the *Las Vegas Sun* — the newspaper founded by Hank Greenspun and carried on by his family."⁸⁶ The national columnist Robert S. Allen, with whom Drew Pearson anonymously co-authored *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, said of Deskin and her husband, who had died in 1983: "I count myself truly fortunate and blessed to be able to call her a friend. There's none better in or out of newspapering, and the same goes for her grand husband, Jim. They are a rarely distinguished and exceptional couple."⁸⁷

Like many women journalists of her era, she helped to establish the foundation of her community, and her legacy is a lasting one. In her community, she left behind, as co-founder, the *Sun* Youth Forum to give high school students a voice in the community. She also worked with the Juvenile Court Services, served as a Child Welfare Advisory Board member, and served as director of the Spring Mountain Youth Camp. For this work, her community honored her



Ruthe Deskin. Photographer unknown. (*Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*)

many times over. A Las Vegas elementary school is named in her honor, and, after Deskin died, the students and teachers decided to have an annual event to remember their school's namesake. The students created murals and wrote essays about her life. At one presentation, Brian Cram, former Clark County Superintendent, said to the children: "Sometimes you hear people say, 'When I grow up I want to be ... When you grow up, I hope you are like Ruthe Deskin.'"⁸⁸ The activity center at Child Haven, the home for abused, neglected, abandoned children, is also named for Deskin.

In her last days, Deskin wrote of her column, "I have scolded, applauded, laughed at and cried with my readers. Politicians who have not learned what 'ethics' mean have been objects of disgust for me. Public officials, who have served with integrity, have won my praise."⁸⁹ Her death led to numerous columns and stories in recognition of all Deskin had done to help her native state and her inherited city of Las Vegas. Said Harry Reid of the woman he had

known since his teenage years, Deskin “is what Nevada is all about.”⁹⁰ Barbara Greenspun said, “I can’t imagine the *Las Vegas Sun* without Ruthe Deskin, and it is even harder to imagine Las Vegas without Ruthe Deskin.”⁹¹

Deskin and Las Vegas became intertwined. In her more visible role as a journalist, Deskin held the city and state’s lawmakers accountable and gave a voice to the voiceless. Lost among the well-documented and oft-told tales of Las Vegas’s rich, famous, and powerful movers and shakers are the stories of the not-so-rich and famous — sometimes because they lack the colorful personalities of those whose histories are so often repeated, but also for the simple truth that they are often the stories of the women who found themselves stuck in a time and/or place where the men around them minimized their roles. Deskin’s behind-the-scenes community service work may be less explicitly known than that of some movers and shakers, but she had a significant impact that continues through the programs and institutions that bear her name or imprint. Finally, as a woman, she deserves to be recognized and remembered for the foundation she laid for women journalists, not just in Nevada but for all who care to know the legacy of the woman who held Las Vegas and its denizens accountable. The *Las Vegas Sun* columnist Susan Snyder wrote of this truth upon Deskin’s death:

Women like Ruthe don’t exist in the past tense. They live on, embodied in women who go to work at newspapers every day as interns, business writers, cop reporters, columnists, editors and publishers. Women journalists can take for granted the opportunities their predecessors took any way they could get them. We’re fortunate to be here simply because we chose to be. But we should remember women like Ruthe, for it was she who made the choice possible.⁹²

NOTES

¹"Where I Stand: The Hank Greenspun Story," 2008 documentary film, directed by Scott Goldstein. See also Hank Greenspun with Alex Pelle, "Where I Stand: The Record of a Reckless Man" (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966); Michael Green, "The Las Vegas Newspaper War of the 1950s," (*Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 31, Issue 3, 1988), 155-82; Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 59-74; "Las Vegas, an Unconventional History," PBS American History Documentary Series, 2005; and A. D. Hopkins, "Word Play," *The First 100 Persons Who Shaped Southern Nevada*, <http://www.1st100.com/part3/greenspun.html> (accessed 10 December 2007).

²Guy Clifton, "A Champion for Children Passes On," *Reno Gazette-Journal* (20 February 2004).

³Videotaped Oral History conducted by Deskin family, CD 1. A copy of this CD is in the possession of author Kimberly Voss.

⁴Ruthe Deskin, "The Invitation," Nevada State Press Association Bulletin (October/November 1983), 7.

⁵Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

⁶Clifton, "Champion for Children."

⁷"Jasper," *Mineral County Independent*, (1 April 1987). Ruthe Deskin Papers, Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (cited hereafter as Deskin Papers).

⁸Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Mike O'Callaghan, "A Strong Lady Leaves Us," *Las Vegas Sun* (17 February 2004).

¹³"Our History," Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada, Reno, <http://www.unr.edu/journalism/apHistory.htm>

¹⁴Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

¹⁵"Ruthe Goldsworthy Bride of Elwin Jeffers," *Nevada State Journal* (2 June 1937).

¹⁶Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1. Deskin and many other housewives experienced this feeling, which would become the basis for Freidan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which was not to be written until two decades later. Many credit that book as a foundation of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s.

¹⁷Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

¹⁸Colonel D.C. Kelly memo to Ruthe Deskin, (20 November 1944). Deskin Papers.

¹⁹Owen Gallagher (director of personnel), evaluation of Ruthe Deskin (31 March 1946). Deskin Papers.

²⁰Ed Koch, "Vegas Pioneer, Longtime Sun Executive Deskin dies at 87," *Las Vegas Sun*, (16 February 2004).

²¹Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

²²Ed Koch, "Deskin a Pioneer in Nevada Journalism," *Las Vegas Sun 50th Anniversary*. (7 June 2002). <http://www.lasvegassun.com/sun50/deskin.html>

²³Ruthe Deskin is listed as editor of the Society section as of 4 December 1946, *Reno Evening Gazette*.

²⁴Nevada State Press Association, Past President Profiles, "The Lady of Las Vegas," (16 May 1988), 11.

²⁵Ruthe Deskin interview, "The Las Vegas I Remember," Nevada State Museum and Historical Society. (5 February 1998). <http://www.knpr.org/LVIR/transcripts/ruthedeskin.txt>

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Nevada State Press Association, "Lady of Las Vegas," 11.

³⁰Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

³¹Koch, "Deskin a Pioneer."

³²Susan Snyder, "Deskin Was a True Pioneer," *Las Vegas Sun*, (16 February 2004).

³³Alan Jarlson, e-mail interview by Kimberly Voss (16 January 2007).

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Ruthe Deskin and Alan Jarlson, "Sunlight on Politics," *Las Vegas Sun* (2 August 1959).

³⁶Green, "Las Vegas Newspaper War," 155-82.

³⁷Hopkins, "Word Play."

³⁸Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰For example, see Hank Greenspun, see Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *Money and Power*, 59-74.

⁴¹Deskin interview, "Las Vegas I Remember."

⁴²Brian Greenspun, "Ruthe Lives in Us All," *Las Vegas Sun*, February 19, 2004.

⁴³Deskin interview, "Las Vegas I Remember."

⁴⁴Ed Koch, "Deskin a Pioneer."

⁴⁵Ed Koch, "Vegas Pioneer, Longtime *Sun* Executive Deskin Dies at 87," *Las Vegas Sun* (16 February 2004).

⁴⁶John R. McCloskey, "Seventy Years of Gripping: Newspapers, Politics, Government," interview by Mary Ellen Glass (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 1982), 229.

⁴⁷Greenspun with Pelle, *Where I Stand*.

⁴⁸Koch, "Deskin a Pioneer."

⁴⁹Ruthe Deskin letter to A.L. Higginbotham, August 5, 1963, Deskin Papers.

⁵⁰Ruthe Deskin letter to Robert Blair Kaiser, January 10, 1983. Deskin Papers.

⁵¹Photo caption, "Nevada State Journal Editor Paul A. Leonard congratulates Mrs. Ruthe Deskin of Las Vegas after her election as president of the Nevada State Press Association," *Nevada State Journal* (23 May 1966).

⁵²"The Tribute to Ruthe — It Was Long Overdue," *The Valley Times* (15 October 1980).

⁵³Deskin interview, "Las Vegas I Remember."

⁵⁴"The Tribute to Ruthe."

⁵⁵O'Callaghan, "Strong Lady."

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Ruthe Deskin, "Appeal to Nixon," *Las Vegas Sun* (30 March 1972).

⁵⁸Ruthe Deskin, "The Beginning of Forever," *Las Vegas Sun* (19 April 1972).

⁵⁹Jarlson, e-mail interview.

⁶⁰Mary Manning, e-mail correspondence, October 4, 2006.

⁶¹Ruthe Deskin, "Las Vegas Campaign Misleading," *Las Vegas Sun* (23 October 2003).

⁶²Ruthe Deskin, "Tired of Gambling on Politicians," *Las Vegas Sun* (13 November 2003). Kincaid-Chauncey went to prison for her role in the corruption.

⁶³Ruthe Deskin, "A Gift-Wrap of Saturation Journalism," *Las Vegas Sun* (4 December 2003).

⁶⁴Ruthe Deskin, "Las Vegas Campaign Misleading," *Las Vegas Sun* (23 October 2003).

⁶⁵Ruthe Deskin, "At Age 25, Hospice Still Comforting," *Las Vegas Sun* (6 November 2003).

⁶⁶O'Callaghan, "Strong Lady."

⁶⁷Ruthe Deskin, "Column Led to Fast Response," *Las Vegas Sun 50th Anniversary*. Deskin Papers.

⁶⁸Hank Greenspun, "Security Guards' Use of Force Inexcusable," *Las Vegas Sun* (20 May 1975).

⁶⁹Deskin, "Column Led to Fast Response."

⁷⁰"Statement of Ruthe Deskin," Deskin Papers.

⁷¹Oral History, Deskin family, CD 1.

⁷²Greenspun, "Ruthe Lives in Us All."

⁷³Deskin interview, "Las Vegas I Remember."

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵"Tribute to Ruthe."

⁷⁶Clifton, "Champion for Children," (referencing a May 18, 1980 column written by Greenspun).

⁷⁷Koch, "Vegas pioneer, longtime *Sun* executive."

⁷⁸Mary Manning, telephone interview by Kimberly Voss (6 October 2006).

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰O'Callaghan, "Strong Lady."

⁸¹Greenspun, "Ruthe Lives In Us All."

⁸²John Katsilometes, telephone interview by Kimberly Voss (29 September 2006).

⁸³Ruthe Deskin, "Fix Was in at Yucca Hearing," *Las Vegas Sun* (13 September 2001).

⁸⁴Ruthe Deskin, "At Age 25, Hospice Still Comforting."

⁸⁵Koch, "Vegas Pioneer, Longtime *Sun* Executive."

⁸⁶Ruthe Deskin, notes, as dictated to her daughter, Terry Gialketsis, who faxed a copy to Kimberly Voss.

⁸⁷McCloskey, "Seventy Years of Gripping," 230.

⁸⁸Lynette Curtis, "Deskin Tribute Takes Bloom at School," *View Neighbor Newspapers*, (13 April 2005).

⁸⁹Deskin, notes.

⁹⁰Koch, "Vegas Pioneer, Longtime *Sun* Executive."

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²Snyder, "Deskin Was True Pioneer."

Laying a Foundation for the Future: Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson, 1959-1975

EUGENE P. MOEHRING

Despite its reputation as a mecca for gambling, vice, and permissiveness, the case for Las Vegas's exceptionalism has been overdrawn.¹ In many ways it resembled other American cities in the range of postwar problems that it faced and the policies it adopted to cope with them. As in many Sunbelt cities, voters in the 1950s and 1960s elected businessmen to run city government and push growth-promoting agendas. In the 1940s, Mayor Ernie Cragin (1931-35, 1943-51), an insurance agent, had, along with businessmen-city commissioners, helped casino operators like J. Kell Houssels to build the town's early tourist economy and create a favorable tax climate for gambling to expand its presence on Fremont Street. In the 1950s, Mayor C. D. Baker, the former city engineer, talked reform, but business (both the gaming and non-gaming sectors) continued to prosper during his time as mayor (1951-59) without much local government interference.² Similarly, in 1959, the election of the political underdog Oran Gragson represented no obvious change from the postwar pattern.

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Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson. Photographer unknown.
(Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

Vowing to “build a clean efficient administration,” Gragson sounded like scores of other conservative candidates vying for office in cities across the nation. Gragson portrayed himself as a reformer and, to some extent, he was. In a town where voters increasingly believed that casino owners and politically connected businessmen controlled city hall, Gragson promised “there will be no payoffs” but just “integrity and square dealing in the Mayor’s Office.” Citing Las Vegas’s lack of parks and abundance of dark streets, he pledged to bring real progress. But Gragson’s Republican business philosophy was clear. As he told the citizenry, “Less government means better government.” He assured them that even a small government could be effective in dealing with the problems brought by burgeoning growth and explained to frustrated voters that Las Vegas was “bursting at the seams with political indecision.”³ Cragin became mayor when the city and suburbs had begun to explode with thousands of new residents and tourists, as the Desert Inn, Sands, Flamingo,

and other resorts put the Strip and the city that spawned it on everyone's map. This surge in tourism laid the foundation for the metropolitan area that exists today. These years also marked a crucial time in American urban history when civil rights, poverty programs, downtown redevelopment, and other issues combined to make the mayor's job more significant than it had ever been before.

