

# The Las Vegas Strip

## the early years

by Pam Goertler  
 assisted by Brian Cashman

### El Rancho Vegas

The first hotel on the Strip

In the 1930's there was no Las Vegas "Strip". Las Vegas was a railroad town, built to house the railroad workers and their families. The clubs, casinos, stores, schools, hotels, professional offices, and railroad station were all downtown.

Highway 91 (now the Strip) went from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City, passing through Las Vegas. Scattered along the highway, leading into Las Vegas, were some small clubs, but they were few and far between.

As the legend goes...in 1938 Tommy Hull and a friend were driving along highway 91. They were a few miles outside of Las Vegas when they got a flat tire. Tommy waited with the car while his friend hitchhiked into Las Vegas to get help. While waiting, Tommy counted the cars that passed him on the highway, and began to get an idea. Highway 91 was a long stretch of road through a hot, dusty desert. There were a lot of cars on the highway, and Tommy thought there were plenty of weary travelers, in the cars, who would enjoy a place to stop and relax. Tommy owned hotels in California, so it didn't take much for him to begin to envision a hotel, a swimming pool, and tall cool drinks...an oasis in the desert.



A man of action, Tommy checked out the possibilities and decided that some land on the corner of San Francisco Avenue (now Sahara), and Highway 91 would be a good place for



his new hotel. Mrs. Jessie Hunt owned the property, and Tommy began negotiations with her. Mrs. Hunt felt that the property was worthless. She offered to give it to Tommy, just to get rid of it! She finally accepted payment of \$150 per acre, for about 33 acres.

After months of planning and construction, El Rancho Vegas opened on April 3, 1941. Having seen the beautiful resort while it was being built, Las Vegas dressed in their finest attire to attend the gala opening. Wanting a comfortable and friendly atmosphere in his hotel, Tommy appeared at the grand opening in cowboy boots and blue jeans! He greeted his guests with a friendly "howdy" and invited them to come in anytime, and "come as you are"!



The original resort-hotel consisted of a small casino, a dining room, and 65 hotel rooms. Later in 1941 came the first of several expansions. Many rows of individual cottages were built



each with its own lawn and a well-equipped kitchen. Each cottage was reached by driving down paved, well-lighted streets. This was called the Village.

**The amenities:**

- El Rancho Vegas was a man-made oasis. A staff of ten gardeners worked year round, using as much as ten million gallons of water a month, to keep the lawns and landscaping lush.
- There were saddle trails on the grounds for horse back riding.
- There was a swimming pool, with plenty of lounge chairs for year-round sunbathing. Food and beverage service was available poolside.
- Sportsmen could rent boats at Lake Mead for fishing, water-skiing, or cruising. Later the ERV had its own cruiser on the lake.
- All rooms were air conditioned, and each had a private bath.
- There was a 24-hour service station on the property.
- Guests could try their luck at the ERV casino.
- The ERV was the only strip hotel with on-site laundry service. A staff of 15 was available to perfectly iron a shirt, and have it back to the guest within 6 hours.



Lawns and gardens took up to 10,000,000 gallons of water per month



ownership changes for the hotel. Some of the owners included Joe Brown, Wilbur Clark and Jake and Beldon Katelman.

Like Tommy Hull, Beldon Katelman was a man of ideas and action. Before long he had bought out his partners, and had full control of the ERV. He brought in designer Tom Douglas, from Los Angeles, and the ERV underwent a major renovation. Each bedroom and cottage received its own design, and was furnished with comfortable modified French provincial furnishings.

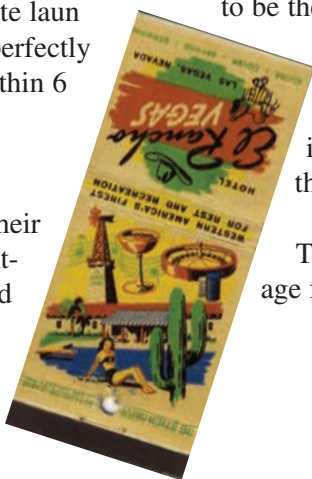
The rustic Round Up Room was transformed into the Opera House Theater and Restaurant, considered by many to be the most beautiful entertainment venue in town. It seated 300 patrons and was the heart of the hotel's entertainment operations. The Opera House had brick walls and an open beamed ceiling. Tables and chairs were arranged surrounding the dance floor, which doubled as the main stage.

The resort idea was to provide a complete package for its guests, so they never had to leave the



Guests were advised to bring their play clothes, yachting togs, boots and spurs, swim suits, sun suits, blue jeans, five-gallon Stetsons, and bandanas. "Spontaneous sports and games are organized by the Social Director for your enjoyment."

After a couple of years, Tommy sold the El Rancho Vegas, in the first of many



property. When they weren't gambling, or enjoying the sports that were offered, there was entertainment offered at the Opera House. ERV was the first to use big names to attract crowds and high rollers. One of the entertainers who was regularly featured at the ERV was stripper Lili St. Cyr. In a unique twist, Lili would step out of the bath and would dress leisurely in front of the audience. Other regulars included Joe E. Lewis, Sophie Tucker, Austin Mack, Eartha Kitt, Buddy Rich, and the Ritz Brothers. Additionally, they had the scantily clad girls of the chorus line. All of which was a far cry from the sawdust joints of downtown.



The origin of the fire wasn't positively determined, though arson was suspected. There were those who said that the fire was fortuitous for Beldon Katelman. Immediately after the fire, it was announced that the El Rancho Vegas would be rebuilt and that it would be bigger and better than ever. That never happened.

In 1970 Howard Hughes bought the property, which remained vacant for many years.

If you'd like to see what the El Rancho Vegas looked like in her heyday, find a copy of the movie "Las Vegas Shakedown". It was filmed at the resort in 1955, and it's fun to watch from a "historical Las Vegas" standpoint.

Alas, all good things must come to an end. The El Rancho Vegas was past its prime. New resorts that were "bigger and better" were built on the Strip, including the Sahara directly across the strip from the ERV. Travelers from Los Angeles encountered the newer places before they reached the ERV. But...the El Rancho Vegas was still hanging in there.



Then, in the wee hours of the morning, on June 17, 1960, three engine companies, a ladder truck and two pumpers with lights flashing and sirens screaming arrived at the El Rancho Vegas. By the time they arrived, the main building, which housed the casino, shops, restaurants and showroom, was engulfed in flames.



El Rancho Vegas yacht on Lake Mead

It was the end of the first resort on the Strip.



Opera House restaurant



El Rancho Vegas casino

## Hotel Last Frontier

The second hotel on the Strip

Late in 1941, Texas millionaire R.E. Griffith and his nephew Bill Moore were planning to build a new hotel in Deming, New Mexico. The hotel was to be called Last Frontier. While on a trip west, to buy equipment for the new hotel, they stopped to rest at the El Rancho Vegas. Seeing the success that Tommy Hull was enjoying, they canceled their plans for the hotel in New Mexico, deciding instead that their hotel should be built on highway 91, about a mile South of the El Rancho Vegas.

Starting construction in December 1941 meant working within wartime restrictions. New construction was supposed to be limited to projects for the war effort. But...The War Board exempted anyone who could prove that they had the materials before the restrictions went into effect. Submitting a list of materials, Griffith and Moore were able to prove that they already had the construction materials. The catch was, the War Board had the authority to commandeer materials for the war effort, and the list told them exactly what was available. They came to the hotel construction site, and seized virtually all of Griffith and Moore's electrical materials.

Undaunted, Moore bought a couple of old mines and stripped the wiring and conduit out of them. To conserve materials Moore, an architect, incorporated the existing 91 Club (formerly the Pair-O-Dice) into his building plans. He bought the bar and the French beveled glass barroom entrance out of the historic Arizona Club and used them in the new hotel. Griffith and Moore were able to open their 100-room hotel on October 29, 1942.

R.E. Griffith, who had built and run a chain of movie theaters in the South, used his theatrical connections to bring in stars to entertain the guests at the Last Frontier. Tommy Hull, from the El Rancho Vegas, would go to the Last Frontier and approach their entertainers, sometimes offering them double the salary to perform at the El Rancho Vegas. In a similar vein, Griffith and Moore lured many of Tommy Hull's casino employees to work for them.



Griffith died less than a year after the Last Frontier opened.

### Last Frontier Village

The Last Frontier Village was an authentic recreation of an old Western town during gold rush days. The Village was created on the grounds of Hotel Last Frontier in 1951, using historic buildings from around the state. Robert “Doby Doc” Caudill was a collector of Western memorabilia. After 35 years of collecting, he had 946 tons of relics, stored in two warehouses in Elko. Bill Moore purchased most of those relics, and under his guidance, they became part of the Last Frontier Village.

**Joss House:** The Chinese Church, which was built in Elko in the 1860’s, was the oldest Joss House left in the United States. It was built to serve the thousands of Chinese who worked to build the first railroad to cross the United States.

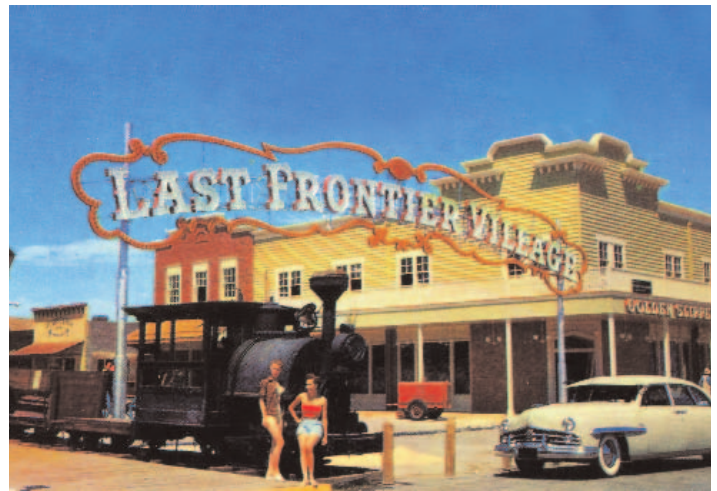
**Schoolhouse:** When Bing Crosby purchased the Kerns Ranch in Northern Elko County, there was a log schoolhouse, with a sod roof, on the property. Bing donated it to the Last Frontier Village, and it was moved, intact, to the property.

**Tuscarora Jail:** The jail was built in 1870 by nailing 3 thicknesses of boards together. Leg chains were attached to the walls for anyone who needed extra restraint. A prisoner once attempted to burn his way out of the jail, but only succeeded in charring the walls, and he died in the attempt. Note: This jail is currently located at the Clark County Heritage Museum, on Boulder Highway. You can tour this and other historic buildings on the property.

**Bird Cage Theater:** This was the first building constructed in Clark County (which was then Lincoln County), by a Mr. Ronnow who was in the freighting business. It was later remodeled into a small theater.

**Shops:** There were several shops available for the tourists, including a cactus shop, lapidary, handwork gift shop, ceramic shop, women’s dress shop, men’s clothing, Western apparel, and a Sweet Shop (which is also currently at the Clark County Heritage Museum).

**Little Church of the West:** This wedding chapel was built as an exact replica, at one-half scale, of a famous church in Columbia, CA. The original dated back to the gold rush days of 1849. The Las Vegas version of the church became known as the “Wedding place of the stars”, hosting the nuptials for stars such as Betty Hutton, Fernando Lamas and Arlene Dahl, David Cassidy and Kay



Last Frontier Village



The Gay 90’s bar



Little Church of the West

Lenz, Angelina Jolie and Billy Bob Thornton. Non-stars get married there, too...including George and Pam Goertler, in 2000!

## Silver Slipper Saloon and Gambling Hall

Opened as part of The Last Frontier Village, the Silver Slipper originally operated for a short time as the Golden Slipper, because there was a Silver Slipper on Boulder Highway. Employees were dressed in Gay 90's attire, with the bartenders wearing striped or checked vests, and the cocktail waitress costumes resembled those of dance-hall girls.