Born in Tucumcari, New Mexico, in 1911, Oran K. Gragson grew up in Texas and Arkansas and spent time in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. A brief stint as a Hoover Dam construction worker and later as a truck driver for a local contractor convinced Gragson that southern Nevada was a place of opportunity, and in 1937 he and his wife, Bonnie, moved permanently to Las Vegas. For a while, he worked as a manager and Bonnie as a waitress at Pete Peccole's restaurant just outside the Boulder City gate at Railroad Pass. Gragson, however, yearned for something better. He saved his money and soon joined with partners to run a second-hand furniture store in downtown Las Vegas. Entrepreneurial by nature, Gragson quickly learned the business and helped stock the store with furniture from middle- and upper-class residents he met all over town. His amiable demeanor and impeccable honesty won him many friends. After the war Gragson went into partnership with another furniture dealer before selling his interest in 1949 and opening his own furniture store at 808 North Main Street, where he sold televisions and home appliances for many years.⁴ By the late 1950s he was a respected member of the business community and known to virtually everyone in town.

Gragson initially had no plans to run for mayor but was forced to in 1959 when repeated burglaries of his store and other downtown businesses brought surprisingly little response from city police. Gragson and other merchants heard the rumors and were convinced that police officers themselves were involved in the break-ins. He felt that Police Chief Ray Sheffer and City Manager A. H. Kennedy knew who was involved but failed to take action, so Gragson ran for mayor. He won in an upset and then ordered an investigation that ultimately put Officer Alfred Mazzuca in jail and led to the forced resignations of Sheffer and Kennedy.⁵ Despite this accomplishment, some merchants still supported Kennedy and backed an unsuccessful effort to recall Gragson. A second recall campaign also ended in failure. Eventually, Gragson's political position stabilized, and for the next fifteen years he enjoyed great popularity, although his tenure was not without controversy.

Gragson's reputation for integrity and public service was so strong that he had no opposition in 1967.⁶ Then in 1971, after Clark County Commission Chair William Briare lost to the popular, three-term incumbent, he conceded in a frank moment that Gragson's lengthy tenure as mayor was the only real issue in the campaign. Four years later, when Gragson retired, Briare won the mayoral election, defeating the future United States Senator Harry Reid and others.

Over the years, Gragson handled a variety of issues that all mayors encounter: teens angry over curfews, revenue cuts from the state, city workers' demands for pay hikes, taxi and bus strikes, and a host of other problems. But as the mayor of a major resort city, Gragson was also active in lobbying for better airline service, federal incentives to boost oil production during the OPEC oil crisis, restoring AMTRAK train service, securing better airline connections, responding to tourist complaints, and denouncing the Justice Department's seemingly endless investigations of mob influence (and the accompanying bad publicity) in local casinos.⁷

Gragson grappled with an especially formidable challenge in the 1960s and 1970s. The growing regional and national popularity of casino gambling quickly multiplied the number of resorts, jobs, and population in the valley. Much of this new growth occurred in the once empty desert areas far from the city's center on Fremont Street. At the same time, as Las Vegas became a more significant destination, federal engineers drafted elaborate plans to route through the Las Vegas valley the new interstate highway linking southern California with cross-country Interstate 80 in Utah. Multiple interchanges, along with the new jetport on Paradise Road, would bring thousands more people to town, which would only enlarge the outer suburbs. But what about the city core that had functioned as the valley's economic center for six decades? Thanks to the Strip's immediate postwar growth, the center was already in decline. The coming of Interstate 15, along with other factors, sparked a decades-long debate on downtown revitalization that dates from Gragson's time as mayor. Indeed, long before mayors Jan Jones and Oscar and Carolyn Goodman struggled with the problems of redevelopment, Oran Gragson began the dialogue. With Interstate 15's downtown interchanges scheduled to open in June of 1970, local merchants in February asked the city to take action to prevent the area from becoming a Skid Row. Some suggested converting Fremont Street into a mall, ending all car parking, and using jitney buses to deliver tourists to their destinations.⁸ There were also calls for beautifying the approach routes such as Casino Center Boulevard—an initiative similar to the one that Reno undertook twenty years later along Virginia Street and the Truckee River. Gragson, who traveled frequently in his role as mayor to promote Las Vegas with airlines and travel agents, was impressed by the dramatic efforts undertaken in Dallas, San Francisco, and other cities to reconstruct their downtowns. As a result, he made revitalization a top priority of his administration and urged downtown businessmen to form a group to advise him about various options.

Another factor driving this discussion was the explosive development of the Strip as a formidable competitor. Every new resort meant more jobs and more suburban construction in the lands east, west, and south of the city. Gradually, much of Las Vegas's middle class migrated to these new neighborhoods beyond the municipal limits. While some in the city's upper

class remained in such posh locales as the Scotch 80s and Rancho Circle, the new Las Vegas Country Club on South Maryland Parkway just east of Kirk Kerkorian's International Hotel (later the Las Vegas Hilton and the LVH) began to attract more of the city's business elite. As new subdivisions along streets near the Desert Inn, Sahara, Flamingo, and Tropicana encouraged construction of the Boulevard Mall and other shopping centers, customers were increasingly lured from stores in the old city core. Gragson and the Downtown Merchants' Association became even more concerned. So did casino operators on Fremont Street, who worried that the palatial new resorts on the Strip would drain away downtown's tourist and resident gambling trade. Virtually all American cities in the postwar era faced the problem of a declining central business district (CBD). But Las Vegas had the world-renowned Las Vegas Strip right on its doorstep threatening to devour much of the city's casino economy. Gragson and other businessmen groped for a solution, but there was no obvious panacea.

Downtown business was not threatened just by the growth of Strip suburbs south of the municipal line, but also by emerging suburbs within the city west of the CBD. While Clark County and North Las Vegas lands blocked Las Vegas's expansion to the south, north, and east, there was plenty of room for the city to grow westward. By the early 1960s, Decatur Boulevard was already a thriving commercial artery, and completion of the projected U.S. 95 freeway, from Interstate 15 to Rainbow Boulevard, opened the way for more sprawl west of Decatur. In 1962, Gragson and the city commissioners had approved the re-zoning request of William Peccole, a former city commissioner, to build the Westland Mall at Charleston and Decatur. In the following year, county approval of the Boulevard Mall on Maryland Parkway raised concerns that the days of Las Vegas's still-thriving CBD might be numbered. Already, the Westland Mall and other new shopping centers built to serve the area were depriving the CBD of new customers.⁹

But in the early 1970s, the Dayton Hudson Corporation's plan to build the huge, indoor Meadows Mall on Valley View near the new U.S. 95 expressway threatened to draw even more shoppers outward. Mayor Gragson, himself a downtown merchant, and several city commissioners were in no hurry to approve Dayton Hudson's project, a position that only inspired conflict-of-interest charges, which Gragson angrily denied. To be sure, the mayor publicly disapproved of the project when it was first proposed, in 1972. Then, in February 1973, the Las Vegas Planning Commission endorsed a re-zoning request for the 126-acre tract, but in March, Gragson and several other city commissioners voted to stall the project by requiring a feasibility study.¹⁰ Six months later, the city's consultant, Development Research Associates, submitted a 44-page report to the City Planning Department recommending the 100,000-square-foot mall, contending that the ever-expanding western suburbs could support the project by its expected completion, in 1975.¹¹ But in an August City Commission meeting the mayor once again opposed it. One

newspaper later suggested that one factor was Gragson's friendship with Peccole, a former city commissioner, a prominent developer, and a past owner of and current advisor to the nearby Westland Mall. Everyone knew that representatives of Los Angeles-based Rossco, Inc., were delighted when Gragson and commissioners Ron Lurie and Hal Morelli voted against Paul Christensen at the August meeting to reject the project. But mall supporters kept up the fight in the courts and in the media. In 1974, with the re-zoning request still blocked by Gragson, Morelli, and Lurie, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that Lurie was currently vice president for the big Wonder World store on Decatur. And while Lurie expressed justifiable concerns about the traffic that the Meadows Mall would generate as well as other issues, the column implied that he must have been even more worried about the competition it would foster just a few miles from his store.¹²

Under pressure from Dayton Hudson and its supporters, the City Commission reconsidered the mall project in August 1974. Gragson said little during the meeting, allowing Lurie to explain the city's position. Lurie asserted that with budgets tight, Las Vegas could not afford to spend \$1.5 million to build an interchange for the expressway at Valley View, which it would have to do if the Meadows Mall were built. But many residents and local developers wanted an interchange built at Valley View and signed petitions throughout 1974-75 demanding that city officials approve the mall's construction. As one resident correctly predicted, "The convenience of less driving time, greater choice of stores, [and] better quality stores all will contribute positively to the growth and prestige of Las Vegas."¹³ City Commissioner George Franklin, a longtime political gadfly, was uncharacteristically quiet. He had to recuse himself from the debate, because Dayton Hudson had an option to purchase 95 acres from the local developer Thomas Beam, whom Franklin represented as an attorney. But neither Dayton Hudson nor suburban residents were mollified. Clearly, the mall would not only enhance land values in the area but it would also promote business—at the expense of the city's CBD.¹⁴

But Gragson remained adamant, contending that the city should respect the property rights of local residents, including nearby homeowners, other neighborhood businesses, and children going to three schools, who would be endangered by the increased traffic. He insisted, quite correctly, that sites farther west had better access to the freeway, and would be less likely to siphon customers from nearby shopping centers.¹⁵ Although Rainbow Boulevard would, by the late 1980s, become a major commercial thoroughfare in the west, in 1974 the mayor's continuing opposition eventually triggered an abortive recall effort, encouraged by Dayton Hudson officials who were convinced that the Valley View site would be the most profitable. Although District Court Judge Keith Hayes later decided this was unconstitutional, Dayton Hudson took the city to court on its zoning request and District Court Judge Joseph Pavlikowski ruled in the company's favor.¹⁶ Soon after a city appeal to the Nevada Supreme Court failed, construction began. The Meadows Mall opened in 1978.

The controversy did little to enhance Gragson's public standing. Had he run for a fifth term in 1975, he would have faced strong opposition from residents and developers angry with his decision to oppose zoning changes that would have benefited the growth of Las Vegas's western suburbs. Insurance broker Phil Carlino, popular LDS County Commissioner Myron Leavitt, and prominent businessman Tom Wiesner, as well as Harry Reid, the former Lieutenant Governor, were all rumored to be interested in challenging Gragson. But the mayor was resolute. While he was willing to approve some larger shopping centers to serve new outlying communities, Gragson firmly believed the large indoor mall should be built farther west. In addition, he and the City Commission were increasingly concerned about the CBD's sustainability and how its continued decline might affect the future of downtown.

For Gragson, the city commissioners, and the downtown business community, the problem was how to revitalize the CBD in the face of suburban pulling forces and the arrival of Interstate 15. To this end, the mayor conferred frequently with businessmen and casino operators in the city's core. A variety of issues provoked much uneasiness among them. In February 1970, Gragson met with the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce's Downtown Development Committee and its Merchant's Bureau to discuss the CBD's future. The closing of Ronzone's Department Store in 1969 again raised the question of how to stimulate downtown business. Ronzone later opened his business as Ronzone's (later Diamond's and then Dillard's) in the Boulevard Mall south of the city line. This, along with the earlier migration of Von Tobel's lumber and hardware store from its traditional downtown location out to South Maryland Parkway near the Boulevard Mall, was another blow for downtown shopping and the city's tax base in the late 1960s. In 1971, Gragson initiated meetings with Don Ashworth (Golden Gate Hotel), Jack Binion (The Horseshoe), and other Fremont Street gaming executives and retail store owners to determine "how our joint efforts can best assure the greatest potential growth for the city of Las Vegas."¹⁷

In the debate that followed, parking became an especially divisive issue, just as it was in many downtown areas across urban America. As early as World War II, it was impossible to park on Fremont Street during weekends. This tended to put pressure on Main Street, an intersecting commercial artery where Gragson soon opened his store, and on surrounding streets in the CBD. By the 1950s, parking became a problem throughout the week. The automobile increasingly disrupted traditional shopping patterns in Las Vegas's CBD. Gragson vehemently opposed the City Commission's effort to install 24-hour parking meters downtown, believing it would divert "city shoppers" out to the suburbs where parking was free. Some commissioners suggested starting the meters at 6 p.m. and turning them off at dawn.¹⁸ But employees at the big United States Post Office (today's "Mob Museum") complained to Gragson that they could not shop downtown until they got off work, at 6 p.m., and the meters were forcing them out to stores in nearby suburbs. Despite Gragson's

opposition, the meters stayed. Then, in September 1966, while Gragson was out of town, Commissioner Reed Whipple tried to persuade his colleagues to pass an ordinance banning parked cars, parking meters, and cab stands on Fremont Street between Main and Third streets to promote the flow of traffic. Commissioner Ed Fountain agreed, but Phil Mirabelli and Grant Stewart blocked the motion.¹⁹

The metered-parking controversy continued to divide the downtown business community into the 1970s. At a March 1970 joint meeting of the Chamber of Commerce's Downtown Development Committee and the Downtown Merchant's Association, the group voted 14 to 10 to ask the city commissioners to remove parking meters on a trial basis along Fremont from Main to Sixth streets. But many merchants with stores not in the casino district signed petitions to keep their meters, because they wanted customers to park in front of their stores. The feeling was that no one patronizing a casino three blocks away would pay to park even for a few hours. Finally, in December 1971, the City Commission abolished the 6 p.m. limit for parking meters, and thereby ended free parking at night, in order to raise more revenue for the cash-strapped city in the midst of a national recession.²⁰

Those at the 1970 joint meeting also tabled a motion that Fremont Street be converted into a mall with no traffic, an idea the city later adopted to accommodate the 1995 Fremont Street Experience. Others contended that downtown needed more bus service to draw shoppers, and that if city buses stopped at every block on Fremont Street, people would still shop there. A majority at the meeting felt that many Las Vegans continued to regard downtown as a viable shopping option in 1970, so they voted 14 to 10 for a motion urging the city to conduct a survey of what residents wanted. Many storeowners at the meeting were convinced that more citizens would shop downtown if they could drive there and park near the stores. But Paul Christensen, a downtown jeweler and later a city and county commissioner, observed that most city workers in 1970 parked all day in the municipal and hotel parking garages, not on the street, and so could shoppers. Christensen also believed that many suburban, and especially low-income shoppers, would prefer taking a bus downtown to shop, and that the city buses running from the suburbs into the downtown core would be slowed by parked cars and meters.²¹

But downtown merchants were fighting a losing battle. After 1970, Las Vegas residents increasingly moved out to the new housing tracts south of the city and to its newer suburbs west of Decatur. By the early 1970s, Sears, J. C. Penney, Woolworth's and many appliance and furniture stores already had left downtown for the suburbs. In the late 1980s, Main, Commerce, and other streets mostly hosted carpet, flooring, upholstery, lighting fixture, and window-treatment stores in the CBD's older buildings rather than the apparel, shoe, fine jewelry, and upscale furniture stores sited in the modern shopping centers on the urban periphery.

Aside from parking and shopping, another issue that divided downtown business interests and the larger Las Vegas community was revising the so-called red-line ordinance to allow unrestricted gambling to spread beyond the immediate casino core to more streets in the CBD. Las Vegas had enacted its original red-line ordinance in 1931—just after Nevada had re-legalized casino gambling—to reassure pious federal officials overseeing Hoover Dam’s construction that the slots and tables would be restricted to an area near the railroad station.²² Several updates had limited casino gambling to the downtown area bordered by Main, Stewart, Carson, and Third streets. In 1931, the city also allowed members of the “Ethiopian race” to operate gaming establishments for the town’s African-American residents. The red-line district in the Westside ultimately ran along Owens Avenue from H to J streets and on West Jackson from D to G streets.²³

But in May 1970, the City of Reno abolished its red-line ordinance, allowing casinos with unrestricted gaming licenses to locate almost anywhere in the city if they built a 100-room hotel attached to their casino. The City of Las Vegas had created an exception to its 1931 red-line law in the early 1950s when it allowed the veteran downtown casino operator J. Kell Houssels and others to build the 100-room Showboat Motor Inn (later the Showboat, and then the Castaways Hotel) on Boulder Highway south of Charleston Boulevard in an effort to attract tourists entering the valley from Arizona. In 1971, the same year as the new Reno ordinance took effect, Las Vegas City Commissioner George Franklin raised questions about Las Vegas’s small red-line district downtown. He was not convinced that unrestricted gaming licenses in the downtown area should be based upon limiting that business to a geographical zone of six blocks.²⁴ After all, residences had sat just a few blocks west of Third Street on Fremont in 1931, but by the 1970s commerce had commandeered virtually all of downtown. There was no longer any reason to protect homeowners from casinos in the city’s core.

In his attempt to expand gambling in the city, Franklin actually attacked the whole concept of a red-line, charging that “it was originally a protective device to limit competition and create a monopoly for those gamblers who provided the necessary ammunition to ensure successful election of politicians.” While this may not have been the case immediately, in 1931 when Mayme Stocker and others got the first licenses to install a few tables and slots in their clubs, it was certainly true later in the 1930s and 1940s when such powerful magnates as J. Kell Houssels and Guy McAfee controlled large clubs.²⁵ Critics like one-time Mayor John Russell and others openly attacked the so-called “political machine” of three-term mayor Ernie Cragin. Those supporting the abolition of Reno’s red-line leveled the same charge against that city’s leaders in 1970-71, insisting that its ordinance for years had protected the interests of William Harrah, Pappy Smith (Harold’s Club) and Charlie Mapes.

In 1971, Mayor Gragson strongly supported Las Vegas’s existing red-line zone. He based his position on the concern that “smaller establishments...would sprout

along the major arterials of Fremont Avenue, Charleston Boulevard and Las Vegas Boulevard South." He also worried that a growing number of casinos scattered throughout downtown would drive more stores into the county and siphon customers from the large hotels on or near Fremont Street. Nevertheless, Franklin led the charge to expand the red-line outward to include a few more streets. In response, a few downtown casinos and property owners threatened to sue the commissioners and force a vote of the people in a citywide referendum. Once again, Gragson was resolute, opposing the licensing of any more slot arcades and argued for confining unrestricted gaming licenses within the existing red-line. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* agreed with Gragson, noting, "There should be a definite centralized area for gambling downtown."²⁶ The newspaper, like Gragson, also continued to support the exception for 100-room hotels, because more big resorts in the city meant "more construction, more employment, and more taxes [revenue]."

Al Bramlet, the powerful Las Vegas Culinary Union secretary-treasurer, also opposed expanding the red-line because it would cost jobs. "More gaming alone," he argued, "will only serve to stifle expansion programs already planned for hotels and major casinos in the red line district." In particular, Bramlet feared the arrival of slot arcades in the side streets. As he noted, "Owners of the present major establishments could not be expected to commit millions of dollars to hotel additions and related guest facilities when their competitors were investing only a fraction of that amount to open slot arcades and small gambling houses." In a letter to the mayor, Bramlet told Gragson that these "arcades...would not employ housekeeping personnel, skilled kitchen craftsmen, waiters, waitresses and others." So, if new slot arcades in an expanded red-line district cancelled resort plans for new hotels and additions, it would mean "the loss of hundreds upon hundreds of new jobs." Echoing these sentiments was an on-air editorial from KLAS-TV Channel 8, which rejected expanding the red-line from six blocks to nine, because it would open up "the possibility of gaming operations running rampant throughout the city."²⁷ However, while Bramlet and the local media were passionate about the red-line downtown, the fact that gaming on the Strip ran for about four miles from the Sahara Hotel to the Hacienda and competed mightily with the city did not bother them at all.

Of course, not all longtime residents agreed with Channel 8 and the mayor. Jake and Ed Von Tobel speculated that an expanded red-line zone "may help the downtown area to expand a la the Strip." Others agreed with them. Arthur Grant and Joseph Rashkov, owners of the Honest John Casino, wrote Gragson that expansion of the red-line was long overdue. They saw it as "the best way to increase gambling and keep it centralized" within the city's downtown core. So, this proved to be a thorny issue for Gragson and city commissioners, who in 1971 were struggling with budgets in the midst of a national recession. Indeed, as Grant and Rashkov reminded the mayor, "you can certainly use the increased revenue from more gambling and new buildings."²⁸

In an effort to find a solution to the impasse, the market consultant Raymond Marshalk suggested a compromise: Expand the red-line but force new casinos to build stores as a “buffer zone” on the district’s edges facing non-gaming businesses. This, Marshalk asserted, “would eliminate the type of operator who hopes to get by with a minimum investment and maximum return.” Specifically, Marshalk wanted “a matched footage gaming area so that the owner of a new 5,000-foot casino would also have to build 5,000 square feet of store space” for tourists and residents. Of course, market forces could be hostile to this kind of heavy-handed zoning. Unsurprisingly, Marshalk’s proposal found little favor.²⁹

But the restriction of gaming within the city remained controversial. Earlier in 1970, city commissioners had amended an ordinance to allow establishments outside the red-line (mostly bars and grocery stores) to have up to twenty slot machines; the old number had been fifteen. And some residents had even protested this change to Gragson in letters. In the end, however, the Las Vegas city commissioners did what their Reno counterparts had done. On November 4, 1971, the City Commission voted to enlarge the red-line district; commissioners Hank Thornley, George Franklin, and Alexander Coblenz outvoted Hal Morelli and Mayor Gragson to increase the old six-block area to nine blocks.³⁰ On and around the Strip, however, the situation was more dynamic—thanks to the county’s laissez-faire policy. In the 1970s, small casinos were built across from the Desert Inn Country Club on Paradise Road. In 1976, the Bingo Palace opened on West Sahara, and while county commissioners did not approve every casino project beyond the Strip, in later years large suburban casinos and clubs appeared on Boulder Highway and elsewhere.

Though he lost on the red-line issue, Gragson had better luck with his efforts to build a new city hall downtown. By the 1960s, the streets immediately south of the casino core were rapidly filling up with law offices, and Clark County located its growing number of courts and judges’ offices in the area, replacing the residential districts of earlier years. Gragson recognized that because of the city’s rapid expansion, it had outgrown its accommodations in the old War Memorial Building, where it had leased space since 1942 (the city had bought the entire building for its use in 1947).³¹ So, in his first term as mayor, Gragson proposed building a new City Hall with enough space to accommodate the increased administrative functions of an expanding metropolis. City commissioners immediately rejected the idea as premature and too costly. However, after three more years of nonstop growth, they changed their minds. In March 1968, they approved an \$8-million bond issue for a new building. The following year, nine members of two city committees toured city halls in thirty other American cities, searching for useful ideas to help the planning process.³²

In early 1971, workers finished demolishing the War Memorial Building on Stewart Avenue, and in March, Del Webb Construction began work on the new facility. Once under way, the new city hall project faced numerous delays. By

late 1972 the City Commission had to borrow money to finish it. Frustrated by unexpected cost overruns and short of revenues due to the national recession of the 1970s, Gragson and the commissioners even considered halving the parking garage's size to save enough money to finish the project. As late as September 1973 Gragson and frustrated city commissioners were still battling to fix the cracked walls and other construction problems. A few weeks later they finally succeeded, and Las Vegas had a spacious new city hall, which immediately invigorated downtown while also contributing to its emerging skyline.³³

During this period Gragson also supported a series of other innovative ideas to enhance downtown that were arguably ahead of their time. In 1960, he suggested building a tower that would give visitors a panoramic view of the entire valley. In later years the Landmark Hotel near the Strip and, in the 1990s, Bob Stupak's Stratosphere resort became popular tourist attractions that capitalized on Gragson's idea. In 1972, in a move that presaged the later construction of the World Market Center near today's Symphony Park, City Commissioner Alexander Coblenz suggested constructing an International Trade Mart on land near Cashman Field. Gragson responded by appointing a citizen's committee consisting of Cliff Jones, the former lieutenant governor; John Cahlan, the former *Review-Journal* editor; and Madison Graves, developer and Falcon Homes founder, to study the project's feasibility.³⁴ But the lingering national recession discouraged investors, and no one came forward to build it.

The idea for a sports arena downtown also predated the proposals of the 1990s and today. Gragson pushed for a feasibility study. In his May 1974 feasibility study for the city and for the Downtown Las Vegas Hotel and Casino Association, the consultant Desmond Kelly recommended building a downtown sports arena with a seating capacity of 10,000-12,000 for basketball, prize fights, track meets, and other events. He also urged construction of an exhibit hall and a two-story convention center. The recommended site was on Bonanza between Second and Fifth streets, because Kelly insisted that the complex be near the city's casino core.³⁵ The 1983 opening of the Thomas and Mack Center at UNLV solved the immediate need for an arena in the valley, and the later debut of the Cashman Center convention complex on East Washington Avenue was a major benefit to the city. Neither venue was as close to downtown as Kelly or Gragson preferred, but the latter facility did help the city divert some convention business from the Strip.