When the Last Frontier Village was dismantled, the Silver Slipper remained open, a small but profitable casino. In 1967 Howard Hughes was living in the penthouse on the top floor of the Desert Inn, across the strip from the Silver Slipper. As the story goes, Howard was afraid that someone was hidden inside the hollow slipper, spying on him. When the owners refused to fill the slipper, Hughes bought the Silver Slipper Casino, and had the revolving slipper sign filled with cement! The slipper revolved no more L.



My first trip to Las Vegas was in 1981. I can remember going to the Silver Slipper and seeing a dusty ol' 1954 Thunderbird, with flat tires, sitting at the front entrance of the casino, under a "WIN ME!" sign. It occurred to me that if no one had won it since 1954, no one was likely to win it now!



Golden Slipper



Casino and bar

## New Frontier Hotel

In August of 1951 Jacob Kozloff was part of a group that bought the Hotel Last Frontier. Kozloff made many changes in the hotel...refurbishing, redecorating and updating the interior to modern contemporary western décor, while retaining the rich flavor of the old west. Most of the Village remained, as it was, an authentic replica of the old west. The exception was the Silver Slipper Theater, which had featured some of the greatest names in show business including Sally Rand, Bela Lugosi, Buster Keaton, Buddy Baer and Slapsy Maxie Rosenbloom.



The new design of the theater-restaurant, which was 120 by 80 feet, was terraced into 12 horseshoe tiers. The general shape of the room was circular and the general effect was that of an amphitheater. The central stage was 33 feet in diameter, with a 30-foot revolving section, with side stages that were 5 by 20 feet. There was also a 38 by 9-foot hydraulic orchestra lift.



The grand opening of the New Frontier Hotel was April 4, 1955, when the “old” and the “new” were joined together. Adjacent to the old west of the Village, the new hotel was the ultimate in contemporary architectural design and interior décor. The exterior was of massive concrete block, integrated with a more delicate brick pattern. The sweeping canopy was cantilevered 70 feet out from the hotel entrance. The entire front was bathed in lights of all colors. As the colors of the front of the hotel changed horizontally, the 126-foot “trilon” changed colors vertically, in what was probably Las Vegas’s first light show.



Venus room



## Frontier Hotel and Casino

The year 1967 brought about another name change and another image change. From the space age New Frontier, to the Frontier Hotel and Casino. About this time, there was concern about hidden ownership and a skimming scheme. Concerned about the possible corruption, authorities encouraged billionaire Howard Hughes to buy the Frontier. Hughes brought in his own people, which resolved any problems.

In 1988 the Elardi family, headed by matriarch Margaret Elardi, bought the Frontier and the Silver Slipper from the Suma Corporation. They tore down the Silver Slipper and replaced it with a parking lot.



security guard, people were even prying the room-number plates off of the doors in the hotel! I wish my husband and I could have been there for a few last pictures and mementos.

The Elardis made changes at the Frontier, cutting back on entertainment and other amenities. They also cut employee wages and benefits, causing 550 of their employees to go on strike starting on September 21, 1991.



This strike was the longest labor walkout in U.S. history, lasting for 2325 days. There was very little support for the Elardis, during the strike. Even other casino owners supported the striking workers. William Bennett, of the Circus Circus, provided hot meals three times a day, to the picketing workers, for free.

It's expected that the Frontier will be imploded in November of 2007.

Elad, which is controlled by billionaire Yitzhak Tshuva, plans to spend \$5 billion to construct a mixed-use development modeled after New York's Plaza Hotel.

To see what the Hotel Last Frontier and the 21 Club Casino looked like, get a copy of the Roy Rogers movie "Heldorado". A lot of it was filmed at the Last Frontier (and the good guy always wins, and the horse gets higher billing than the heroine does!).

Finally, more than six years after the strike started, and after losing a few courtroom confrontations, the Elardis sold the Frontier to Phil Ruffin for \$167 million. Ruffin

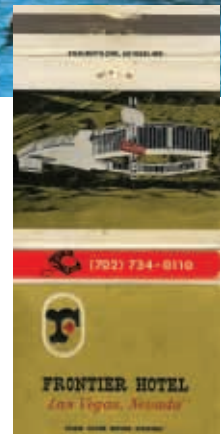


signed contracts with the unions, ending the strike. The name was changed one more time, to The New Frontier.



Nearly ten years later, in May of 2007, Phil Ruffin sold the Frontier to New York based Elad Group for \$1.2 billion.

On July 16, 2007, at 12:01 a.m., an alarm sounded at the New Frontier, signaling the closing of the resort. In the days leading up to the closing, customers and collectors were buying chips, dice, cards and anything else showing the resorts name or the "F" logo. According to a





## Flamingo

The third hotel on the Strip

Billy Wilkerson had big ideas. He was one of the founders of the *Hollywood Reporter*, and he owned night-clubs in Hollywood, but he wanted to build something bigger. He started to build a large hotel on Highway 91, about a mile south of the Last Frontier. Unfortunately for Billy, he ran out of money long before the hotel was completed.

In the late 1930's and early 1940's mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel spent time in and around Las Vegas. Illegal gambling was a cash cow for the mob; there was no reason they shouldn't be involved in Nevada's legal gambling, too. At various times, Bugsy and his associates owned shares of the Northern Club, the Las Vegas Club, the Golden Nugget, the Last Frontier and the El Cortez. They also owned many of the race wires that were used in the casinos.

Bugsy started thinking he might like to own his own resort, and he envisioned an elegant hotel-casino unlike anything in Las Vegas. He knew Billy, and when he learned about Billy's financial problems, Bugsy discussed it with his "business associates", who agreed to finance the desert dream. Billy would retain one-third ownership and operational control. Bugsy would take over the building of the hotel.

Bugsy started out with a bankroll of \$1 million, but that was quickly depleted. Construction materials were hard to find and expensive in the post-war era. It was rumored that truckloads of construction materials that were deliv-



ered by day would disappear over the desert by night...only to be delivered again (and paid for again) the next day! Hey...it was better to collect 2 or 3 times for the same materials than to face the wrath of Bugsy if you didn't have materials to deliver!

Bugsy was eccentric and extravagant. The hotel's thick concrete walls were reinforced with steel. Bugsy's suite, the top floor of the four-story hotel, boasted trap doors and escape hatches, one of which led to a getaway car in his private garage. There were gun portals and halls leading to nowhere, to confuse any unwelcome visitors.



Flamingo boat



Flamingo casino

Bugsy was extravagant on the rest of the hotel too, spending a fortune on luxurious carpeting, elegant fixtures, a lavish swimming pool with scalloped edges, tennis courts, and riding stables. Some say that Bugsy wanted to be a movie star. At the least he enjoyed hanging around with the Hollywood set, including his friend actor George Raft. In building the Flamingo, that was the group that Bugsy hoped to attract. With expenses running high, Bugsy had to go to his associates more than once for additional funding. The final cost of the Flamingo would be over \$6 million...a huge investment in 1946.

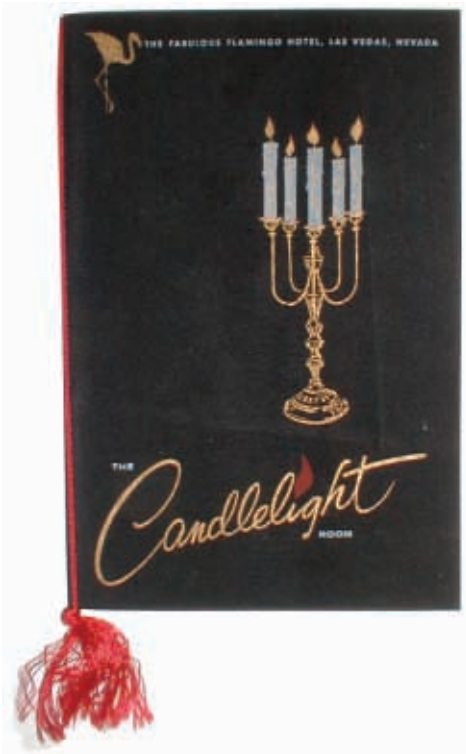
It was rumored that part of the cash was going to Bugsy and his flamboyant girlfriend, Virginia Hill. Virginia was a long-legged redhead, and Bugsy's nickname for her was Flamingo. Many say that he named the resort after her. During the building of the Flamingo, Virginia made several trips to Europe and several cash deposits, totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars, into numbered Swiss bank accounts.

On December 21, 1946, the 40 acres of desert that surrounded the Flamingo were completely barren, except for a few scattered mesquite bushes, or the occasional tumbleweed blowing across the construction site. Then...overnight...truckloads of rich topsoil were brought in to complete a planned terracing of the gardens. Acres of lush green lawn arrived and were laid out, yard by yard to create an emerald green carpet. Date palms from the Orient were lowered into the ground, exotic flowers and shrubs were added. Fifteen varieties of fully-grown trees, including rare cork trees from Spain, completed the spectacular landscaping.

Bugsy opened the Flamingo Casino on December 26, 1946. It was a dismal failure. Bugsy had chartered 2 planes to bring in the Hollywood guests, but the planes were grounded due to severe weather in LA. The dealers wore tuxedos, which fit in perfectly with the elegant casino, but the Las Vegas locals were used to the "come as you are" atmosphere of the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier. The gamblers were winning, and since the hotel rooms weren't finished, they took their winnings and left. In their first two weeks the Flamingo lost \$300,000. Shortly after that, they closed.

Just weeks later, on March 1, 1947, with the hotel completed, the resort re-opened under the name The Fabulous Flamingo, and the second time around was much better





for the casino, they were finally turning a profit. For Bugsy, though, it was too little, too late. His associates had heard about his skimming, and Virginia Hill's deposits in Swiss accounts. Nobody steals from the mob and gets away with it...not even one of their own. Bugsy's execution was ordered.

On June 20, 1947, while he was relaxing with a newspaper in Virginia Hill's Beverly Hills home, Bugsy Siegel was the victim of a mob hit. Shortly thereafter, Moe Sedway and Gus Greenbaum walked into the Flamingo and announced that they were the new bosses.

In the early 1950's, the Flamingo was remodeled at a cost that exceeded \$1 million. The 10-story "Champagne Tower" was added, giving a spectacular view to motorists on highway 91. The tower flashed circles of neon, and could be seen for miles over the flat desert land, a friendly beacon to attract travelers. The tower was demolished in 1968 after Kirk Kirkorian bought the property.

Over the years, the Flamingo underwent many ownership changes. Regardless of who owned her, the Flamingo continued to represent comfort and luxury to the guests. In 1955, it was announced that Albert Parvin was the new president of the Flamingo. In an interview, Parvin stated that the Flamingo had over 500 trained and courteous employees on hand to cater to the guest's every whim. That meant there was approximately one employee for every guest!



Some of the amenities in the rooms were full-length bathroom make-up mirrors, generously built closets, and purified soft water.

In 1957, while performing at the Flamingo, Judy Garland introduced her 11-year-old daughter, Liza Minelli. The mother and daughter performed a duet for the audience. Other stars who graced the Flamingo showroom through the years reads like a "Who's Who?" of entertainment: Steve Allen, Paul Anka, Pearl Bailey, Wayne Newton, Juliet Prowse, Tom Jones, Peggy Lee, Joe E. Lewis, The Supremes, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Ella Fitzgerald, Pat Boone, Bill Cosby, Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, Jimmy Durante, and hundreds more.

In 1970 the Hilton Corporation bought the Flamingo, and soon after they began an ambitious expansion program. Through the 1970's and 1980's they added four new towers, with 500 rooms each. In 1990, preparing to add a 728-room tower, they tore up the rose garden that was part of the original Flamingo—rumored to have been personally planted by Bugsy Siegel. Another expansion, in 1993, required the destruction of the two-story garden-room bungalows that had been built in the 1940's. Also destroyed in the 1993 expansion was the Oregon Building, which was the original Flamingo Hotel, including Bugsy's fourth floor private suite.

While the Flamingo is "still" open today, on the original property, everything that was part of the original Flamingo is gone. In 2003, my husband and I went to the Nevada State Museum, on Twin Lakes Drive, in Lorenzi Park. They had a door on display, with a sign that it had been removed from Bugsy's suite before the Oregon Building was torn down. The number plate on the door said the suite



number was 4400. A club member who specializes in the Flamingo was lucky enough to get a tour of Bugsy's suite shortly before the building was destroyed. He sent me photos that he had taken of the suite, and of the door...which said the suite was number 44000. Sooooo...if that was the original door, where did the original number plate go?