Schemes for a monorail, the new people-moving technology popularized by the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, also date from Gragson's tenure. As early as 1960, there were suggestions that a system of gondolas could transport tourists from one hotel to another along the Strip. Of course, county leaders also endorsed the idea to enhance the Strip's modern image. In the 1960s and 1970s Mayor Gragson and other valley leaders supported the construction of a light-rail system from southern California to Las Vegas and another along the Strip to downtown. In 1967, Gragson publicly admired the model of

the proposed 130-mile-per-hour Harrod Super Train from Las Vegas to the outskirts of Los Angeles at Palmdale. Two years later, he was also enthusiastic about the Pullman Corporation's proposed monorail service connecting the city and Strip. In 1974, the Downtown Casino Association endorsed both ideas. In a document signed by such gaming luminaries as Jack Binion, Jackie Gaughan, Mel Exber, Frank Scott, and Steve Wynn, the group declared that tourists "be given as wide a choice as possible in selecting a means to come to Las Vegas, and to travel around Las Vegas once he has arrived."³⁶

So, Las Vegas's first courtship with a monorail system antedated by thirty years the eventual construction of a line that never went all the way down the Strip or even left the county to serve the city. In practical terms, the high-speed, long-distance Harrod Super Train was probably ahead of its time in the 1960s. But an intra-metropolitan system was not, and several companies offered designs for consideration. The Rohr Company's proposal for a twenty-two-mile-long system for a "monocab" running above the Strip's central median on Las Vegas Boulevard and through downtown to the airport generated much interest and support. But in the end, and much to Gragson's chagrin, the project died for lack of support from Strip executives, who were busily planning parking garages at their own resorts.³⁷

Along with these new ideas to help spur the city's and metropolitan area's appeal, Gragson also pushed for creation of a new master plan for Las Vegas to further support downtown revitalization and retain some semblance of a central business district. By the mid 1960s, feverish growth had already made the 1959 plan virtually obsolete. As mayor, Gragson planned to use Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grants to write a new "comprehensive plan" that would tackle the knotty problems of commercial zoning in new suburban areas, urban renewal in the Westside, downtown revitalization, and freeways.³⁸ But HUD funding for this was slow in coming, and the city engaged in a more gradual process of updating the old plan, which it accomplished by the mid 1970s.

Freeway construction, however, could not be put off. Unlike Eugene Pulliam and his conservative supporters in Phoenix, in Las Vegas Mayor Gragson and other leaders recognized the need to strategically route the approaching Interstate 15 and aggressively pursue federal and state funding to build a connecting freeway system that would complement, encourage, and shape metropolitan development. At city hall everyone understood the value of getting a high-speed interstate highway linking Las Vegas with the huge southern California market. The city submitted plans for four interchanges, but Gragson and the city commissioners soon were shocked to learn of federal plans to award five interchanges to the Strip to the city's one. So, for much of the 1960s Gragson and city officials battled with the United States Bureau of Roads after that agency rejected the city's proposal for Interstate-15 interchanges at Charleston, Bonanza (near Fremont), and at Alta and Gass streets. Although Gragson was

willing to concede the Alta-Gass interchange, he strongly objected to the federal authorities eliminating the others. He was not alone. As the prominent banker and city commissioner Reed Whipple declared before a showdown meeting with federal officials at the convention center, "We'll hold out for at least two freeway interchanges." City Commissioner Harrison Sharp declared that he would "fight for more freeway access into the city of Las Vegas—and for conformance to our carefully worked out master plan." But what infuriated city leaders even more was that Clark County was getting a sixth on-off ramp at the California border. Prior to the meeting, Gragson and his colleagues warned that they would lobby Congress to "stop this thing [Interstate 15] cold" if the city did not get more interchanges. As one *Las Vegas Review-Journal* editorial summarized the problem: "this 'unfair' setup, city leaders fear, will 'freeze' downtown completely versus the plush resort section."³⁹

And, to some extent, it did—over time, the Strip got most of Interstate-15's interchanges. In the end, after years of tireless work by Gragson and others, the city got three interchanges—at Charleston, downtown, and D Street. Federal officials added D Street in the mid 1960s more as a sop for Westside residents, who complained about the freeway route mostly tearing through homes in their neighborhood rather than through white sections of town.

The struggle to build what became the U.S. 95 Las Vegas Expressway and the eastside U.S. 515 freeway was almost as time-consuming. From 1930 to 1970 the Las Vegas growth pattern had mostly veered eastward, away from the railroad-job zone created by Montana Senator William Clark's company surveyors when they platted Las Vegas for train workers and their families. By 1970 homes and stores eventually reached Fifteenth Street and beyond. Prior to the 1970s there was relatively little development west of the Strip, because it was easier to build to the east. The reason was simple. Lake Mead was where the city and Strip suburbs went for their water and sent their sewage. The valley floor's abundance of hard *caliche* clay made it cheaper to install this infrastructure first in the eastern part of the valley where the distance to the county's and cities' wastewater-treatment plants was the shortest. But there had always been some development west of the tracks. Lying west of the railroad tracks, the original McWilliams Townsite (later West Las Vegas or the Westside) counted hundreds of residents even before Senator Clark's Las Vegas Townsite debuted in May 1905. The Scotch 80s and Rancho Circle areas also had a long history. But during and after World War II and into the 1950s and 1960s, many new subdivisions appeared, spreading westward beyond Decatur and reaching as far as Rainbow in some places. For this reason, in February 1972, the Clark County Regional Street and Highway Commission asked the State Highway Department to study the need for a "West Fremont Street Expressway" (the downtown part of which was later re-named for Oran Gragson). The project had been under consideration since the late 1960s. By 1970 there was already a four-lane highway to Jones Boulevard built at street

grade. What the city ultimately wanted was a modern expressway running above and below grade with interchanges replacing occasional traffic lights and intersections.⁴⁰

At the same time, a growth trend eastward and especially southeastward from the city was also significant. In 1972, city and county officials expressed concern about “the great amount of growth” southeast of town and the need for an expressway there as well. At this time few really expected that someday this burst of growth would reach Henderson, since the east leg of the proposed freeway that Gragson pushed would intersect Interstate 15 downtown and not in the Strip job zone. As late as the mid 1970s, the *Las Vegas Sun* editor, Hank Greenspun, had sold relatively little of his vast Green Valley holdings to developers for subdivisions because his lands were so remote; as yet, no major artery linked them to the Strip job zone and Interstate 15.

This East Leg freeway project (which eventually became U.S. 515 and part of today’s metropolitan beltway) had its origins in the planning process for Interstate 15 that began in the late 1950s. The continued growth of the city of Las Vegas simultaneously westward and eastward, as well as the early expansion of the Strip suburbs eastward toward the Boulder Highway and Henderson, prompted city, county, and state officials to consider a freeway that would cross Interstate 15 somewhere near downtown. So, in February 1972, city and county traffic officials also expressed concern about “the great amount of growth” southeast of downtown and urged construction of an expressway to serve the western, eastern, and southeastern suburbs, which would intersect with Interstate 15 downtown.⁴¹

As with all freeways, especially those running through suburbs and business districts, there was some conflict over the route. In 1972, the state highway engineer conceded that there was still considerable controversy regarding the exact course of the proposed freeway from Russell Road to Railroad Pass near Boulder City. Funding and other factors also threatened to delay the project, thereby endangering federal funds that could be easily diverted for bypass highways in other, larger metropolitan areas. Gragson recognized the problem and throughout the late 1960s and 1970s continued to be an outspoken supporter of construction of the “spur of Interstate 15,” or “the east leg of the freeway” as he called it; this spur would offer high-speed travel to commuters and commercial trucks between downtown and Railroad Pass, the main entry point for Arizona traffic coming across Hoover Dam to Las Vegas.

In a 1974 letter to federal officials supporting the freeway’s funding to Desert Inn Road, Gragson noted that the Las Vegas area’s explosive growth made the road’s construction “absolutely essential to a continuation of this development pattern and potential.” He then cited Nevada’s Freeport Law, asserting that thirty trucking firms already used the metropolitan area’s warehousing facilities. Why? Because the Las Vegas valley served as the “trade and distribution center for a region that encompasses much of

Nevada and parts of Utah, Arizona, and California.” The projected freeway, Gragson predicted, would only stimulate more business and promote regional transportation, and he cautioned that further delays in constructing this “vital link” would only increase costs. The mayor also pointed out that a freeway from Railroad Pass to downtown would serve Hoover Dam, whose traffic had doubled between 1963 and 1973. Then, connecting the freeway’s construction to national security, Gragson referred to the valley’s key military and scientific installations and their need for the rapid delivery of supplies and personnel. Declaring that completion of the road would establish “the foundation and backbone of the transportation plan in the Las Vegas Valley,” the mayor tied virtually all of the metropolitan area’s local street improvements to completion of this freeway, arguing once again for no more delays. If it were not finished soon, he warned, “the remaining arterials proposed for improvement or new construction will do little to meet the transportation needs of the area or relieve the ever-growing congestion.”⁴² In the end, Gragson and other local officials were successful, although the completion of the highway’s entire length to Railroad Pass did not occur until the 1990s.

The freeway not only provided access to downtown Las Vegas, but also promoted the development of Henderson and the Strip’s eastern suburbs. Moreover, the road, with its rights-of-way secured in the 1970s, made construction of today’s Bruce Woodbury Beltway around the metropolitan area possible and helped knit the valley’s emerging cities and unincorporated townships together. It was therefore not surprising that Gragson, like the mayors before him, hoped to someday annex these various jurisdictions to the city. To be sure, he was a strong supporter of metropolitan government when it became a pressing issue in the 1960s and 1970s.

As Las Vegas mayor, Gragson saw the blossoming metropolitan area as an outgrowth of the central city and thus took a keen interest in valley-wide problems. Given the multiplying number of places where road systems crossed city and county borders in a less than seamless manner, Gragson was particularly concerned about the need to plan streets and roads on a valley-wide basis. To this end, he pushed in the mid 1960s for creation of the Clark County Regional Street and Highway Commission (today’s Regional Transportation Commission). This emphasis eventually led him to press for the related goal of regionally coordinated planning that evolved into today’s Regional Planning Coalition.

Given his interest in the metropolitan area’s managed growth, from 1967 to 1971 Gragson chaired the Clark County Regional Planning Council (CCRPC), an entity created in 1966 by the metropolitan area’s four cities, Clark County, and the school district in order to help coordinate the planning of sewers, parks and recreational facilities and other infrastructural projects. The CCRPC quickly became a significant agency shaping metropolitan development, receiving and disbursing hundreds of thousands of dollars of HUD and

other government funds for parks and other public improvements. True to his campaign pledge in 1959 and again in 1963, Gragson worked hard to open more parks and playgrounds, especially in his city, which was woefully lacking in both. In the 1960s, Alan Bible and Howard Cannon, both powerful United States Democratic senators, had the ear of President Lyndon Johnson, and Gragson, a Republican, exploited this advantage to the fullest, securing federal funds to purchase Lorenzi Park in 1965 for \$750,000. In the previous year Las Vegas also bought Tule Springs Park (later Floyd Lamb State Park) and considered acquiring today's Springs Preserve area, a rich archaeological site near the historic Las Vegas (Big) Springs oasis.

The valley's hectic growth created a range of problems beyond streets, highways, and parks. In the mid 1960s, Gragson joined the mayors of Henderson and North Las Vegas, along with Clark County commissioners, in lobbying for more water to quench the metropolitan area's growing thirst. The Las Vegas Valley Water District had delivered the first Lake Mead water to the Strip and Las Vegas in 1955, but with more resorts planned and Nellis Air Force Base expanding its personnel in response to the intensifying Cold War, more lines were needed. Gragson and others got crucial support in June 1963 when officials of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) endorsed what became the Southern Nevada Water Project. The BLM insisted that "to conserve dwindling groundwater resources" and to provide "the firm and additional supply of municipal and industrial water that is required to serve a rapidly increasing population and industrial growth," construction of a new, large-diameter main from Lake Mead and the requisite pumping facilities was vital.⁴³ Ultimately, thanks to the lobbying efforts of Cannon and Bible, President Lyndon Johnson signed the enabling bill into law as part of his Great Society program in 1965. Construction began in 1968, and water began flowing to Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, and the Strip suburbs by June 1971. Another straw began delivering water from the lake in April 1982. Both lines were crucial prerequisites to Las Vegas's ability to supply a metropolitan area of two million by the early twenty-first century.

But more water and population only led to the further pollution of Lake Mead. This raised concerns at the newly created United States Environmental Protection Agency, which ultimately demanded that Clark County construct an advanced wastewater treatment plant. But county commissioners balked at this expensive proposition. Gragson became increasingly concerned about the county's position, especially after a 1974 consultant's report warned that if the county did not build a new large-capacity plant, the City of Las Vegas would have to consider "alternative measures such as the export of effluent from the Las Vegas Wash Watershed." Noting the valley's continuing growth, the consultants advised that work on the plant "should be commenced as soon as practicable."⁴⁴ The county's foot-dragging on wastewater only frustrated Gragson, who recognized the difficulty of addressing valley-wide problems

on a multi-lateral basis. Even before this 1974 incident, Gragson viewed metropolitan government as the best way to save money by centralizing the decision-making process and eliminating costly overlapping bureaucracies.⁴⁵

This was especially the case with police services. In 1971, the state legislature established a Local Government Study Committee to look into the consolidation of some urban services. When the committee recommended creation of a metropolitan police department for the Las Vegas valley in 1973, Gragson was quick to support the measure. He appointed himself and several other officials to represent the city on committees investigating the agency's feasibility. But consolidating police services was just part of the mayor's agenda. Ever the prudent businessman, Gragson suggested that the "overlapping and duplication of government functions, which resulted from the nearly coincidental growth of the incorporated City of Las Vegas and the unincorporated areas beyond the city limits, clearly dictates the need for one government." But for now, he focused on police. Ultimately, a proposal to merge just the City of Las Vegas's Police Department with the county Sheriff's Office (Henderson and North Las Vegas refused to join) won state legislative approval in 1973, and Gragson quickly agreed to chair the new Metropolitan Police Commission, which oversaw the new agency's operations. County Commissioner (and former Boulder City mayor) Robert Broadbent served as vice chair. Gragson was also a strong supporter of a metropolitan fire department, but, once again, Henderson and North Las Vegas refused to join, preferring to keep their own departments. And, this time, Clark County decided to do the same—much to Gragson's disappointment. But the suburbs were adamant about maintaining their own departments and not allowing Las Vegas to control the location and manpower of fire houses. This sentiment never died. Years later, amidst the need for severe cost-cutting as a result of America's "Great Recession" of 2007-09, the Nevada legislature in 2011 passed a law denying cities and counties the right to consider forming metropolitan fire departments.