Today there are over 3500 rooms on the Flamingo property, including a time-share tower. The property offers a health spa, wedding chapel, shops, and a car rental agency, two Olympic size swimming pools, four night-lighted tennis courts, and more

The 70,000 square foot casino has a race and sports book, and well over 2000 slot machines. The usual table games are offered, as well as progressive keno, Caribbean Stud Poker and Let it Ride.

I think Bugsy would be pleased.

### Thunderbird Hotel

The fourth hotel on the Strip

In October of 1947 Marion B. Hicks and Clifford Jones invested \$2 million and began constructing the 76-room Thunderbird Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. The Thunderbird was across highway 91, and slightly south of the El Rancho Vegas. Eleven months later, on September 2, 1948, the Thunderbird opened and was financially successful, in spite of losing \$145,000 to lucky craps shooters on opening night.



Named after an ancient Navajo legend "The Sacred Bearer of Happiness Unlimited", the



Thunderbird's cocktail lounge had a western motif, with murals of cowboys, chuck wagons, and cactus. Native American portraits were on the walls of the Wigwam Room and the Navajo Room restaurants.

The focal point of the décor was on the outside of the hotel...the large, stylized neon bird that was perched atop a tower above the casino entrance. A second, smaller, bird was perched on the sign, overlooking the Las Vegas Strip.



By 1950 the Thunderbird had expanded to a total of 206 rooms and a 6-unit bungalow. That still wasn't enough to accommodate all of the prospective guests, so in 1953 a separate 110-unit motel, The Algiers, was built on the property. The Algiers had a restaurant with a bar, and the guests were accorded the full use of the facilities at the Thunderbird, including the swimming pool, which was said to be the largest in Nevada at the time, containing 360,000 gallons of water.

In 1955 The Las Vegas Sun published articles alleging that mobster Meyer Lansky and other underworld characters held hidden interests in the Thunderbird. The tax commission revoked the Thunderbirds license while an investigation was conducted. Hicks and Jones claimed that Hank Greenspun, of the Sun, tried to force them to buy advertising and threatened to shut them down if they didn't.

The hearing revealed





that Meyer Lansky's brother Jake, through a third party, had loaned money to Hicks and Jones. The courts determined that

a loan didn't constitute ownership, and the license was restored. The incident helped lead to more oversight of gambling operations, and the development of the Nevada State Gaming Control Board.

By the 1960's things were changing. Marion Hicks died in 1961, and newer and larger resorts were offering more competition for the tourist dollars. The Thunderbird needed something that would make them stand out in the crowd. Show producer Monte Proser approached Richard Rodgers, of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame, with the idea of presenting a slightly altered version of the Broadway hit *Flower Drum Song*. The show opened at the Thunderbird in December of 1961, and it was a success, which led to more Broadway-style productions hitting the stages in Las Vegas. In 1962 the Riviera presented *Bye, Bye, Birdie*. In 1963 the Thunderbird opened *Anything Goes* and *High-Button Shoes*. In 1967 Caesars Palace added Neil Simon's *Odd Couple* to the entertainment available.

Over the years, contractor Del Webb had been involved in the construction and the ownership of many Las Vegas hotels and casinos. In 1964, purchased by Del Webb for nearly \$10 million, the Thunderbird underwent a major renovation. The room count was raised to 500, and the original birds were replaced with an updated version. The most visible change, however, was the new THUNDERBIRD sign that was added across the front of the building. The sign was 700 feet long, more than three times longer than the Stardust sign!



In 1964 and 1965 the Thunderbird Downs racetrack operated behind the Thunderbird Casino. I've tried to find more information on the track, but so far haven't found much. I've seen a couple of ebay auctions for photos or postcards, but that's about it.

In 1972 Caesars World bought the Thunderbird. They kept the Thunderbird name, but the logo was changed to a bird with outspread wings. Initially, Caesars planned to raze the Thunderbird, and build a new resort in its place. Plans fell through, and Caesars was no longer interested in the Thunderbird. Ownership reverted to the bank that held a \$9 million mortgage on the property.



## Silverbird Hotel & Casino

In 1977 the Thunderbird was sold again, this time to Major Riddle, who had formerly been involved with the Dunes, on the strip, and the Silver Palace in North Las Vegas. Major Riddle (his name, not his rank) changed the name to Silverbird.



## El Rancho

In 1981, Major Riddle sold the Silverbird to veteran casino executive Ed Torres. Torres added a Spanish Mission style front, and built a new tower. He renamed the property the El Rancho, after the first hotel on the Strip. He added a 52-lane bowling center, which included a bar and snack bar.

In spite of Torres's efforts, business at the El Rancho declined and the property closed in 1992.

For many years the El Rancho stood empty and neglected. I can remember seeing a sign on the property, for years, that said "Countryland USA—coming soon!" Countryland never came, nor did any of the other projects proposed for the property.

Finally, in 1999, Turnberry Associates bought the property, which was a major eyesore by that time. They imploded it on October 3, 2000.

# The Las Vegas Strip

## the early years - part 2

by Pam Goertler  
assisted by Brian Cashman

### Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn The fifth resort on the Strip

#### The Players Club

In 1945 Johnny and Mitzi Hughes opened a small, but elegant, club at 3145 Highway 91, in Las Vegas. The Club was called The Players; it was licensed for slots, blackjack and craps. Guests at The Players wore coats and ties, high heels and evening gowns. Wandering musicians provided entertainment in the Orchid Room. *Fuller's Index* shows that Wilbur Clark was the licensed owner of The Players Club as of March 1949, and that the club was closed in 1949.

#### Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn

According to the March 1, 1955 edition of the Las Vegas Review Journal: *"In 1945 when slender, dapper Wilbur Clark stood in the barren desert with a blue-print in his hand and visualized the completion of his dream, he did not know then that it would be five long years before the Desert Inn became a reality."*

Wilbur Clark had been involved in gambling, both legal and illegal, since the 1930's. He worked on gambling boats off the California Coast, then moved on to Saratoga, Reno (Bonanza Club) and Palm Springs. In San Diego, he bought a couple of small bars that had gambling in the back rooms. Like other gambling entrepreneurs of the era, he eventually ended up in Las Vegas.

Clark bought a majority of shares in the El Rancho Vegas in 1944. In 1945 he leased the downtown Northern Club from Mayme Stocker, renaming it the Monte Carlo. He remodeled the Monte Carlo, bringing to it an elegance that wasn't seen in other downtown casinos. The sale of these properties gave Clark the cash to buy out



his partners in the Players Club. He demolished the building to make way for the Desert Inn.

Clark's dream was to build a luxurious, chic resort that would compete with The Flamingo. Construction began in 1947 and, unfortunately for Clark, he ran into the same problem that Billy Wilkerson ran into when The Flamingo was being built...he ran out of money long before construction was complete. The construction site was silent for nearly two years, while Clark tried to raise the funds needed to complete his dream.

#### Moe Dalitz

In 1949 Clark met Moe Dalitz. Dalitz was a former rumrunner from Cleveland, with connections to top figures in organized crime. As head of the Mayfield Road gang, Dalitz also was involved with illegal gambling. Using the profits from his illegal activities, Dalitz invested in legitimate businesses including Detroit Steel Corporation, Pioneer Linen Supply, Liberty Ice Cream Co., Buckeye Catering Co., and several others. Clark sold 74% of the Desert Inn to Dalitz and five of his Cleveland partners. With financing that was secured from





a full house on opening night, in the luxurious Painted Desert Showroom.

### Success

The DI casino, at 2400 square feet, was the largest in Nevada. It offered five craps tables, three roulette wheels, four blackjack tables, and seventy-five slot machines. It employed sixty people. Profits for the DI, in its first week, were \$750,000, including \$90,000 from the bar. During the casino's first year of business, the monthly gross income was \$250,000; net profits in the first year were just under \$2 million. I'm assuming that would be reported income—after any skimming in the count room.

Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn was a success. In spite of the name, however, Clark had very little influence in the day to day operations of the DI. Instead, he and his lovely wife Toni acted as goodwill ambassadors, not only for the DI, but also for Las Vegas. They were constantly visible around the hotel, greeting and chatting with the guests. Clark was often heard on popular radio programs, and was seen on television, always promoting his Desert Inn and Las Vegas. He and Toni dined with dignitaries and politicians, including Senator and Mrs. John F. Kennedy. They were presented to the Pope, in two private audiences, and they were guests at the White House.

### Golf

Moe Dalitz had his own vision for Las Vegas, one in which resort owners worked together to promote Las Vegas as a vacation destination. He tried to get other resort owners to join him in building an 18-hole golf course on the strip. He was rejected and ridiculed by the



other resort owners, who thought it was a foolish idea. In November of 1951, the DI began the project on its own. A few months later, 165 acres of land adjacent to the DI had been cultivated and contoured. Grass and trees were planted; lagoons, sand traps and greens were added, resulting in an attractive 7200-yard course.

the Teamster's Union Central States Pension fund, the Desert Inn was completed in 1950.

Preferring to remain in the background, Dalitz and his Cleveland partners were happy to have Wilbur Clark as a prominent "front man" with his image and name on napkins, match books, menus, place mats, coin cups, chips, tokens and neon signs that boldly proclaimed "Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn".

### Grand Opening

Understanding the importance of publicity, the DI sent Grand Opening invitations to all major newspapers and magazines. They flew the media guests in, at a cost of \$5,700. Clark sent out 150 invitations to high rollers, with \$10,000 credit limits. Moe Dalitz and his partners supplied the names of more dignitaries and gamblers who were invited to the Grand Opening, which was held on April 24, and 25, 1950. About half of the guests on opening night were from Nevada and California, the rest flew in from all parts of the country.

Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, and the Donn Arden Dancers were among the entertainers who played to





In 1953, the DI held its first Annual Tournament of Champions Golf event, to raise money for the Damon Runyon Memorial Fund for Cancer Research. For 13 years this was an annual event on the pro golfer's tour. It was tele-

vised by NBC, giving great publicity to the DI and Las Vegas.

Over the years presidents, including John F. Kennedy and Gerald R. Ford, have played the DI course. Robert Redford, John Elway, George Clooney and Bob Hope are some of the celebrities who have played the course. Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Sam Snead, Lee Trevino, Greg Norman and Nancy Lopez have all won tournaments held on the DI course. Not a bad claim to fame for an idea that was considered foolish those many years ago.

### Skyroom

Another unique feature of the Desert Inn was the Skyroom, billed as a sky-high cocktail lounge. The third-floor lounge was glassed in on 3 sides, and overlooked the figure-8 swimming pool. The room also overlooked the "Dancing Waters", fountains with water rising and falling in time with recorded music, under the glow of colored lights. In the center of the lounge was an oval bar, and there were tables grouped along the glass walls. Against one wall were a number of slot machines. The midnight blue ceiling was set with electric "stars" that twinkled at night.



In the 1950's, assured by the government that there was no danger to Las Vegas from the fallout, atom bombs were tested at Yucca Flats, approximately 75 miles from Las Vegas. Always looking for fun and publicity, casinos would host parties on the roofs so their guests could get a clear view of the mushroom clouds. The Skyroom was another venue from which many Las Vegas, as well as DI guests witnessed the

tests.



### The end of an era

In 1955 Wilbur Clark's health began to suffer. Some say it was caused by unhappiness at what his dream had turned into, or the fear of what questions might come up in an interview. Regardless, he began to remove himself from the public view. In 1956 he suffered a stroke, restricting his moves even more. In 1964 he sold his shares to Dalitz and his associates, and a year later he died from a heart attack.

In the hands of Moe Dalitz, and his general manager Allard Roen (AKA Rosen), the Desert Inn continued to prosper. However, without Clark as a front man, more unwelcome attention was focused on Dalitz and his associates. Las Vegas was beginning to get uncomfortable with the syndicate in control.

### Howard Hughes

Eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes often visited Las Vegas during the 1940's and 1950's. He enjoyed the glamour, and in the evenings would go from one resort to another, often with a lovely lady on his arm. He envisioned what the city could become; predicting that one-day the population would exceed 1 million. That man was far different from the recluse who arrived in Las Vegas on Thanksgiving Day in 1966, taking over the top two floors of the Desert Inn. The floors were reserved for 10 days only, for Hughes and his entourage. Hughes extended his stay. Dalitz was getting irritated; the suites that the Hughes party occupied were normally reserved for high rollers, customers who would lose tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in the casino. Hughes never left his suite, and his entourage didn't gamble. Further, the suites had long been promised to high rollers for the holidays. Hughes told Robert Maheu, his right-hand man, to "handle it". Maheu contacted Teamsters Union President, Jimmy Hoffa, and called in a favor. Hoffa telephoned Dalitz, asking him to let "my friends" stay. That lasted into the new year, then Dalitz began pressuring Maheu again. Maheu finally told Hughes that the only way they could continue to stay at the DI was for Hughes to buy it. He did.



After buying the Desert Inn, Hughes bought the Sands, the Frontier, the Castaways, the Silver Slipper, and the Landmark. Hughes purchasing these casinos meant that the syndicate was on its way out. Hughes brought in his own men, though many of the top management stayed. The inexperience of the Hughes team meant that the skimming could, and did, continue for awhile.

Unbeknownst to the public, Hughes was apparently in the beginning stages of mental illness when he went on his casino-buying spree. He wouldn't leave the top floor of the Desert Inn, with its darkened windows, and it was seldom that he allowed anyone else in his suite. He had a phobia about germs, yet he lived surrounded by his own filth. In 1970, Hughes finally left the Desert Inn on a stretcher, and was taken to the Bahamas. He died on a plane enroute to Houston in 1976, at the age of 70. The cause of death was reportedly kidney failure, but he was malnourished and dehydrated, and pieces of hypodermic needles were found in his skeletally thin arms. What a sad ending for one of the wealthiest men in the world. His Summa Corporation continued to own the DI until 1987.

Before his death, Hughes had approved an expansion and remodel of the Desert Inn. On July 4, 1978, the DI had a grand re-opening. Over 300,000 tourists and Las Vegas residents watched the desert sky blaze with the largest fireworks display the town had seen.



Wayne Newton had signed the richest and longest-term entertainment contract in the history of Las Vegas. He welcomed the guests to the new Crystal Room, but then, after singing a few songs, he collapsed on stage.

Suffering from the flu, he was carried off the stage on a stretcher and he was hospitalized for two days. For those two days Joan Rivers, Robert Goulet, Nipsey Russell, Doc Severinsen and Dave Barry filled in.

### Vega\$

Even if you never visited the Desert Inn, you may be familiar with its casino and pool area. Many scenes from the 1978-1981 television series, *Vega\$*, were filmed there. Robert Urich played Private Investigator Dan Tanna. Tanna drove around Las Vegas in a 1957 T-bird, taking care of problems for Phillip Roth (Tony Curtis), the casino manager at the Desert Inn casino. Tourists were sometimes able to watch the scenes being filmed, and some were even selected to be 'extras' if a crowd scene was being shot. Long before he was my husband, my husband was at the DI when the show was being filmed. He was able to take a couple of pictures of Robert Urich by the swimming pool, and his daughter was picked to be an extra for the day! He says that she felt like a movie star! Unfortunately, when the episode was shown, they weren't able to pick her out of the crowd...but they knew she was there!



### More owners

In 1987 Summa Corporation sold the Desert Inn to Kirk Kerkorian and his Tracinda Corporation. The name was changed to the MGM Desert Inn.

In 1993 the Tracinda Corporation sold the DI to ITT-Sheraton for \$160 million. A \$200 million renovation and expansion was completed in 1997. The renovation actually reduced the number of rooms from 821 to 715, in order to offer more comfortable accommodations. The Augusta and St. Andrews towers as well as the casino and all public areas were renovated. The Palm Tower, Grand Lobby Atrium, Starlight Lounge and Villas Del Lago were all added, as well as a new Golf Shop and Country Club.

In 1998 Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide bought ITT, acquiring the DI as part of the package. Starwood immediately put the resort up for sale as it was losing money.



In May 1999, Sun International Hotels, Ltd. bought the DI for \$275 million.



On March 2, 2000, Sun International announced that it was pulling out of the agreement to buy the resort from Starwood. They agreed to pay up to \$15 million to Starwood if the resort didn't sell for the originally agreed upon \$275 million.

### DI turns 50

On April 24, 2000, the Desert Inn turned 50 years old and had a weeklong celebration. Festivities began with a celebrity golf tournament on the championship course. Some of the celebrities were Susan Anton, Robert Urich, Vincent Van Patten, Tony Curtis and Rip Taylor. A time capsule was buried on April 25, 2000, to be opened on April 25, 2050.



### Steve Wynn

On April 28, 2000, Steve Wynn bought the Desert Inn for \$270 million. Just four months later, at 2:00 a.m. on August 28, the Desert Inn closed her doors.

The Desert Inn was imploded, in stages, to be replaced by the upscale Wynn resort. The first implosion was the Augusta Tower, which went down on October 23, 2001.

The Palms and St. Andrews towers were imploded on November 16, 2004.

## WYNN

The Wynn resort opened on April 28, 2005, just 4 days after the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn, and exactly five years after Steve Wynn bought the DI.

At a cost of \$2.7 billion, the 50-story curved tower, covered in bronze glass, has 2,716 rooms. Of the rooms, 2,359 are standard rooms at 620 square feet; there are 270 parlor and salon suites, 45 executive suites, 36 fairway villas, and six 7,000 square foot private entry villas.

The 111,000 square feet of casino space offers 137 table games, 1,960 slot machines, a race and sports book, a keno lounge, a baccarat room and a poker room.

If a guest is hungry, there are 18 restaurants and bars, six of them overseen by renowned celebrity chefs.

The 76,000 square feet of retail space includes a Ferrari-Maserati dealership.

The Desert Inn golf course was retained, though completely redesigned by architect Tom Fazio. It was available to hotel guests only, and the cost per round of golf was \$500.

Currently Steve Wynn is building the second phase of his resort, and is calling it "Encore". I'm not sure if the golf course survived this expansion.

My husband and I went to Wynn. Once. It's beautiful, it's huge, and it's elegant. I miss the much smaller Desert Inn, where I once went around a carousel of slot machines and played every one of them just one time...just to see how many would pay off. Most of them did. J

## Where'd Moe go?

Moe Dalitz died in 1989. At the time of his death he was a prominent member of the community, known for his charitable and philanthropic contributions.

## The Sahara

### The sixth resort on the Strip

## Club Bingo

On July 24, 1947, the Club Bingo opened on the corner of Highway 91 and San Francisco Avenue, across the highway from the El Rancho Vegas. Milton Prell built the

club on land that was owned by Mel D. Close, Sr. The sign on the outside of the building featured a large neon bingo card, and the inside of the club featured a 300-seat bingo parlor. In addition, the club was licensed for slots, blackjack, craps and roulette. On opening night Club Bingo raffled off a brand new Cadillac, the lucky winner was a gentleman who owned a hamburger stand.

In the evening, Las Vegans often ran into friends and neighbors while enjoying drinks served by the friendly bartenders at the club. In the morning, the club served the best 49-cent breakfast around. It wasn't long before Prell added the Bonanza Room, for entertainment and dancing. What Club Bingo didn't have was a hotel.

## The Sahara

In 1952, Mel Close sold the land under Club Bingo to Milton Prell, Al Winter, and a group of investors from Portland, Oregon. Deciding that a hotel was needed, the group solicited backing from Texas financier A. Pollard Simon. Finding that their financing was still short, the group contacted contractor Del Webb, who agreed to build





the new hotel at, or near, cost in exchange for 20% interest.

On October 7, 1952, the Sahara opened. The theme of the property was African, with statues of camels in front of the hotel. The Congo Room was decorated with statues of Arabs; The Caravan Room restaurant and the Casbar Lounge overlooked the swimming pool. The lobby and casino were in the front of the main building, with restaurants in the rear overlooking the two-story room wings. The wings held 206 rooms, each with a balcony or patio. Prell dubbed his new creation “The Jewel in the Desert”, perhaps in tribute to his previous occupation—he was a jeweler.



### Dining and Entertainment

The Congo Room was promoted as “*Breathtaking... Spectacular... Unique... artistically designed as the nation’s most beautiful room*”. Booths and tables were triple-tiered, and positioned to provide an unobstructed view of the elaborate stage from every seat. The Congo Room offered an international selection of menus, with each menu giving a wide variety of selections to satisfy the food whims of the most discriminating diner.

The Caravan Room was surrounded by large picture windows, which overlooked Las Vegas’ largest swimming pool, and the Garden of Allah, with its lush vegetation.

The heated pool, holding over 200,000 gallons of water, was built to meet official Olympic specifications. The Caravan room was open, for delicious meals, from early morning until midnight.

The Casbar Lounge (“*we know it’s spelled wrong*”) was a cocktail lounge that served the finest liquors in an atmosphere of romance, soft lights, and delightful musical entertainment.

### That’s Entertainment

The Riviera, in Fort Lee, New Jersey, was a swank club with illegal gambling upstairs. When World War II started, the club closed. Bill Miller bought it in 1945, renamed it “Bill Miller’s Riviera”, and reopened without gambling. After struggling for the first year, the club became successful. According to Miller, Sinatra played there, as did Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Jerry Lewis, and Sammy Davis Jr. with the Will Mastin Trio. In 1953 Bill Miller’s Riviera was closed, and a highway was built through the property.



Milton Prell called Bill Miller and invited him to join the Sahara group. Miller bought a 10% interest in the property and was named entertainment director. The first act that he booked at the Sahara was Ray Bolger, best





known as the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*. Bolger was popular as a dancer, but he didn't have a nightclub act. Miller put together a variety show, with Bolger acting as emcee and performing his dance routines between the other acts.

### Louis Prima and Keely Smith

In 1954 Miller received a call from Louis Prima, a gravel-voiced vocalist and trumpeter whose arrangements combined swing, Dixieland jazz, Italian folk songs and comedy. Louis' wife, Keely Smith, was pregnant, they had no job and no prospects, and they were broke. Could Miller use them and their small group? Miller said he could use them...in the lounge. When Louis hesitated, Miller assured him that they would make more money than they ever had before. Louis asked when they had to be there, "In six days" replied Miller.

While Keely packed, Louis contacted the members of their group. They left New York in a caravan of cars. Being pregnant, Keely got sick from time to time, and the

entire caravan would come to a stop 'til she recovered. They finally reached Las Vegas.

On November 24, 1954, Prima and Smith opened in the lounge at the Sahara. There were virtually no lights on the stage, just a tiny spotlight for the performer to stand under. The service bar for the waitresses was right in front of the stage. Waitresses yelling out drink orders in the middle of a number often interrupted the show. The song would stop, Prima would ask the waitress if she was done then, receiving an affirmative answer, the song would pick up right where it left off. After a few days of that, Prima told Milton Prell that it just wasn't going to work. The next day the service bar was moved to the far end of the bar, away from the stage.

In 1954 the lounge was wide open. A man gambling in the casino could look over and see his wife in the lounge, while she enjoyed a drink and listened to a few songs. Prima and Smith, however, didn't just play music; they put on a show. According to Bill Miller "...there was no one, ever, in the history of show business, that did the business that this man [Louis Prima] did from midnight until 6 in the morning. You could not get into that club."



Keely Smith says the crowds were so large that the room had to be enclosed. Drapes were put up to help muffle the sound, but the show was still louder than the pit bosses, dice tables and slot machines.



Eventually the lounge was enclosed with glass. They did five shows a night, from midnight to 6 a.m., eventually out-drawing the main showroom. Their engagement at the Sahara lasted for six years.

As of 1999, Keely Smith was still performing, and a portion of her show was dedicated to Louis Prima.

### Expansions

As the Sahara gained in popularity, it needed to add more rooms to accommodate all the guests.

The Bank of Las Vegas opened in 1954, and shortly after that banker E. Parry Thomas was assigned to work there. Parry had the vision to see what Las Vegas was becoming, and knew that he and the bank could be a part of the growth.