To be sure, Mayor Gragson wanted to see valley wide government go further than just creating the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department or the Clark County Regional Planning Council. It became increasingly clear in the 1970s that future growth in the Las Vegas valley would eventually cross all political boundaries. This convinced Gragson and Las Vegas city commissioners of the need for local governments to centralize planning, zoning, building codes, and permits as well as public works and other services into one valley-wide government. In 1946 and again in 1950, Mayor Ernie Cragin and the city commissioners had tried to annex the Strip and failed, but Gragson's administration used the growth of a true metropolitan area in the 1960s to justify consolidation. Desperately short of revenues in 1968, Gragson and city commissioners moved forward with plans to annex the Strip—even to the point of funding a feasibility study. But the other cities and Clark

County fended off this effort, especially in the state legislature. By January 1969, Gragson had conceded the prospects of having one government in the valley as a "lost cause."⁴⁶ Ultimately, he argued for Henderson, Las Vegas, and North Las Vegas to annex their contiguous lands where they could best provide urban services. Using this reasoning, he still pushed the idea of Las Vegas annexing the Strip, and he vigorously opposed the county's proposal for sharing the costs for libraries, parks, and some other services while retaining each jurisdiction's autonomy, which he called a "hodge-podge of local governments formed thru ... contracts providing certain services."⁴⁷

Instead, Gragson and Las Vegas officials, anxious to increase their tax base, contented themselves with a determined effort to annex the Strip and other unincorporated townships in county lands south and southeast of the city. In January 1971, the mayor optimistically predicted that during the ensuing year, Las Vegas would annex the Strip. But his confidence was unwarranted. Despite enthusiastic support from prominent bankers and city-based businesses, the idea was fought by Strip executives, county commissioners, and residents in all of the affected townships, who formally rejected it in a 1978 referendum.⁴⁸

If the metropolitan government controversy tested Gragson's patience, racial tensions over civil rights, Jim Crow, and poverty tested his resolve as well as his flexibility. Despite his southern background, Gragson was not a staunch supporter of Jim Crow. Although an entrepreneurial businessman and a political conservative, Gragson had tasted poverty in the 1930s and, to his credit, as mayor he recognized the tyranny of a system that denied opportunity and civil rights to Americans on account of race. He also displayed a growing willingness to adjust to the times and, while a firm believer in small government, Gragson pursued Great Society funding with Depression-like fervor to help the city's black Westside neighborhood.

The civil-rights movement, of course, antedated Gragson's tenure at city hall, as did local opposition to racial discrimination. As early as the 1930s, local black residents and the NAACP had complained to federal officials about the failure of Six Companies to hire minorities for the construction of Hoover Dam, ultimately forcing the contractors to recruit a token force of fifty or so African-American workers. The 1940s brought calls for state and city civil-rights legislation after the Cragin administration began herding black businesses and residents into West Las Vegas, and downtown clubs and casinos started banning minorities from their public places in an effort to create a friendly hometown atmosphere for white soldiers, defense workers, and other wartime visitors. However, the postwar growth of the resort industry and the numerous low-paying, unskilled jobs it created swelled the local black population to well over ten thousand, more than enough to support a vibrant civil-rights movement. In the late 1950s, once James McMillan and Charles West, both doctors, joined David and Mabel Hoggard, Lubertha Johnson, Ruby Duncan, and other activists, the local NAACP and related groups finally had the strong leadership to move forward.

While Mayor C. D. Baker was active in starting to pave, curb, and install sewer and lighting for many thoroughfares in the impoverished Westside, he did little to help African-American residents end discrimination. Few black leaders expected much from the southern-born Gragson when he became mayor. In fact, Gragson later recalled that he got less than twenty Westside votes in 1959, but in 1963 he garnered 89 percent of them, because during his first term he had diverted thousands of dollars in funding to the Westside to finish the public-works projects that Baker had begun or planned. Gragson also played a major role in securing a consensus of most downtown hotel and club owners to open their rooms, lounges, bars, restaurants, and other public places as part of the Moulin Rouge Agreement brokered by himself, Las Vegas Sun editor Hank Greenspun, Strip executives, and civil-rights leaders in March 1960. This pact not only prevented mass demonstrations on the Strip and downtown, but also helped save Las Vegas from the extent of violence and rioting witnessed in Birmingham, Detroit, Los Angeles, and other cities. Gragson also impressed residents by leading the fight to pull the liquor license of the Moulin Rouge Hotel's white owner, Leo Fry, after he admitted charging black patrons higher prices than whites for drinks. Losing the resort's liquor license effectively closed down Fry's business near the Westside.⁴⁹

Still, tensions rose throughout the 1960s, as job, school, and residential discrimination continued in Las Vegas and the Strip suburbs. Gragson worked with such organizations as the Solutions Conference to ease racial pressures. Formed in 1967, the Solutions Conference was a group of prominent white and black community leaders who sought to identify sources of racial tension in the community. The group was chaired by Nevada Southern University (NSU)/UNLV biology professor Bert Babero; other members were Assemblyman Woodrow Wilson, Clark County School District (CCSD) Superintendent James Mason, the Reverend Jerome Blankinship, NSU theater professor Jerry Crawford, some Las Vegas police officers and several businessmen. In its report the group identified a number of valid minority complaints: not getting government jobs (in 1968 blacks held only 1.8 percent of all state government jobs); police harassment—especially when in white neighborhoods; white landlords not renting to blacks if whites also lived in the building; and black culture and history not being taught in the public schools. The conference recommended passage of an open-housing law, an end to retail price discrimination and bank redlining policies, and the hiring of more black police officers. In a carefully written editorial, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* observed that the conference members were not “agitators” or “do-gooders,” and the column urged local leaders “to take immediate steps to improve the plight of the negro in Las Vegas.”⁵⁰

To his credit, Gragson worked to unite the community by pushing for creation of a civil-rights commission and appointing black Las Vegans to all city commissions and committees covering parks, zoning, planning, and

other municipal functions. As Gragson recalled, "We formed a civil rights commission right away made up of members of the business community, the clergy and minorities." The mayor also noted that he "appointed blacks to all the commissions and committees in the city—planning, zoning, parks and recreation, child welfare, civil service board, housing authority, human relations, urban renewal." The reason was simple. "When everyone's taking an active part in government, attitudes are bound to be different. It takes the steam out of the militants. It becomes everybody's government—not just Whitey's."⁵¹

On some issues Gragson was more conservative. Black complaints regarding the city police dated back to at least the 1930s and had only multiplied with the city's growth. In October 1966, the United States Human Relations Commission presented a report detailing allegations of police brutality against Las Vegas minority citizens. At an earlier meeting of the Nevada Equal Rights Commission, Gragson had requested an inquiry and a subsequent report making recommendations. But while sympathetic to black complaints about city police action and recognizing the need to re-train and in some cases discharge racist officers, Mayor Gragson, like many of his white counterparts across the nation, refused to support creation of a police civilian review board composed of members chosen from all racial segments of the community. In August 1966, Gragson expressed his firm opposition to such a board, despite numerous complaints of harassment and retaliation by Las Vegas and North Las Vegas police officers against minority residents.⁵² To maintain department morale, Gragson opted for sensitivity training for white officers, the hiring of more minority policemen, and the discharge of problem employees. Ultimately, the creation of Internal Affairs divisions in police departments across the nation and in Las Vegas, eased the problem; these entities were vested with the power to conduct reliable investigations of officers and the authority to recommend suitable disciplinary measures, including prosecution and discharge.

While police brutality and harassment were certainly problems, the racial segregation of Las Vegas's grade schools (area high schools had always been integrated) was the match that ultimately sparked major violence. Various racial incidents in local high schools between white students and blacks protesting continued segregation portended the violence to come. In 1968-69, Gragson received numerous letters from concerned parents and residents regarding the growing tension in some of the high schools located within the city limits. He responded that it was the school district's jurisdiction and city police would get involved only if necessary.⁵³

Gragson recognized the concern white parents had for their children's safety, and, as a parent himself, he understood their desire to preserve neighborhood schools. This was evident in 1969 when he expressed his opposition to school busing in a letter to one resident. As he told Mrs. R. E. Williams, "one of the most important items that most of us consider when

buying a home is the close proximity to schools, as well as to churches, shopping and recreational facilities . . . , and I will therefore never support cross busing."⁵⁴ But residential segregation in Las Vegas gave school district officials like Clark County School Superintendent Kenny Guinn little choice; busing was the only way to integrate schools until Nevada's open-housing law eased the problem in the 1970s, and, to his credit, Gragson quickly adjusted to it.

For the most part, Gragson was a good mayor on civil rights and did his best to prevent trouble, but black frustration only grew as the 1960s wore on. White casino owners and other local employers largely ignored a 1965 state civil-rights act mandating that minorities be given an equal opportunity for better-paying jobs. This issue, along with school segregation, festered throughout the decade. In 1968-69, Gragson received intelligence reports from the Las Vegas police about rising tension in the Westside community and the renewed threat of protests. In May 1968, city police Chief N. D. "Pete" Witcher and Deputy Chief (and future Clark County sheriff) John Moran attended an NAACP meeting in which the attorney Charles Kellar reminded downtown hotel executives that, despite the 1965 state civil rights act, they had hired only a few black dealers. Kellar then warned them to prepare for "Action Committee" picketing at the Fremont Hotel and perhaps major demonstrations on Fremont Street itself. Of course, the city's largely white unions were just as devoted to Jim Crow. A few days later the NAACP also picketed the Teamsters Union Hall at Wall Street.⁵⁵ The goal of black leaders at this time was to work with city authorities to keep the demonstrations peaceful. NAACP leaders told police in advance that demonstrators would be bused in from the Westside to provide enough pickets to cover Fremont Street from Main to Third. Peaceful demonstrations continued into the summer of 1969.

But white resistance to further civil-rights concessions made violence inevitable. By June 1969, Gragson had received contingency plans from the United States Army for troops if violence and rioting broke out in the city. Continued school segregation and job discrimination, coupled with some cuts in local poverty programs by the Richard M. Nixon Administration and little state funding from the conservative Governor Paul Laxalt, finally led to rioting in the Westside on October 6 and 7, 1969. For two days roving bands of mostly young people roamed the streets destroying property around the Golden West Shopping Center on H Street and Owens Avenue. Police patrolled the area, arresting troublemakers, and Laxalt sent some National Guard soldiers. Local black ministers and civil-rights leaders worked to restore calm, but they and Mayor Gragson both understood that the underlying cause was continuing racial discrimination.⁵⁶

In the short run, Gragson focused his efforts on restoring peace. At the height of the Westside riot, Gragson went into the neighborhood, surrounded by city police, to meet with community leaders. But the latter cancelled the meeting because of the presence of "massed police" and some National Guard troops. On October 7,

Gragson had declared an 8 p.m. curfew for everyone in the area, but he soon lifted it, to the residents' delight, and conferred with community leaders. For his part, CCSD Superintendent Kenny Guinn agreed to re-open schools in the Westside that had been closed because of the rioting. Gragson had the respect of enough African-American leaders to keep the lines of communication open, which was crucial at the time. Local black ministers added their voices, praising the mayor for meeting with community groups to address African Americans' concerns. At the same time, however, a few racist white residents wrote to Gragson, characterizing the rioters as "cannibals" and denouncing him for "coddling" Westside activists.⁵⁷ But, as the dialogue continued, there were no more violent uprisings in the city's streets (although there continued to be problems in the high schools into the early 1970s)—until the Rodney King riot of 1992.

The mayor subsequently pleased Westside residents by working hard to restore poverty programs, whose funding had been cut nationwide after the 1968 presidential election. The Republican mayor made every effort in convincing the Nixon administration to transfer control of a \$1.6 million manpower anti-poverty program to the city, which went a long way toward restoring good will. Moreover, Governor Mike O'Callaghan's victory in pushing an open-housing law through the 1971 legislature and Guinn's successful integration of Las Vegas schools in 1972 further eased the underlying causes of racial tension in the Las Vegas metropolitan area.