Del Webb continued an aggressive expansion plan, adding a 24-story skyscraper (at the time, the tallest in the state) with 400 rooms, which brought the Sahara to over 1000 rooms. Webb also added a 44,000 square foot convention facility and a parking lot with spaces for over 3000 cars.

Paul and Sue Lowden purchased the Sahara from Webb in 1982, and in 1988 added a 26-story tower, expanded the casino, and added a new race and sports book.



In 1995, Bill Bennett bought the Sahara from the Lowdens for \$193 million. Bennett immediately began a \$100 million renovation project, which included remodeling the Casbar Lounge and 1,720 hotel rooms. After Bennett passed away the Sahara was put up for sale, in 2007 it was sold to SBE Entertainment Group and Stockbridge Real Estate

Funds.

### The Telethon

While not as well known as the Desert Inn, and not as popular as the Sands, the Sahara still made its marks in the history of Las Vegas. Hundreds of top stars played there, especially every Labor Day from 1973 through 1981. That's the years that the Sahara played host to Jerry Lewis's annual Labor Day Telethon, to raise money for Muscular Dystrophy. The telethon started in New York in 1954, as a 4-hour local event. Over the years it grew, and in 1973 it moved to Las Vegas, to the Sahara. Coincidentally (or not?) that's also the first year that the telethon raised over \$10 million. One of the more memorable moments in telethon history was in 1976, when frequent telethon guest Frank Sinatra escorted a grinning Dean Martin onto the stage as a surprise to Jerry Lewis. Memorable because it was the first time that the comedy team of Martin and Lewis were together again, after a much-publicized break up so many years before.



### NASCAR

In the spring of 2000, Sahara teamed up with NASCAR Café to bring the entertainment complex to Las Vegas. The 75,000 square-foot Café featured stock car racing entertainment and an All-American menu. The NASCAR theme included giant projection television screens, equipped with surround sound, that feature NASCAR racing, driver profiles and the latest NASCAR news.

In 1955, Parry Thomas and the Bank of Las Vegas loaned the Sahara \$750,000 for additional rooms and improvements. That was the first time a bank loaned money to a casino. Prior to that, the casino owners had to rely on whatever cash they could come up with, either privately or by taking in partners who often had connections to organized crime.

In the mid-1950's, Las Vegas finally began building upward, and in 1959 the Sahara added a 14-story tower, with 200 rooms. The tower was constructed on the far side of the swimming pool, and was patterned with windows and balconies. There was a digital time and temperature board on top of the tower, capped with a stylized "S". The expansion also included a convention center and a 127-foot vertical roadside sign, by YESCO.



In 1961 Milton Prell sold the Sahara to Del Webb, who arranged a merger between his construction company and the Sahara-Nevada Corporation. The merger also included Prell's downtown Mint and Lucky Strike Clubs. Prell continued to operate the Sahara until 1964.

The NASCAR Café also features “Speed”, the roller coaster, and a Cyber Speedway with 24 stock car racing simulators, a state-of-the-art arcade and various race memorabilia.

### Movies

The 1951 movie *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine* featured the interior of the Club Bingo.

Much of the 1960 *Ocean’s 11* movie was filmed at The Sahara, in addition to the Riviera, Desert Inn, Sands and Flamingo.

The 1986 movie *Stripper* had scenes filmed at The Sahara and Imperial Palace.

The 1956 movie *Meet me in Las Vegas* had scenes from The Sahara.

### The Sands

#### The seventh resort on the Strip

#### La Rue Restaurant and Casino

Remember Billy Wilkerson? You know, the man who really started building The Flamingo—even though Ben “don’t call me Bugsy” Siegel usually gets all the credit. In part one of this article, the segment on The Flamingo, the last thing I said about Billy was “*Billy would retain one-third ownership and operational control.*” That was the plan, but that’s not exactly what happened...

Billy might have been muscled out of the Flamingo, or he might have been bought out, or maybe he just got tired of dealing with Ben Siegel’s idiosyncrasies and temper tantrums.



Whatever happened, Billy was out of the Flamingo, but he still wanted a club in Las Vegas. In December of 1950, Billy Wilkerson opened LaRue Restaurant and Casino, possibly with Jack LaRue and/or Nola Hahn as partners. LaRue was on Highway 91, between the Desert Inn and the Flamingo; it was licensed for slots, blackjack, craps and roulette.

Along comes Max Kufferman, who wants to build a resort on the Las Vegas Strip. He buys LaRue from Billy Wilkerson, but he can’t get a license from the Nevada Gaming Board. He allegedly sells LaRue to Jake Freedman (sometimes spelled Friedman) and his partners

Jack Entratter, Carl Cohen, and Ed Levinson.

### The Sands

In 1952, Freedman and his partners brought in architect Wayne McAllister to design the new resort. Rather than building from the ground up, McAllister’s design remodeled and added on to LaRue. In August, Freedman went before the gaming board and applied for his casino license. Initially he was denied a license, because of his association with Max Kufferman, but eventually was able to convince the board that he wasn’t a front for Kufferman. Freedman had intended the property to open in late October or early November, but the licensing problems delayed the opening.

Finally the license was issued, the 200 luxurious rooms were ready, and the invitations went out. The world premiere of the Sands would be Monday, December 15, 1952. In the fabulous Copa room would be Danny Thomas, Connie Russell, Lou Wills, Jr., Ray Sinatra and his orchestra, and of course, “the Most Beautiful Girls in the West”. Present at the Grand Opening were 146 newspapermen

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 Tommy Doyle

**The Sands**  
 LAS VEGAS, NEVADA



and special guests including Esther Williams, Fernando Lamas, Arlene Dahl and Terry Moore. Each was presented with a chamois bag that was filled with newly minted silver dollars.

Similar to what happened on opening night at the Flamingo, in her first 8 hours the Sands lost over \$200,000. Unlike the Flamingo, within the next 16 hours or so, the Sands won it all back.

The guestrooms were in five two-story motel-type buildings; each named after a racetrack for thoroughbreds. The buildings were arranged in a semicircle around the swimming pool. In one corner of the large rectangular main building was the reception desk, slot machines were arranged on one long wall, a bar and cocktail lounge were on the opposite wall. Three stairs led down to the casino.

### Entertainment

Jack Entratter and Carl Cohen came to Las Vegas from New York, where both were associated with the world famous Copacabana Night Club. Entratter was named entertainment director of The Sands, and there was no one better for the position than he. He'd worked with all of the top stars of the day, and he brought all of them to the Copa Room, including Lena Horne, Danny Thomas, Judy Collins, Tallulah Bankhead, Rosemary Clooney, Peter Lind Hayes & Mary Healy, Bobby Darin, Jerry Lewis, and Vic Damone.

### The Rat Pack

Thanks in large part to Entratter's celebrity line up, the Sands was established as the 'IN' place to go in Las Vegas. Out of the hundreds of stars featured at the Sands, there were five that were famous individually, but together they were legendary, described by Paul Anka as "the greatest, cool, hippest entertainers around..." The Rat Pack.




**Frank Sinatra** was the Leader of the Pack. In addition to his incredible singing voice, he won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for the film *From Here to Eternity*. He would gamble, chase women and drink until dawn, and do it all with boyish charm and sophistication. Frank's first appearance at the Sands was October 7, 1953.

**Dean Martin** was dark and handsome, a ladies man. He could croon a tune, or toss back a martini with equal style. He'd been one-half of the Martin & Lewis comedy team, but they split up in 1957 and Dean began working in the nightclubs as a solo act. Dean was headlining at the Sands in January 1959, when Frank joined him on the stage for the first time. A reviewer reported that the pair put on one of the best shows ever seen at the Sands.

**Sammy Davis, Jr.** was the sensational young performer from the Will Mastin Trio,

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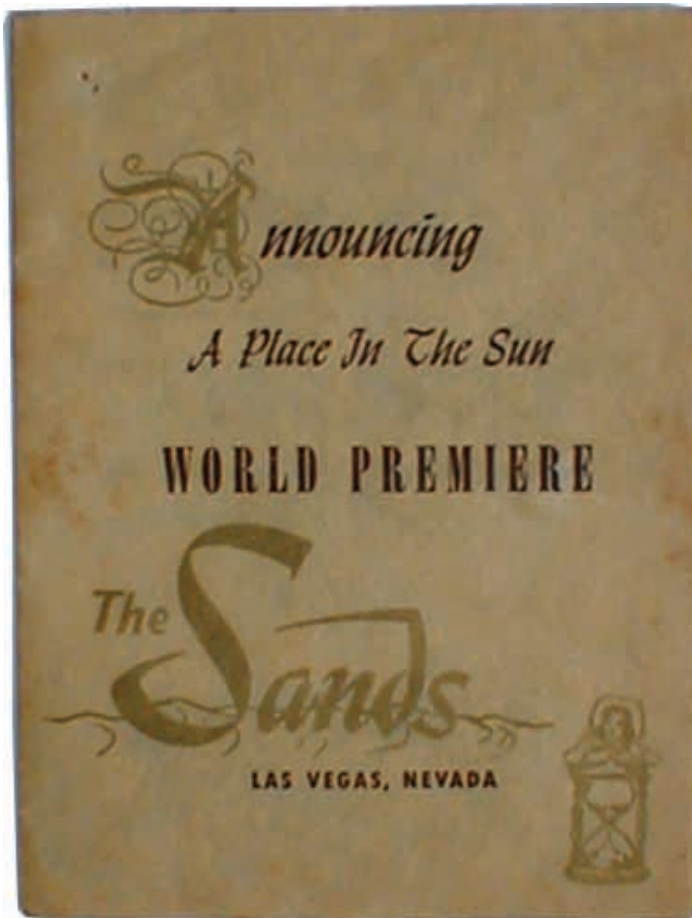
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which had included his father and his uncle. He was an awesome singer and dancer, perhaps the best all-around entertainer of the group.

**Joey Bishop** was the straight-man, and the best comic of the group. He'd been working as an opening act, and when he joined The Rat Pack as a warm-up he wrote many of the "improvised" routines that were performed on stage.

**Peter Lawford** was an actor and entertainer, but he was also John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law and Sinatra wanted to be part of Kennedy's inner circle. Sinatra's nickname for Peter was "Brother-in-Lawford".

In the non-politically correct 1950's and 1960's, there was no subject that the group wouldn't joke about...race, religion, politics, and of course drinking. Part of the nightly routine included rolling a bar cart onto the stage, and making regular trips to it for a refill. One of their most widely reported comic bits has Dean (after Joey Bishop whispered the idea in his ear) picking up Sammy Davis Jr., and carrying him to then-Senator John F. Kennedy, who was in the audience. Dean drops Sammy into



the Senator's lap, announcing "Here you are, Mr. Senator, the NAACP sent this award over for you." The audience burst into gales of laughter.

The original *Ocean's 11* movie was produced in 1960. The movie starred all of the members of the Rat Pack; in fact the movie was produced by Sinatra's own Dorchester Productions, as a way for the group to work together. The filming took place in Las Vegas from January 26 through February 16, 1960, and the Rat Pack used The Sands as their playground. They did two shows a night in the Copa Room then headed for the lounge where they often ended up on stage again. After a few hours of sleep, it was back to the movie set for whoever had early scenes scheduled. Around 5:00 p.m., they'd all meet in the steam room.

Those few weeks in the 1960's were pure magic. With all the publicity that ensued, those weeks defined the image of Las Vegas in the minds of the nation. During February, the hotel received 18,000 reservation requests for its two hundred hotel rooms.

A&E did a marvelous set of four VCR tapes on the history of Las Vegas. Not only are there great old shots of the Strip, in its early days, there are also clips of The Rat Pack doing their show at the Sands. Get the tapes, you won't be disappointed.



These days the Las Vegas Strip itself is the attraction. The casino architecture is 'over the top', the casinos are huge, the shopping is incredible. There are stars in town, but if they're not hiding from public view, they can still be lost just because of the size of the town. In the 1950's and 1960's The Strip was a two lane road, the casinos were smaller and more personal, and you just might run into your favorite star out in the casino. While Jack Entratter discouraged the Copa Room stars from playing in the casino ("If they lose, they might hate me and say no the next time I want to book them"), he encouraged them to hang around the casino and even deal a few hands. Of course, when they dealt everybody won, so the customers loved it.

### Money

The Sands management understood the concept of spending money to make money. In the first six months, Jack Entratter spent \$1 million on entertainment. In the early years, Frank Sinatra alone was paid \$15,000 a week. But

when Frank was in town, there was money to be had. Frank knew all the big money people, and many Hollywood Celebrities would fly in to see him perform. The Copa Girls were the highest paid showgirls in town, described as luscious dolls in sumptuous costumes, everyone wanted to see them and to be seen with them.

Guests at the New Year's Eve party in 1954 were supposed to pay \$25 each. Instead, they were all comped, which cost the Sands approximately \$100,000. I don't know when the tradition started, but for years, on New Year's Eve, The Sands gave their guests velvet bags filled with silver dollars. We bought one that was from New Year's Eve 1965, and we once saw a framed display of about 25 of the bags in an array of colors, all from different years.

Another item that the Sands gave out in an array of colors was their logo coffee mugs. There were free coupons available all over the place, and if you didn't happen to



have a coupon, an out of state driver's license would work. We didn't spend a lot of time at the Sands, but we did visit it on almost every trip to Las Vegas. Hey...we had to get our free coffee mugs! Plus, I always liked to kick off my sandals and wiggle my toes in the lush

green lawn (probably more than you needed to know...sorry!)

### Frank leaves the Sands

Frank Sinatra was a star. As I said before, when he was in town there was money to be had. He knew it, the casinos knew it, and he knew that the casinos knew it. Consequently, when he made a request, regardless of what it was, the standard answer was "Of course, Mr. Sinatra. And is there anything else I can do for you...?"

Thus, on September 11, 1967, Mr. Sinatra was not a happy man when his request for credit was denied. Various sources don't agree on the amount of credit that was requested, or who made the decision to deny Mr. Sinatra's request. They do agree, however, that an unhappy Frank went in search of Carl Cohen, Vice President of the Sands. Frank (approximately 155 pounds) found Carl (close to 300 pounds) seated in the coffee shop. There was a lot of yelling and swearing, then Frank picked up a chair and threw it at Carl. Carl takes that kind of abuse

from *no one*, regardless of their star status. Carl took a swing at Frank, and knocked him to the ground, also knocking the caps off of his two front teeth. Frank's bodyguard (!) Jilly Rizzo helped him up and back to his suite. They packed up, then headed for McCarren Airport and a flight back to Frank's home in Bel Air. The casino found Alan King to replace Frank for the two shows he was scheduled to do that night.

Jack Entratter was right, the Copa Room stars shouldn't gamble at the Sands.

### Changes

In late 1965 there was a groundbreaking for the distinctive 17 story cylindrical tower, which would add 777 rooms. Most of The Strip was still low-rise, so the new tower would stand out as a landmark, like the Stratosphere tower does today.

On July 22, 1967, Howard Hughes (Summa Corporation) bought The Sands for \$14.6 million. In 1981, financial advisors advised Summa to sell the property. The Inns of the Americas (later known as Pratt Corporation) bought the property, enlarged the casino, and remodeled the porte cochere. Pratt Corporation ran into severe financial problems, and Summa repossessed the property.

In 1988 Kirk Kerkorian bought The Sands, and renamed it the MGM Sands. Just a few months later he sold it to the Interface Group for \$110 million. That sale was finalized in April of 1989.

### The End

Fifty-five years after the first hotel was built on the Strip, the one thing that was constant was change. Virtually all of the resorts, as they aged, lost business to the newer and larger resorts that continued to be built. The Sands was no exception...she was in a decline. No matter who owned her, no matter what improvements were made, she just couldn't keep up with the newer, larger properties. In 1996, the decision was made to close the doors. Once the announcement was made, the reservations phone lines couldn't keep up. There were thousands of people who wanted to stay there one last time, to remember the good times they'd had, to reminisce with others who were also there for one last time.



Shortly after 6:00 p.m., on June 30, 1996, after Bob Stupak rolled the dice one last time, the Sands turned off her lights, and closed her doors...but not quite forever. The Sands got one last chance to be seen, in all her glory, near the end of the film *Con-Air*. Her lights were turned back on and she was painted and polished. Slot machines were brought in and set up. Her brief revival comes to an end when a plane crashes into her. Filming finished, the actors leave. The crew packs up and leaves. There's no more action at the Sands.

At 2:00 a.m. on November 26, 1996, the Sands was imploded.

### The Venetian

On May 3, 1999, the \$1.5 billion dollar mega-resort, the Venetian opened for business on the former site of the Sands. The 35 story Venetian opened with 3,036 rooms on 1.7 million square feet of property.

The Venetian was the Strip's first all-suites hotel. The spacious 700 square-foot suites feature plush private bed-chambers, an oversized 130 square-foot bathroom finished in Italian marble, and a sunken living room area.

What the Venetian doesn't have is legends-no Copa Girls, no Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin. Shoot, they don't even have free coffee mugs...do they?

### The Royal Nevada The eighth resort on the Strip

**“Royal Nevada Group Say Three ‘Undesirables’ Out of Hotel!”** exclaimed the article on the front page of the Las Vegas Review-Journal on March 1, 1955. The article went on to explain that Florida attorney Herman Kohen, a partner in the lavish Royal Nevada Hotel, told the tax commission that financier Frank Fishman, and gamblers Herbert Manheim and Sam Miller “are out unequivocally, without reservation and permanently.”

In February, the tax commission had labeled the three as “undesirable” as Nevada gambling license holders; the Royal Nevada would not receive a license unless the three were bought out.

Kohen then explained to the commission that Manheim and Miller had been bought out completely. Fishman, however, wanted another \$200,000 from the remaining partners. As the leaseholder, he was holding notes in that amount. The notes however, were intended to be paid back after 10 years. Kohen told the commission that if



forced to pay that debenture to Fishman, he would be getting \$290,000 out of the venture...but had only put in \$90,000. Besides, the remaining partners didn't have the money.

### The Opening

Apparently the problems were taken care of, and on the evening of April 18, 1955, the Royal Nevada hosted a pre-opening party for soldiers from the Nevada atomic testing grounds with a special dinner. On April 19, 1955, the Royal Nevada formally opened for business, with 250 rooms. The soldiers were in evidence again, this time assisting in one of the opening ceremonies...a showgirl dropped the key to the Hotel's door down the barrel of a cannon, and the soldiers set the cannon off, shooting the key into the desert sky. The headline entertainer on opening night was opera star “Queen of the Met” Helen Traubel, singing in the hotel's beautiful Crown Room.

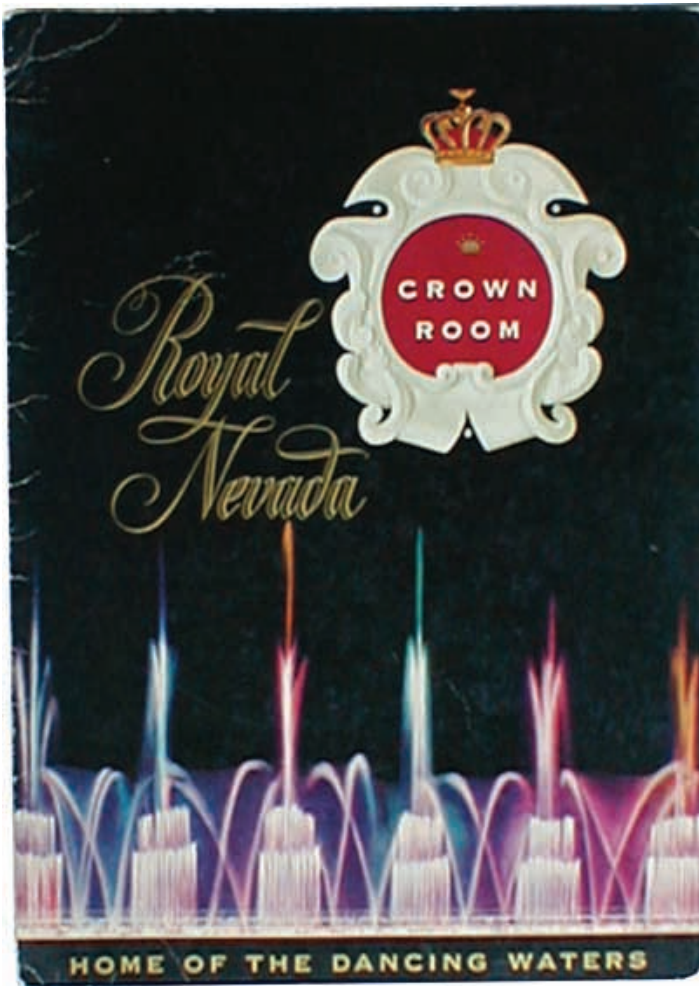
The Hotel itself had a central structure, which was topped by a large neon trimmed crown. A gracefully curved low-rise wing flared out from each side of the structure. On the front of the structure was a fountain-like sculpture, formed from curved neon tubing. Inside the



Hotel were a “Dancing Waters” fountain show, The Luau Room, the Cabaret Lounge and the Palm Room. Bud Harris opened the Strip's largest gift shop in the resort, it featured imported, domestic and western items. We have a decorative Staffordshire plate that pictures a group of people around a roulette wheel. The caption on the plate reads “Playing Roulette, Las Vegas, Nevada”. There's a sticker on the back from the Royal Nevada Gift Shop.

### Entertainment

One of the featured lounge acts was the Dukes of Dixieland—which included Liberace's brothers Frank and



Fred. The showroom featured a shortened version of the Broadway smash *Guys and Dolls*, which reunited its original Broadway stars; Robert Alda (father of television star Alan Alda), Vivian Blaine and Sam Levene.

### Problems

After being open for only eight months, more problems arose at the Royal Nevada. On January 1, 1956, the resort closed its doors after the culinary union tried to collect \$25,000 in back wages that it said were owed.

Bill Miller had been the publicist at the Sahara Hotel, but was also an investor in the Royal Nevada. When the Royal Nevada closed, he left the Sahara. In March of 1956, the resort reopened as Bill Miller's Royal Nevada, with T.W. "Rich" Richardson as president, W.A. Simonds and Bucky Harris as managers. The resort's new motto was "A wonderful where in Las Vegas."

I'm not sure, but the resort might have closed again in 1956, or maybe it just underwent a renovation. I found an article indicating that on February 3, 1957, the bistro and



casino were newly opened. In 1957, for the first time, "all you can eat prime rib" was introduced to a strip's Chuckwagon buffet, at the Royal Nevada, and the cost was \$1.50.

The resort continued to struggle, and in March of 1958 the Royal Nevada closed for good. Some say it was a result of a weak economy, combined with the building boom on the Strip (The Riviera opened 2 days after the Royal Nevada, The Dunes opened in May, and the popular Moulin Rouge opened on the West Side in June). There have also been rumors that the gamblers broke the bank. Whatever the reason, the Royal Nevada had made its last comeback.

### "Stardust South"

In 1959, the crown came down from the building and the Stardust took over the property. The casino and most of the showroom became the Stardust's convention center. The motel wing became the pool wing for the Stardust. The wing was usually used for high rollers and showgirls. The pool was more secluded than the Stardust's Big Dipper pool, so it was the pool of choice for the showgirls who liked to swim in the nude to avoid tan lines.



On June 1, 2006, the Royal Nevada wing of the Stardust closed for good, and now it's gone. Eventually the ground that it stood on will be under a tiny portion of the gi-normous *Echelon Place* project that is currently under construction.

### The Riviera The ninth resort on the Strip

Back in Chicago, in 1931, David, Meyer and Lou Gensburg started a small business, manufacturing pinball

and other amusement games. As their business, Genco, Inc., grew, their father told them to use whatever money was available and buy real estate. They bought hundreds of parcels of land in northwest Chicago, including many corner lots with stores and apartments on them. Post-depression, the property was cheap, but the values were rapidly rising.