While Gragson was open-minded about supporting equal opportunity based on race, he was more traditional when it came to gender. In February 1970, the mayor and city commissioners voted to uphold the city's 1958 ban on women dealers. When the commissioners had passed this ordinance twelve years earlier, women had been dealing cards in Reno for years, but Las Vegas area hotels had hired only a few, and they were invariably friends of the owner. The reason given by Mayor Baker and the commissioners in 1958 was that women dealers, in the paraphrased wording of the *Las Vegas Sun*, "would result in bad publicity for the area and would induce certain people to gamble who would not otherwise do so."⁵⁸ The real reason, of course, was to protect the jobs of male dealers, who made up a substantial bloc of voters in the city. The men feared that women, who were beginning to push for dealer's jobs in the 1950s, would work for less and attract more players and tips to their tables. But by 1970, the point was quickly becoming moot. In 1971, the Union Plaza opened and its owners—Sam Boyd, Frank Scott, J. Kell Houssels, Jr., and Jackie Gaughan—wanted to hire women dealers to draw more business downtown. Moreover, by 1971, the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) and federal judges were rapidly transforming the gender situation in the workplace, and so the City of Las Vegas soon revised its policy.

While Gragson slowly adjusted to the position that women could deal cards and eventually even hold management positions in a casino hotel, his support for racial equality and "fair employment" was more immediate. He not only displayed enlightened leadership to restore peace in the Westside and openly

addressed minority concerns, he actively sought funding for anti-poverty programs. In fact, the mayor's track record with the Moulin Rouge Agreement of 1960, the revocation of Leo Fry's liquor license (from 1960 to 1962), and the aggressive pursuit of Great Society funding earned him the respect of black leaders, who helped him restore the peace in 1969 and maintain it thereafter.

Once President Lyndon Johnson signed the initial War on Poverty legislation in 1965, Clark County Commissioners established the Economic Opportunity Board (EOB) as its agency (with a thirty-six-member board) to manage the federal programs, and appointed J. David Hoggard as director. In 1965, after receiving a development grant from Sargent Shriver's Office of Economic Opportunity, the EOB opened its first office, on Paradise Road. Later that year, the agency launched Project Head Start, the Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC), and several "neighborhood councils" to identify needs at the community level. The EOB also funded a hot meals program in the schools and hired family planning counselors. By 1973, Hoggard could report that his agency had assisted more than twenty thousand residents since its inception.⁵⁹ Gragson pursued these programs because he understood that discrimination created low-income neighborhoods, which required help. He recognized that the income gulf between African-American and white residents was stark in the 1960s. By 1970, the median annual income of black Las Vegas was \$3,350, compared to \$7,500 for their white counterparts. As one 1970 survey found, 15 percent of local families earned less than \$5,000 a year, and most of these lived in the Westside. So the Gragson administration worked closely with the EOB, providing city funding to help sustain Summer Head Start, Vista Volunteers, the Manpower Development Center, and other initiatives.⁶⁰ Of course, the entire effort was hardly a top-down process; Westside community leaders also pushed from the bottom up to convince federal and state officials to provide additional funding. But Gragson did his part, consistently reinforcing ties with leaders and with the agencies they helped manage. In the EOB's case, for instance, Gragson routinely updated Hoggard about the specifics of Las Vegas's Model Cities grant proposals.⁶¹

Gragson's administration actively sought Model Cities grant money, even after it lost out in 1967-68 to larger and needier cities. Vegas Heights revitalization, for example, consistently remained a mayoral priority. In 1970, Las Vegas hosted HUD representatives who talked to local residents about the need for off site improvements in the Vegas Heights neighborhood. In a letter to HUD officials Gragson explained that in 1964 the city had annexed this black and Latino neighborhood just north of the city limits, and even though the area had been equipped with sewers, power, and water, it still lacked sidewalks, curbs, gutters and street lights, and therefore needed "to be brought up to standard condition."⁶² But the fact that residents had rejected establishing a special assessment district as "too costly" hardly impressed federal officials at the time. As a result, the neighborhood waited several more years for improvements.

At the same time, Gragson also pursued funding to build a multi-purpose neighborhood community center in the Westside, but lost out for most of the late 1960s to cities with more compelling needs. Finally, in November 1969, HUD granted the city \$200,000 to build a Westside Community Center on H Street near Jackson. A few months later, however, it rejected Las Vegas's bid for a large Model Cities grant. Even the community center faced more bureaucratic delays.⁶³ Then, in December 1969, Gragson wrote HUD officials requesting money to build two small parks on the Westside for residents. But that application was also turned down. Still, Gragson and the commissioners persevered in their efforts to the satisfaction of Westside leaders and the EOB.⁶⁴

Las Vegas was more successful on the housing front. In 1969, HUD informed Gene Amberg, director of the city's urban renewal agency, that it would approve construction of the Sproul Homes development in the Madison School Project. Even though the new complex would violate HUD guidelines by increasing the Westside's racial concentration, HUD agreed to fund it because "of the need for improving the stock of low income housing in the community."⁶⁵ Gragson also viewed the HUD funding of more senior citizen housing as a priority. In 1973, the Las Vegas Housing Authority director, Arthur Sartini, asked the mayor to contact HUD officials in San Francisco to urge approval of the city's request for 600 new public housing units—300 for low-income families and 300 for low-income seniors. At the time, there were 447 low-income seniors on the Housing Authority's waiting list. Gragson's administration was successful in this effort. By March 1974, the housing authority had already received \$2 million in HUD funding. Of course, local homeowners, both white and black, routinely objected to nearby public housing for fear it would depress property values. This was the case, for example, near Lake Mead Boulevard and Tonopah Avenue, when numerous Las Vegas and North Las Vegas home owners wrote Gragson to oppose construction of 352 low-income units nearby.⁶⁶ But the city persevered with its public housing initiative.

As mayor, Gragson vigilantly monitored the progress of Great Society programs in the city, receiving constant reports from local agencies, the NAACP, the EOB, and other neighborhood groups. In 1974, the CCSD, which (with United States Department of Labor manpower funding) ran the Neighborhood Youth Corps's "in-school" program reported to Gragson on a regular basis; this program was designed to keep minority teens in school and out of trouble. At the same time, Fernando Romero of the Nevada Association of Latin Americans, Inc., which spent EOB money on job training for local Latinos, kept Gragson abreast of how his program promoted employment in the city and other areas.⁶⁷

The Gragson administration's active pursuit of Great Society program funding continued to strengthen the relatively harmonious relationship between the city government and African-American community leaders.

Even into his last year as mayor, the Republican Gragson lobbied Senator Paul Laxalt and the Nixon and Ford administrations to direct more funding to Las Vegas. In December 1974, for instance, the city established the Department of Community Development, run by the city planning director, Don Saylor, to apply for federal grants for deteriorating neighborhoods. This arrangement allowed federal money to flow directly to the city. Up to this point, the state of Nevada ranked low in receiving federal funds in this area. President Nixon's Revenue Sharing approach attached fewer strings than did the Great Society bureaucracy of Lyndon Johnson, which tightly controlled where grant monies went.⁶⁸ But under Nixon's programs, all cities in the state had to compete for Nevada's share. The problem was that conservative states like Nevada often applied for little because of spending restraints, so Las Vegas had to be more aggressive in pursuing funds coming from federal sources other than revenue-sharing monies.

Finally, as a successful businessman, Gragson recognized that federal help alone could not pull the Westside out of poverty. More capitalist enterprise in the neighborhood would also be necessary. To this end, he wholeheartedly supported the Ventures in Progress initiative of the early 1970s to establish a company in the Westside that would manufacture and ship containers and boxes. To guide the effort, the mayor pushed for creation of a Citizens Advisory Board, and then appointed a group that reflected "a real cross section of West Las Vegas citizens, as well as citizens from Greater Las Vegas." "We want representation," he declared, "ranging from ministers to some of the militant young black people."⁶⁹ And he got it. Over the years more businesses moved in, and the community's economic situation improved somewhat, although the prolonged recession of the late 1970s into the mid 1980s slowed the process until after Gragson's mayoral tenure ended.

In the years after he left office, Gragson took pride in the dramatic growth of Las Vegas and his administration's role in facilitating it. Oran Gragson died in 2002 at the age of ninety-one, and, in their tributes, his contemporaries uniformly agreed that his legacy was substantial. His tenure as mayor spanned a crucial period in Las Vegas's development. As the city evolved into a metropolitan area, Gragson became the first Las Vegas mayor to function as a leader and representative of the whole valley. He was present at all resort openings, whether on the Strip or downtown, at Nellis Air Force Base and at the dam for various ceremonial events, at the Convention Center to address large meetings, and at the christening of the new McCarran jetport in 1963. But most of all, he was a spokesman who championed agendas requiring valley wide consideration. Recognizing the need for a regional approach to urban problems, he pushed for creation of the Clark County Regional Planning Commission, the Clark County Street and Highway Commission, and the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, all of which survive today in one form or another. While Gragson failed to get a valley wide fire department

or annex the Strip and its suburbs, he encouraged Henderson and North Las Vegas officials as well as county commissioners to begin working more closely on wastewater treatment and other issues of mutual concern. He also helped popularize innovative ideas that could benefit the entire valley's economy, such as super-train service from southern California and a monorail serving Las Vegas and the Strip. The mayor also battled to get more freeway access both to Las Vegas from Interstate 15 and also to the mushrooming suburbs to the east and west, with an expressway that would later comprise portions of today's Bruce Woodbury Beltway.

At the same time, Gragson responded to the challenge raised by a declining central business district. Not only did this involve the migration of major stores to suburban malls—a problem experienced by all mid-century mayors—but also the loss of downtown's core customers, the gambling tourists, to a dynamic Edge City boasting an increasingly global reputation. Mayor Gragson diligently pursued every worthwhile idea to energize Las Vegas's central core, including a new city hall, an arena, a stadium, a convention center near downtown, and a new master plan to address such concerns as parking, an expanded red-line, commercial zoning in the suburbs, and various downtown revitalization initiatives. Finally, he led the city through the tense years of the civil-rights movement and worked to secure Las Vegas's fair share of Great Society funding while fighting to end discrimination in public places—downtown and on the Strip—a crucial prerequisite to attracting the millions of tourists who would come from all over the world in later years. It was in the 1960s and 1970s that the Las Vegas valley finally became modern in its approach to minorities, growth, government, infrastructure, and big-time city-building. These were the years when city and county leaders, Strip operators, business executives, and activist citizens laid the foundation for the metropolitan area's future development—a process that Oran Gragson played a major role in shaping.

NOTES

¹See, for instance, John Findlay, *A People of Chance: Gaming in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); David Spanier, *Welcome to the Pleasure Dome: Inside Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992).

²For more on Cragin's and Baker's years as mayor, see Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-2000*, 2d ed. (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), 67-72, 100-104.

³See several handwritten and typed Gragson speeches in 1959 in the Oran Gragson Collection (cited hereafter as OGC) in Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Series 3, Box 7, Folder 2.

⁴A. D. Hopkins and K. J. Evans, eds., *The First 100: Portraits of the Men and Women Who Shaped Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1999), 146-47.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Gragson's reputation for fairness resulted in his being asked to serve as an arbitrator in many labor disputes involving resort employers and employees, both on the Strip and downtown, during his time as mayor. He also arbitrated cases for non-resort businesses based in the city and outside while he was mayor; see Series 3, Box 3, Folder 6, OGC. As an example of Gragson's integrity as mayor, he once wrote a personal check to pay the parking ticket of a resident because Gragson was convinced the city's parking ordinance for motorcycles was too vague. Oran Gragson to D. Fred Gillies, 31 August 1970, Series II, Folder 7, 1970 Correspondence, OGC.

⁷See, for example, Oran Gragson to Department of Energy, Series 3, 8 March 1974, Box 5, Folder 17.

⁸*Las Vegas Sun* (17 February 1970), 3.

⁹See the relevant documents in Series 3, Box 4, Folder 25, OGC.

¹⁰See the Feasibility Study, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 7, OGC.

¹¹See "Regional Shopping Center Potential: Las Vegas Metropolitan Area," Series 3, Box 11, Folder 5, OGC.

¹²*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (20 January 1974), 15; See also Series 5, Box 25, Folder 1, 1974 Scrapbook, OGC.

¹³See the petition and correspondence to Gragson from residents, Series 3, Box 10, Folder 9, OGC.

¹⁴*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (20 January 1974), 15.

¹⁵*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (1 March 1974), n.p. See Series 5, Box 25, Folder 1, 1974 Scrapbook, OGC.

¹⁶*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (1 January 1975), 13, Series 5 Folder 1 (1974 Scrapbook), OGC.

¹⁷See the minutes of a joint meeting of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce's Merchant's Bureau and the Downtown Development Committee, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 13, OGC.

¹⁸See Gragson's 1972 protest statement about 4-hour parking meters downtown, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

¹⁹*Las Vegas Sun* (14 September 1966), 1, 4.