In 1952, the Strip was approximately 3 miles long. The Sahara and El Rancho Vegas were at the northern end, the Flamingo was at the southern end; the Thunderbird, the Sands, the Last Frontier, and the Desert Inn were scattered between them. Between the resorts there were restaurants, gas stations, and other small businesses...and lots of empty desert land. So, when the Gensburg brothers decided that they wanted to build a big casino in Las Vegas, there were plenty of empty parcels for them to choose from. The property they decided on was between the Thunderbird and the Desert Inn. The new resort was to be called the Casa Blanca.

### Licensing

Charles “Charley the Blade” Tourine (AKA Charles White), and William Bishoff (AKA Lefty Clark, of the Detroit Syndicate) were named on the original license application, along with the Gensburg brothers. Bishoff had been associated with Meyer Lansky, running casinos in Havana. Tourine had also been a casino manager in Havana. Shortly before the Nevada Tax Commission meeting, where the gambling license would be granted (or not), realizing that he wasn’t likely to be approved, Tourine removed his name from the application. The tax commission refused to license Bishoff, so the project was delayed.



In September of 1953 a new application was submitted to the commission. The proposed resort name was changed to The Riviera; among others, the list of applicants included the three Gensburg brothers, and Harpo (Arthur) and Gummo (Milton) Marx, of the Marx Brothers comedy group. This time the application was approved and construction of the Riviera began in 1954.



### The Opening

Before the Riviera, the Desert Inn’s Skyroom was the tallest building on the Strip, at three stories. Some designers believed that the sandy desert floor wouldn’t support a high-rise building. The Riviera, designed by Miami based architect Roy France and Son, topped out at nine stories. Luckily for the guests staying



in the 291 rooms, the Riviera boasted the first elevators on the Strip. The casino had 18 table games, and 116 slot machines.

At 10,000 square feet, the Clover Room Theater was the largest showroom on the Strip. The room could seat 523 people for the dinner show, and 700 people for the second show.

The Grand Opening, the most lavish that Las Vegas had seen to date, was on April 21, 1955. Joan Crawford was the official hostess; being paid \$10,000 plus her room and meals, for four days of greeting the Riviera’s guests. The headliner in the Clover Room was Liberace...at a previously unheard of salary of \$50,000 a week! (For comparison, remember that this was around the time that the

Sands was paying Frank Sinatra \$15,000 a week! Just a few years earlier, Liberace played at the Last Frontier for \$750 a week!) “He was the hottest name in show business, at the time” mused Tony Zoppi, the Riviera’s vice president in charge of entertainment and publicity. What did Liberace have to say about opening night at the Riv? “It was one of the great nights in my career. When the curtain went up, the ovation was tremendous. So was my bank account from that day forward.” There was also a 32-piece orchestra, conducted by George Liberace.



### Bankrupt

Like the Royal Nevada, the Riviera ran into problems right from the start. This nationwide period of recession in 1955 was the only time in postwar history that the availability of hotel rooms greatly exceeded the number of visitors. Also, with Tourine and Bishoff out of the picture, no one in the group of investors had any experience running a casino...hotels, yes, but not a large casino.



no. In July of 1955, the Riviera declared bankruptcy. Gensbro Hotel Corporation, the property owners, stepped in and immediately started looking for new operators. They turned to Tony Accardo, who was high up in the Chicago Mob, for help. Tony knew just who to contact.

### Gus Greenbaum

Back in 1947, just a couple of hours after Bugsy Siegel was killed, three men walked into the Flamingo and announced “We’re the new bosses.” The three men were Gus Greenbaum, Moe Sedway and Morrie Rosen. Greenbaum was in charge of the Flamingo for the next eight years, and he ran the place at a profit...there was plenty for The Boys to skim, and still show a large enough profit to keep the taxmen happy. A win-win situation. Everybody was happy except for Mrs. Greenbaum. Gus was caught up in the Vegas life style; he drank too much, gambled too heavy, ate too much, and chased too many women. His health was suffering. In March of 1955 Gus approached his Boss Tony Accardo—he wanted to retire. Tony said O.K., so Gus and Bess Greenbaum moved back to Scottsdale, Arizona.

In July, Tony called Gus and set up a meeting. At the meeting, Tony told Gus that they really needed him to return to Vegas and run the Riviera. Gus protested that his health was shot and a return to Vegas and that lifestyle would kill him. Tony commented that one could die in a number of ways. A few days later Gus received a panicked phone call from his brother Charlie. Charlie’s wife, Lenore, had answered the phone a few minutes earlier—a man told her that if she knew what was good for her, she and her husband had better convince Gus to move back to Vegas! Gus assured Lenore that it was a bluff, nothing would come of it, and he had no intention of moving back to Las Vegas. A few days later Charlie came home and found his wife dead. Cause of death—suffocation. A human hand had smothered her. Gus and Bess packed up and moved back to Vegas.

Within a short time Gus had put together a group of investors, many of whom had been with him at the Flamingo, to bail out the Riviera. The group included Ben Goffstein (who would later open the Four Queens, downtown), “Icepick” Willie Alderman, Joe Rosenburg, Charles Harrison, Ross Miller (a Chicago bookie, whose son would eventually be Governor of Nevada), Dave Berman, Elias Atol, and several others.

On July 28, 1955 Gus Greenbaum and his group of investors applied to the Nevada Gaming Commission for licensing. Gus informed the Commission that his group would lease the Riviera for \$1,250,000 a year, and that they had already loaned the Riviera \$500,000 as a short-term solution to her financial problems.



In September it was announced that the Commission had reviewed the situation and the applicants. The Commission noted that several of the applicants had police records, most going back to the 1920’s and 1930’s. Because the Riviera was in dire financial circumstances, and because the country was in a recession, and Las Vegas



needed the jobs that the Riv provided, and because the applicants had clean police records in Nevada, the Commission approved 8 of the 14 applicants. Approval of the others would be deferred until there could be further investigation, and Gus had to agree to replace any of the applicants that the Commission deemed undesirable.

Greenbaum did what he had to do to turn the Riviera around. He still had the names and addresses of the Flamingo's high rollers, and his secretaries contacted all of them inviting them to enjoy the hospitality of the Riviera. A few dealers had been getting away with their own little skimming operation, at the tables...those dealers learned the hard way that it was impossible to deal when you had a broken hand. Finances at the Riviera were back on track, the mob was making money, and everybody was happy again. Sort of.

Before long, Gus was back to heavy losses at the craps tables. He was drinking too much, and no beautiful woman was safe from his attention, whether she was a showgirl, a secretary or a prostitute. Gus wasn't making good decisions, and his Bosses noticed. They sent people to talk to Gus a couple of times, but nothing changed. After Gus gambled away all of his millions, he began pilfering. His bosses had enough—they wanted Gus out. They suggested it was time for Gus to go back into retirement, in Arizona. Gus said no; he was enjoying Las Vegas.

In 1958 Gus and Bess went home to Scottsdale for a few days over the Thanksgiving weekend. On December 3, 1958 their housekeeper found Gus and Bess dead, both were decapitated. The police report said that they had been murdered, but there was nothing to indicate that the murders were connected to the mob. Did I mention that "enforcer" Marshall Ciafano, and Tony Accardo happened to be visiting their friend Pete "Horse Face" Licavoli over the holiday? Did I further mention that Licavoli lived about 30 minutes away from the Greenbaum home? Probably just a coincidence.

On December 5, 1958, gambling at the Riviera was closed down from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m., while services for the Greenbaums were held in Phoenix and Las Vegas. In spite of a \$35,000 reward that was put up for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the murder or murderers, the case was never solved.

On December 9, 1958, Ben Goffstein was named president of the Riviera.

### The 1960's

Goffstein had worked with Gus Greenbaum for a lot of years, and he knew how to run a casino. In spite of that, in mid-1960 Goffstein approached the Gaming Control Board and informed them that the Riviera was very close to closing her doors, due to a shortage of cash on hand. Goffstein explained that while assets were well over \$2 million, there was only about \$155,000 cash on hand due to buying Greenbaum's shares from the estate, some of the other partners requesting money for their investments, and poor entertainment that hadn't drawn the anticipated number of gamblers to the Riv. Within the next two weeks, the Riviera needed to be able to pay close to \$500,000 for obligations such as payroll, rent and entertainment expenses.

Goffstein said that there were seven men who were ready to pay the



Riviera \$760,000 cash for 38.4% of the Riviera, which would keep it afloat. Goffstein expected that the Board would approve the seven investors, as all were involved with the Desert Inn and Stardust. The seven were Wilbur Clark, Allard Roen, Moe Dalitz, Sam Tucker, Morris Kleinman, Ruby Kolod and Bernard Rothdopf. Gaming refused to make an immediate decision, fearing that issuing multiple licenses to individuals would give too much power to too few people.

Meanwhile, the First National Bank of Nevada stepped in. Though the Riv had maxed out her credit, the bank offered another \$250,000 loan, which would be guaranteed by the Desert Inn and Stardust groups. A \$100,000 loan payment that was due would be extended for 60 days while Gaming processed the seven new applications. Ultimately, the applications were denied. It was tough but the Riviera survived the crisis thanks, in large part, to the popular comedian Shecky Greene performing in the Starlight Theatre.

In February of 1963, Ben Goffstein resigned as president.

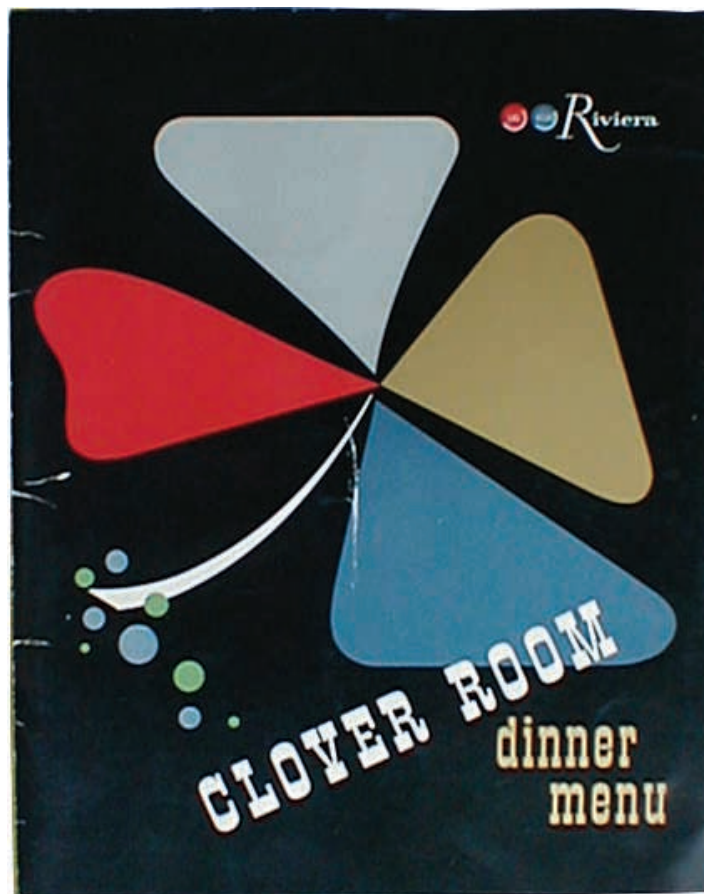
In 1965, Hotel Riviera, Inc. bought out the Gensburg brothers, becoming the sole owner of the resort.

In 1967 a wing was added, with 200 guestrooms, a penthouse, a 9000 square foot lobby and 10,000 square feet of meeting and office space.

Shecky Greene was playing in the lounge, and it was packed every night. Celebrities could often be found in the audience, catching Shecky's show in between doing their own shows. Just before the last show of a two-week engagement, Shecky was told that the lounge would be converted into a keno parlor the next day. When it was time for the show to start, Shecky stepped onto the stage holding an axe. He proceeded to chop the stage into bits, and presented the pieces to his fans as souvenirs. The next day, unaware of what had happened at the show, Executive Director Ed Torres called Shecky with the good news "We've decided to keep the lounge open for another month!"



In 1968 the Riv completed an expansion project,



with a 12-story hotel tower and convention facilities. That same year "Rat Pack" member Dean Martin received shares in the Riviera, in exchange for performing in the showroom. Dino's Den Restaurant was named for him.