²⁰See the minutes of the joint meeting on 13 March 1970, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 13, OGC; *Las Vegas Sun* (17 December 1971), 1.

²¹See the minutes for the meeting on 13 March 1970 and *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (12 April 1971), in Series 3, Box 5, Folder 13, OGC.

²²Ralph Roske, *Las Vegas: A Desert Paradise* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1986), 84-86. See Las Vegas City Commission, *Minutes*, Vol. 3, 8 April 1931, 157 for the first mention of Las Vegas creating a "zone" downtown within which casino gambling would be restricted. The city did issue slot-only licenses for stores and other places, such as David G. Lorenzi's Resort at Twin Lakes, located well beyond the red line district.

²³For the ordinance allowing African Americans to own and operate a gaming establishment to serve minority customers who were not white, see Las Vegas City Commission, *Minutes*, Vol. 3, 9 and 17 April 1931, 157, 162. See also relevant documents in Series 3, Box 6 Folder 24, OGC.

²⁴*Reno Evening Gazette* (11 May 1970), 1; Series 3, Box 6, Folder 12, OGC.

²⁵George Franklin to Oran Gragson, 18 October 1971, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

²⁶*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (4 December 1971), 1; *Ibid.* (29, October 1971), 1.

²⁷Al Bramlet to Oran Gragson, 2 November 1971, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12; for Channel 8's position, see the printed editorial dated 14 December 1971 in Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

²⁸Ed and Jake Von Tobel to Oran Gragson, n.d.; Arthur Grant and Joseph Rashkov to Oran Gragson, 14 October 1971, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

²⁹See the written statement by Raymond Marshalk, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

³⁰Herbert Jones to Oran Gragson, 2 February 1970, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 12, OGC.

³¹Population and territorial growth were the driving factors behind the need for a new city hall. In 1960, the city comprised 25.1 square miles and hosted a population of 64,400. Just three years later, the figures had grown to 35.0 and 90,000, respectively. Series 3, Box 4, Folder 6, OGC.

³²Gragson often joked that a city hall that could have been built for \$5 million in the early 1960s ultimately cost the taxpayers \$8 million. He also urged construction of what later became the Cashman Field Center in Las Vegas years before city commissioners approved that facility. Hopkins and Evans, *The First 100*, 147. For more on the bond issue, see *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (OGC, 21 March 1968), Series 5, Box 23, Folder 1, 1968/69 Newspaper Scrapbook Clippings, OGC.

³³John Cahlan's history of Las Vegas's city government is informative on the subject of its city halls; see OGC, Series 3 Box 2, Folder 7. See also *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (7 September 1973), p. 3, for problems delaying the new city hall's opening.

³⁴See the letter from Oran Gragson to Deil Gustafson, president of the Tropicana Hotel and Country Club, regarding the International Trade Mart, 14 December 1972, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 5. For Gragson's championing of a tall tower with observation deck from which to view the valley, see *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (11 May 1960), p. 1.

³⁵Desmond Kelly to the Downtown Las Vegas Hotel and Casino Association (May 1974), OGC, Series 3, Box 11, Folder 4.

³⁶The gondola idea is discussed in *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (9, May 1960), p. 1. See "The Harrod Super Train Proposal," March 1967, and the letter of the Downtown Casino Association, 22 May 1974, OGC, Series 3, Box 12, Folder 10.

³⁷See the "Monocab" brochure, February 1973, OGC, Series 3, Box 15, Folder 12.

³⁸See correspondence relating to the "comprehensive plan" under Regional Street and Highway Commission, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 25.

³⁹As early as fall 1960, the city met with federal officials to secure the Charleston interchange; see *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (3 November, 1960), p. 2. This can be found in OGC in folders marked Series II, Box 14 and 15, 1960 Clippings. They are not listed in the collection's index.

⁴⁰Charles Brechler to Grant Bastian, 2 February 1972, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 25.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²See Gragson's 1974 statement on the freeway, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 25.

⁴³*Las Vegas Sun* (24 March 1971), OGC, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 5, 1971 Clippings. For the acquisition of Lorenzi Park, see Oran Gragson to Alan Bible, 18 May 1973, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 30.

⁴⁴"Facilities Planning Report: Wastewater Treatment Plant Expansion," November 1974, OGC, Series 3, Box 13, Folder 5.

⁴⁵As early as 1960, Gragson pushed the idea of consolidating governments in the valley; see *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (18 May 1960), p. 1.

⁴⁶Oran Gragson to Clark County Commissioners, 7 January 1972, OGC, Series 3, Box 5, Folder 31; *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (17 January 1968), p. 4.

⁴⁷*Las Vegas Sun* (1 January 1969), OGC, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁴⁸*Las Vegas Sun* (1 January 1971), p. 1.

⁴⁹Hopkins and Evans, *The First 100*, 146-47; For the Moulin Rouge Agreement and Leo Fry's multiple license revocations, see Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 183-85.

⁵⁰Solutions Conference; see OGC, Report and Proceedings, Series 3, Box 11, Folder 3.

⁵¹See "A Report to the Honorable Oran K. Gragson ... on Complaints of Police Brutality" by the Southern Nevada Human Relations Commission, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 32.

⁵²Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 170-82. For Gragson's refusal to establish a Police Civilian Review Board, see Oran Gragson to Evelyn Sanford, 22 August 1966, OGC, Series 3, Box 11, Folder 9; and *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (2 August 1966), p. 1.

⁵³Ann Carter to Oran Gragson, 12 March 1970; see also Gragson's statement, 26 February 1969, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 26.

⁵⁴Oran Gragson to R. E. Williams, 7 February 1969, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 26.

⁵⁵Sergeant John Connor to Chief Pete Witcher and Deputy Chief John Moran, 20 and 22 May 1968, OGC, Series 3, Box 9, Folder 2.

⁵⁶U.S. Army dispatch, 2 June 1969, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 8.

⁵⁷Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 191-94. For an example of the angry letters that Gragson received from white residents, see Louis Jaramillo to Oran Gragson, 6 October 1969, OGC, Series 3, Box 11, Folder 3.

⁵⁸*Las Vegas Sun* (10 February 1970), p. 1.

⁵⁹OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 23.

⁶⁰Charles Kellar to Oran Gragson, 10 April 1969, and see the attached "Concept Paper for a proposal for Project YET [Youth Effectiveness Training]," p. 2; OGC, Series 3, Box 9, Folder 2; W. F. Cottrell to Oran Gragson, 8 March 1967, OGC, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 16.

⁶¹For good coverage of the community's effort to help the poverty relief process move faster, especially the vital efforts of Ruby Duncan and other black mothers active in the area of welfare rights, see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005). While Gragson kept the EOB informed about the city's efforts regarding federal block grants, the future state assemblyman Marion Bennett complained that he did not speak enough to "community leaders." See *Las Vegas Sun* (30 March 1974), OGC, Series 5, Box 25, Folder 1, 1973-74 Scrapbook.

⁶²Oran Gragson to James D. Richardson, HUD Regional Administrator, 24 August 1970, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 3.

⁶³*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (13 November 1969), OGC, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 3.

⁶⁴Oran Gragson to James Richardson, 11 December 1969, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 3, OGC.

⁶⁵See HUD letter to Gene Amberg, 12 March 1969, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 3.

⁶⁶Oran Gragson to James Price, HUD Area Director, 27 July 1972; Arthur Santini to Oran Gragson 18 October 1973, OGC, Series 3, Box 6, Folder 25.

⁶⁷Fernando Romero to Oran Gragson, 31 January 1973, OGC, Series 3, Box 9, Folder 8.

⁶⁸*Las Vegas Sun* (31 December 1974), p. 11.

⁶⁹*Las Vegas Review-Journal* (21 January 1970), OGC, Series 5, Box 23, Folder 2, 1969-70 Scrapbook Clippings.

*Paul Revere Williams:
La Concha Motel and other
Las Vegas Projects, 1943-1962*

DOROTHY WRIGHT

The acclaimed African-American architect Paul Revere Williams (1894-1980) seems an unlikely fit for designing buildings in small-town Las Vegas of the 1940s. Known for his restraint and elegance, he made a name for himself by designing Hollywood mansions for well-known celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Jay Paley, and Desi Arnaz. He also collaborated on a wide range of public and private projects ranging from department stores, and hotels, to restaurants and municipal buildings.

Williams was born in L.A.'s garment district. His parents had moved from Memphis with his older brother Chester, Jr. They lived in an integrated neighborhood near downtown, and Williams attended an all-white school and all-black church. His father opened a fruit stand on what became Olvera Street.¹ His parents died when he was four, and he and his brother were raised by separate foster families. Williams has stated that he doesn't recall experiencing racism until high school, when he expressed a wish to become an architect. He was soundly discouraged by his teachers.²

In 1912 Williams graduated from Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles. He then began methodically making the rounds of architectural firms seeking

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Portrait of Paul Revere Williams by Taylor Martin, 2010.
(*Paul Revere Williams Project, University of Memphis*)

work. He secured a position with a landscape architect, Wilbur D. Cook, Jr. After that he worked at a number of important Los Angeles architectural firms. At the same time he enrolled in engineering courses at University of Southern California.

During these years Williams won a number of regional and national competitions, bringing his work to the judges' attentions. One of those was John C. Austin. Williams went to work for Austin in 1921 and ended up heading the drafting department with a staff of twenty. In 1921 Williams passed the Architecture Licensing Exam and opened his own office, while still working for Austin until 1924. They were later to collaborate on a number of important buildings.³

Early on, Williams set the credo that would direct his life. In his July 1937 essay in *American Magazine*, "I Am a Negro," Williams stated, "If I allow the fact that I am a Negro to checkmate my will to do, now, I will inevitably form the habit of being defeated."

Williams' talent was fueled by an extraordinary capacity for work. One of his own anecdotes, frequently told in essays and articles, describes how he prepared a design for the automobile magnate E. L. Cord in twenty-four hours, where other architects had asked for three weeks. He got the job.⁴ Williams forged ahead of his competition, even with the challenge of being a black man in a nearly all-white profession, by taking on an enormous number of projects and by doing them faster, better, and with more value for the dollar. His work was distinguished by consistent excellence, and he had the ability to provide his clients with a pleasing result while staying true to his own vision.

For researchers of Williams's work, there is some confusion about which Williams projects in Las Vegas were actually completed or even started. Tragically, much of the records of his lifetime of work, including correspondence, plans, drawings and contracts, was destroyed by fire in the Los Angeles riots of 1992.⁵ Williams's biographer, his granddaughter Karen E. Hudson, pieced together a chronology from remaining records. Occasionally documentation was somewhat confusing.

Because of its diversity, the handful of his Las Vegas projects spanning the 1940s to the 1960s provides a telling window into Williams's long international career as an award-winning architect. His finished Las Vegas projects include two housing tracts, a horse-race park, a hotel, two motels, and the Guardian Angel Cathedral.

Williams's first project in Las Vegas began in what later became the City of Henderson, just south of Las Vegas, when he designed a housing tract for African-American workers at the Basic Magnesium Incorporated (BMI) defense plant.⁶ Called Carver Park, the tract provided simple and affordable homes for hundreds of African-American families who had been recruited from the Deep South to work in the factory making lightweight airplane parts.

The selection of Williams for the Carver Park project may have been based partly on his having designed one of the first public-housing projects in the country, Pueblo del Rio, in Los Angeles. He also served from 1933 to 1941 on the Los Angeles Housing Commission, and was appointed in 1933 to the National Board of Municipal Housing. These experiences served him well when designing Carver Park, which opened in October, 1943.⁷

Unfortunately many of the African-American BMI workers felt isolated in Carver Park, and many workers chose to live instead on the west side of Las Vegas and commute to work. Even with no streets, lighting, or sewers, West Las Vegas was more of a community than Carver Park, with churches, eateries, saloons, and neighbors. BMI did provide recreation at Carver Park. Lubertha Johnson, an African-American woman and later civil-rights activist who was placed in charge of all recreation activities at Carver Park, had this to say about Williams in her 1987 oral history at University of Nevada, Las Vegas:



Berkeley Square house, 2010. Photograph © David Horan. (*Paul Revere Williams Project, University of Memphis*)

I think Mr. Williams prided himself on having the opportunity to build this place.... I didn't get the impression that Mr. Williams was pleased with Carver Park. It wasn't a creative kind of thing; it was just something that you built for this particular purpose. He didn't have an idea that it would ever turn out to be a residential area. He didn't see Las Vegas as a place where Negro people would actually settle, because he talked about the fact that he wondered what people would do when the plant closed. There was nothing except the Last Frontier and the El Rancho...

Mr. Williams was concerned about what would happen for permanent types of buildings in Las Vegas, where black people could live and establish permanent homes... He and I talked about a plan for multiple housing and single housing. He liked to build around a patio... He built something like that in several homes around Los Angeles.

Williams made good on his concerns when he signed on as the architect for what was first called Westside Park, now known as Berkley Square, in West Las Vegas. This project addressed the desperate living conditions on Las Vegas's West Side. After the war, hundreds of blacks stayed on and found other work. Housing, however, was a problem.

In December 1949 the Las Vegas Review-Journal announced "Famed Architect Designs Homes for Westside Park."⁸ That architect was Paul Williams. The announcement was somewhat premature, as the financing was not assembled until closer to the mid 1950s. Originally to be an Federal Housing Administration approved subdivision, it was ultimately sponsored by the Veterans' Administration. The prominent Oakland attorney and newspaper owner Thomas L. Berkley was a black civil-rights activist who helped finance Berkley Square and gave it his name. Berkley Square became the first subdivision built by and for minorities in Nevada, and the first project to start the long-overdue improvements to the deplorable living conditions on the West Side.

Williams's two architectural plan books, published in 1945 and 1946, illustrate the modest Contemporary Ranch style that he used in Berkley Square. *The Small Home for Tomorrow* and *New Homes for Today*, long out of print, demonstrate his philosophy of attractive, spare spaces with garden rooms brought inside, and open-interior plans. The style, influenced by the iconic modernist Richard Neutra, became the dominant post-war design for affordable housing for returning veterans.

Berkley Square subdivision, now listed on the National Register of Historic places, was not constructed until 1954 and 1955 because of delays in financing and government procedures.⁹ After that, it took many years for real improvement to come to the West Side, but the Berkley Square subdivision provided a turning point in decent housing. Many of its homes are still owned by the original families who purchased them.

Never one to confine himself to a single venture, Williams's name was announced in 1949 as one of the architects, with Arthur Froehlich, of the new Las Vegas Racetrack. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article notes that the track was being developed by the New York promoter Joseph M. Smoot, who had owned and operated the Hialeah Track in Miami. Froehlich had been the architect for the Hollywood Park Racetrack for ten years and in 1949 was overseeing its reconstruction since it was recently destroyed by fire.¹⁰

A photo accompanying the article shows a smiling Williams being handed a large check by an elderly Smoot, while Froehlich looks on. The article said Williams "has built some of the top hotels in this country, as well as in South America and Honolulu. He recently added 100 rooms to the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles and just finished adding a new wing to the Beverly Hills Hotel." The Las Vegas architect Richard Stadelman was the local associate architect.

The Las Vegas Racetrack had actually been in discussion for several years. The original announcement was published in the *Review-Journal* on December 7, 1946 and proclaimed that Las Vegas was to get a new \$2,500,000 racetrack. Construction was to start the following year. Ultimately the cost ballooned to \$4,500,000, and construction didn't start until the 1950s.¹¹

The track seems to have been doomed from the start, with financial and other troubles plaguing it. There has been speculation that Smoot knew a Las Vegas track could not compete with Hollywood and Santa Anita, and that he

used the opportunity to skim financing from the project. Whatever the truth, the track did not open on time, and Smoot was charged with embezzlement. In federal court, Smoot couldn't produce cancelled checks when asked about half a million dollars in missing money. "You ever try to pay a politician with a check?" he asked, bringing down the house.¹²

Eventually the \$4.5 million dollar Las Vegas Racetrack did open, under an appointed board of directors, on September 4, 1953. Problems with the tote board and the high-roller windows meant that lines were long, and the high rollers had to mingle with the commoners. The track closed for two weeks to replace the tote board. A brief re-opening was met with poor attendance and weak betting. With only nineteen thoroughbred-racing days under its belt, the Las Vegas Park closed on October 19, 1953. After a few non-thoroughbred events in 1954, the park closed again, this time for good.¹³

By that time Williams was involved in designing a small hotel on the Strip, the Royal Nevada, with the California architect John Replogle. The year the Royal Nevada opened, 1955, was not a good one for new hotels, with the Moulin Rouge opening and closing within eight months, and the Stardust construction delayed because of the untimely demise of its visionary owner, Tony Cornero. In 1958 the Stardust construction was completed and the hotel opened, in the process swallowing up the troubled Royal Nevada Hotel for use as the Stardust's convention center.¹⁴

Williams continued his Las Vegas work into the sixties. A small motel project that seemed modest on the surface was to have wide repercussions for Williams's legacy, not just in Las Vegas but around the world.

In 1959, Los Angeles real-estate developer M. K. Doumani, after a New York court action, succeeded in clearing title to a disputed parcel of property south of the Riviera with 960 feet of Strip frontage. According to a *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article on Sunday, May 10, 1959, the parcel contained more than twenty-eight acres and was valued in excess of \$1.5 million dollars. The Las Vegas developer Herman Kishner was Doumani's Las Vegas partner.¹⁵ Once the property was secured, Doumani and his two sons, Edward and Fred, decided to develop the property themselves. It took two years to secure the financing, hire an architect, and build what would become one of the most recognizable and unusual structures on the Strip, the La Concha Motel.

In an interview on March 29, 2010, Ed Doumani recounted how he and his brother Fred, then still in their twenties, worked with their father to bring the project to fruition. Ed had heard of Paul Revere Williams, who by then had an international reputation. Williams was also known in Las Vegas, most recently in association with the Royal Nevada Hotel across the street from the Doumani parcel. Williams seemed the right architect to make their new establishment stand out on the Strip. The Doumanis went to visit him in his Los Angeles office.

Ed Doumani described Paul Williams as very well dressed, wearing a three piece suit. The Doumanis explained that they wanted something unusual and

eye-catching, but left it up to the architect to decide on the direction and the theme. "I sat across his desk from him while he drew a sketch—backwards and upside down," Doumani said.¹⁶ The three flowing arches of the conch shell took shape.

The La Concha has been referred to as Googie architecture, belonging to a genre of California Mid-century Modern that celebrates pop culture, space-age design and is expressed with exuberance and swooping lines. Named for a coffeeshop called Googie's, designed by John Lautner, Googie architecture ranged from roadside drive-ins to serious monumental projects such as the Seattle Space Needle. Examples of the genre have until the late twentieth century been considered not worth preserving, but to fans of Googie, the La Concha Motel was an icon of the first order.

Williams was not known for his Googie design. However, with his broad range of projects, and his continued activity into the 1960s, Williams's style did evolve naturally and easily into designing buildings that embraced modernism. The La Concha also shows Williams's characteristic love of curves and graceful movement. Whether the La Concha is Googie or not is somewhat immaterial. It is certainly easy to understand that Williams could have produced it.

The La Concha was a blend of high design from a renowned architect, and hands-on construction, with the two Doumani sons helping to build the interior block walls. Ed Doumani described how, to save money, they shopped at a local hardware store for off-the-shelf dropped light fixtures for the nine bays in the lobby. The distinctive La Concha logo, which was used on matchbooks and paper associated with the motel, was designed by Ben Mayer, a local graphic artist. The logo was enlarged into a twelve-foot wall piece that hung behind the semi-circular reception desk. Lembke Construction was the general contractor for the project.¹⁷

The La Concha's engineering is also one of a kind, not easily replicable today. Basically the exterior structure is a web of reinforced steel in the shape of the shell, sprayed with gunnite like in the same process as a swimming pool. Originally the family had planned a three-story motel, but First National Bank in Las Vegas would only lend them money for two stories. The motel was small, only a hundred rooms, but it made its impact with its dramatic façade.

Ed Doumani recounted how the La Concha could be seen from miles to the south by those approaching from Los Angeles. "Until we blocked it ourselves!"¹⁸ he pointed out. The following year, 1962, the Doumanis finished developing their Strip parcel by building the El Morocco Motel next door to the La Concha. Also designed by Paul Revere Williams, the El Morocco Motel's arch-encircled front lobby was a stylized and much more pedestrian design than the dramatic, elegant, and soaring arches of the La Concha.

(Also in 1962, Williams was hired to design the Guardian Angel Cathedral, just to the south of the La Concha, near the Desert Inn, on land and with funds donated to the Catholic Diocese by the gaming boss Moe Dalitz. A modern, A-frame edifice, the cathedral is distinguished by its stained-glass windows and clean lines. The cathedral, which opened in fall of 1963, was the last of Williams's Las Vegas projects completed before he retired in 1973.¹⁹)



Aerial view of the La Concha, ca. 1962. Photographer unknown. (*Las Vegas Convention and Visitors' Authority, News Bureau*)

The La Concha Motel was important in its day, both architecturally and socially. Ed Doumani describes it as the unofficial Republican Party headquarters, along with the El Morocco, where important city leaders would meet to discuss the issues of the day. There were also a number of celebrities who stayed there including a young Cassius Clay. Ed Doumani also contends that while integration was slow in coming to the Strip, the La Concha was one of the first motels to actually accommodate African-American patrons.²⁰

The impact of the La Concha was not one that could have been foretold when it was built. It took a unique set of circumstances and a unique partnership to remind the world of the power and beauty of Paul R. Williams's architecture, and to ensure that he remains internationally known for what was to have been a relatively minor building project—a hundred room motel in 1960s Las Vegas.

By the year 2000, with the building boom exploding, the Doumani family had many offers to develop their piece of the Strip. They finally joined with

Hilton Hotels' boutique arm, Conrad Hotels, to build a non-gaming luxury residential hotel called the Majestic Manors and Residences. (Patriarch Malik Doumani sailed to America on a boat named *The Majestic*.)²¹ At the same time, the Doumanis were reluctant to demolish what they considered their legacy, the 1961 La Concha Motel. They looked for an appropriate steward for their treasured building.

The Neon Museum, a Nevada non-profit corporation, was just then embarking on a major long-term fundraising and capital campaign to build a permanent visitors' center to lead into its outdoor display of unrestored signs, about three miles to the north. It had been operating from a borrowed office across the street from the sign display, known as *The Boneyard*. Already a very popular attraction without benefit of advertising, *The Boneyard* handled capacity crowds with only a part-time staff and with visitation by appointment only. The Neon Museum needed its own visitors' center, to make the signs available to visitors on a full-time basis.

The project was an ideal marriage of history, architecture, and historic artifact. Historic preservationists, especially fans of Mid-century Modern, lent their support from around the country. Fans of historic Las Vegas neon signs voiced their support from around the world. (The Neon Museum, which tracks visitors electronically, reports that 85 percent of its patrons are from outside Las Vegas.)

In February 2004 the Doumani family announced their partnership with the Hilton.²² Shortly after, *Preserve Nevada*, a statewide preservation non-profit based at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, brought the two sides together. After determining there was no route to transport the thirty-foot-tall lobby without hitting the freeway overpass, a reconstruction feasibility study was funded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Melvyn Green, an historic preservation structural engineer, was hired to determine if the building could be successfully cut apart and put back together.

Once that determination was made, over the next few years the needed funds were raised, primarily from federal, state, and local grants. The City of Las Vegas provided land under a long-term lease for the La Concha. The City also received federal funding to build an adjacent Neon Park, which would provide an attractive and secure block wall fence to encircle the entire Neon Museum Campus. The Neon Museum's new visitors' center opened to the public in October 2012.²³ The Neon Museum now gives regular tours of its historic collection of rescued neon signs.

Paul R. Williams will be justly remembered for his body of work over a more than fifty-year career. During that time he designed whole communities, Hollywood mansions, hotels, restaurants, department stores, and civic buildings. His work has value, and even more when considered in the context of his life as a black man fighting the odds against him. Williams' work is now celebrated at the University of Memphis in Tennessee, which has set up a permanent on-line archive, in partnership with the American Institute for Architects, and has launched a national touring exhibit and educational program.

It is an irony that Williams may end up being known best for a building that wasn't necessarily representative of his lifetime of work. The La Concha Motel in Las Vegas was a project that Paul R. Williams must have had fun producing, although he may not have thought of as significant, compared to some of his other work. But as people from all over the world get a chance to see the building restored and functioning as the Neon Museum's Visitors' Center, Paul Williams's name will live on as the man who designed it.

NOTES

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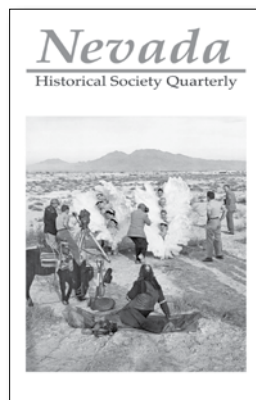
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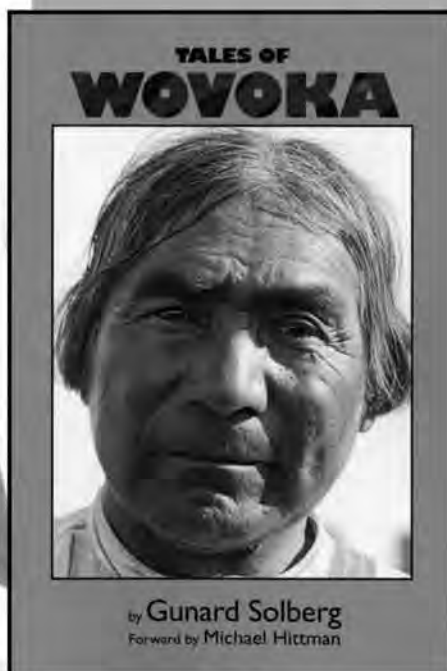
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