### The 1970's

In 1973, the Riviera was sold again. The buyer was Meshulam Riklis, a New York multi-millionaire who paid \$56 million for the resort. In 1975 he added the 17-story Monte Carlo tower with 300 rooms, 60 suites and an elaborate penthouse, at a cost of \$20 million. This brought the total number of guestrooms to 1,000. In 1977 the San Remo Tower was built, adding 200 more rooms and the elegant Ristorante Italiano, a gourmet Italian Restaurant.

In 1973, Dean Martin was released from his contract and the Riviera bought back the shares he held. The reason given was that Kirk Kerkorian offered Dean a deal that he couldn't refuse, to perform at the new MGM Grand which would be opening soon. There were rumors that Dean had been trying to get his contract with the Riviera rewritten, so that he only had to perform one show a night. A standard LV strip contract required two shows a night.





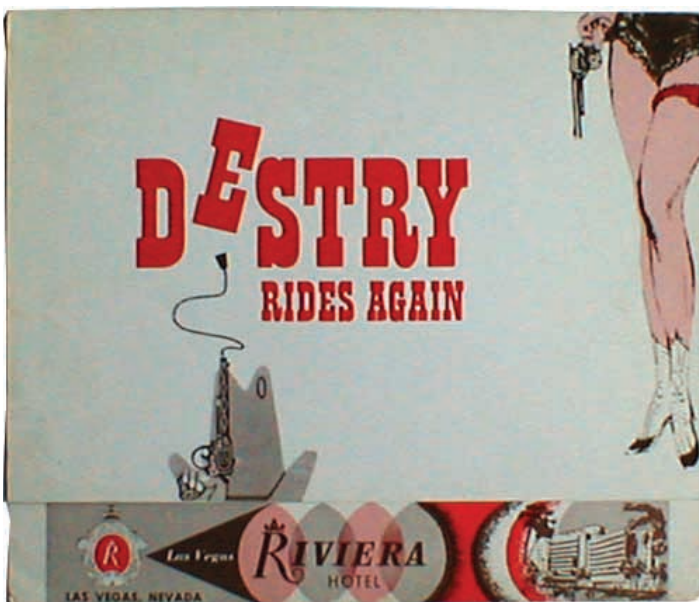
### The 1980's

The first time I saw the Riviera was in 1981, and it had the coolest sidewalk in front of it. The concrete squares had the handprints, footprints and autographs of dozens and dozens of stars, pressed into the cement. There were lights, kind of like rope lights, set between the squares. A few years later the sidewalk was gone, buried under the food court. In those days I rarely had a camera with me, so I never got a picture of that sidewalk. L

In the 1980's, the Riviera added the variety show "Splash", "an aquacade of music and dance" that took place in and around a 20,000-gallon aquarium. The show featured numerous specialty acts. Of course, the infamous *Splashbar* was named after the popular show.



"Crazy Girls", a topless female comedy revue was another popular show during the 1980's, as was "An Evening at La Cage". La Cage was a revue of female



impersonators and cabaret dancers, starring 20 year old Frank Marino as Joan Rivers.

In 1982 several scenes from the movie *Nevada Heat* were filmed at the Riviera. The movie starred Pia Zadora, who also happened to be Mrs. Meshulam Riklis.

In 1984, the Riviera had cash flow problems again, and filed for bankruptcy protection under chapter 11. Riklis blamed declining revenue from foreign high rollers. Arthur Waltzman was brought in as president, in an attempt to get the Riv financially stable again. He was able to accomplish that by catering to the middle class tourist in addition to the high rollers, and in 1985 the resort was back out of Chapter 11.

In 1988 the 24-story Monaco Tower was added, at a cost of \$28 million, bringing the number of rooms to more than 2,000.

### The 1990's

In 1990 the Riviera expanded the casino, to nearly 125,000 square feet of gaming space...which they boasted was the largest casino in Las Vegas.

In 1990 the Riviera remodeled suite #2902. A remodel? For just one suite? Well, yes. You see, the star of the New Year's Eve festivities was a star of stars...none other than Francis Albert Sinatra! And of course, Mr. Sinatra was still accustomed to hearing "Yes, Mr. Sinatra...and is there anything else I can do for you? Remodel a suite? Of course, and what amenities should the suite contain, sir? And your color choices? Very good sir...we'll take care of it. And is there anything else?" Two thousand people packed the Superstar Theatre on that New Year's Eve and rang in the New Year with a legend.

In 1993, during their 38<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, the Riviera revived an old Las Vegas publicity stunt...they had a floating craps game in the swimming pool.

The word around Hollywood was that the Riviera was very "movie friendly". That certainly seemed to be the case in the 1990's, when parts of the following movies were filmed at the Riv: (1992) *The Runner*; (1995) *Beyond Desire*, *The Watcher*, *Showgirls*; (1996) *The Corporation*; (1997) *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* and *Vegas Vacation*; (1998) *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Scenes from the 1997 movie *Casino* were also filmed at the Riviera. The movie was based on real happenings at the Stardust, but the 'dust wouldn't have anything to do

with the film. So the fictitious name Tangiers was used, and the casino shots took place at the Riviera. We happened to be in town when some scenes were being filmed downtown. I came out of one of the casinos and headed toward the Plaza. I could see that there was something going on, there were police and security officers around, and there were cameras all over the place (everyplace except in my hand, sigh...). I walked up just in time to see Sharon Stone step out of a trailer; she looked gorgeous in a little white dress, and a white fur coat. But, it was kinda' chilly out and I didn't have a fur coat, and it actually looked pretty boring, so I went inside. I watched through the window for a few minutes, then headed for the casino and some video poker.

On May 10, 1997, the Riviera unveiled the largest life-cast bronze statue in the world. The "No ifs, ands or..." statue is 6' tall, 11' long and weighs 1540 pounds. It was created by Michael Conine, to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Crazy Girls* show.

In 1999 the Riviera designed and built 12 Skyboxes, rooms from 600 square feet to 1,024 square feet, which sit above the Royale Pavilion. The rooms are available for

special parties, such as Super Bowl parties, and include a private bartender, servers, and network feeds on two televisions.

### **The new millennium**

In 2005, the Riviera celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, one of very few Las Vegas casinos to make it that long. Part of the original building is still there, if you look at the front kind of behind the mirrored tower, you can see the long horizontal bands with the windows between them. That part was constructed in the 1950's.

The Riviera currently has five towers, with approximately 2,000 guestrooms, 187 suites, and penthouses.

The casino offers reel slots and video games, table games, keno, bingo, a VIP slot area, and a race and sports book.

The resort offers a swimming pool, lighted tennis courts, health spas and exercise rooms.

Of course, the resort is now home to the annual Casino Chip and Gaming Token Collector Club, Inc.'s annual convention! YAAAAAYYYY!!

# The Las Vegas Strip

## the early years - part 3

by Pam **Goertler**  
assisted by Brian **Cashman**

### The Dunes

#### The tenth resort on the Strip...

#### "The Miracle in the Desert"

He was huge...the 30 foot tall fiberglass Sultan that overlooked the entrance to the Dunes. He was the lord of all he surveyed, a benevolent ruler; he welcomed all to his domain. Once inside, however, you were under the watchful eye of lady luck. You couldn't see her, but she was there. If she was in a good mood, you were lucky and could walk out the door as a winner, but she could turn quickly and if she weren't on your side, you would lose.

#### In the beginning

The original partners in the Dunes were Alfred Gottesman, a former movie theater chain owner; Bob Rice, a Beverly Hills costume jewelry maker; and Joe Sullivan, a Rhode Island businessman. Sullivan was rumored to be a "front man" for Ray Patriarca, head of a Rhode Island crime family. The partners bought 85 acres on the southwestern corner of Flamingo Road and the Strip, and the 200 room Dunes hotel was constructed at a cost of \$3.5 million, by the McNeil Construction Company of Los Angeles.

The Dunes opened on May 23, 1955, at 3650 Las Vegas Boulevard South, with great fanfare. The headliner was Vera Ellen, who starred in the musical-variety show *Magic Carpet Revue*, with a cast of 60 entertainers, in the Arabian Room. Ellen was a singer, dancer and actress, who had starred the previous year in Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*, along with Danny Kaye, Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney (sorry...had to throw that in, it's one of my very favorite Christmas movies!).

#### Tough times

The country was in a recession in 1955, and the Las Vegas casinos felt the pinch, especially the



new casinos. The Riviera and Royal Nevada had only been open for about a month when the Dunes opened. The off-strip Moulin Rouge opened just a few days later. Without an established clientele, all four struggled. Before long, Jake Freedman, owner of the Sands, bought the Dunes. He used the experienced staff of the Sands to operate the Dunes, but it wasn't enough. Within a year the Dunes casino closed, but the low-rise hotel remained open.

#### A new beginning

In 1956 James "Jake" Gottlieb bought the Dunes, with financing from the Teamsters Union pension fund. Gottlieb brought in Major Arterburn Riddle, to assist in running the resort (Major was his name, not a rank). On June 6, 1956, the Dunes had a grand re-opening, inviting most of the residents of Clark County to attend. Over 6,700 people attended, enjoying the free buffet and dancing that were offered.

Riddle had innovative ideas that worked well in Las Vegas. He booked Minsky's Follies, starring Lou Costello, for a six-week engagement. The Follies featured the first bare-breasted showgirls in Las Vegas, which caused an uproar in some circles. The controversy created publicity, the publicity generated ticket sales (a record 16,000 in one week), the business that was generated helped the resort to





be profitable...and a six-week engagement lasted for well over four years. After the Follies, the showroom was used for Casino de Paris, which was conceived, produced and directed by Frederic Apcar. The show was the first to be imported from France, with its original cast. Casino de Paris played at the Dunes for over 20 years. A couple of other entertainment features included Tanya, the elephant, who pulled the handle on her own slot machine (she needed human help to feed the coins into the slot), and pool-side fireworks at 10:15 every night for the entire summer, in 1960.

**The Sultan's Table**

In addition to a new direction for the entertainment, Riddle brought gourmet dining to Las Vegas in the Sultan's Table Restaurant. Some of the hors d'oeuvres offered were Terrine de Foie Gras aux Truffles for \$6.75, Escargots de Bourgogne for \$4.00 or Smoked Nova Scotia Salmon for \$3.75. Lobster Bisque or French Onion Soup Gratinée were available for \$1.85 each. A few of the entrée choices were Paupiette of Filet of Sole Marguery, Long Island Duckling à l'Orange, Prime Filet Mignon aux Champignons or Medallion of Veal à la Sultan, at prices





that ranged from \$9.50 to \$17.00. Of course the captains were available to assist you in selecting fine wines to complement your meal. One of the captains listed was early club member and chip manufacturer, Bill Borland. Reviewed by the Diner's Club, the Sultan's Table was named "America's finest and most beautiful new restaurant." In December of 1965, the Sultan's Table was

the only Las Vegas restaurant named on Esquire Magazine's "Gourmet Feast" list.

Of course a buffet was also available, in the Aladdin Room, and it offered more than 50 cold and hot dishes...something for every taste.

#### And more...

In 1961 Riddle bought a huge rectangular piece of land that stretched between Dunes Road and Tropicana Avenue. He used the property to build an 18-hole, par 72 golf course. His next move was to have the Olympic Tower constructed, adding another 250 rooms to the hotel. By this time, Riddle had bought the Dunes from Jake Gottlieb.

In 1965, Riddle added the "Diamond of the Dunes" tower, which brought the total number of rooms to over 1000. The tower was advertised as having 24-stories, but I've read that it actually only had 21, as the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> floors were omitted. In spite of that, it was the tallest building in the state. Also added was the 180 foot "Diamond of the Dunes" sign. At the time, it was the largest freestanding sign in the world. Including the foundation, the sign weighed 1,500,000 pounds. The sign had miles of neon tubing, used 10,000 lighting units, and had an annual operating cost of \$47,500.

In June of 1965 the "Dome of the Sea" seafood restaurant opened. There was a pool in the center of the restaurant. In the pool was an "island" where a harp player would sit, playing for the enjoyment of the diners. Two of the harpists were Barbara Allen and Kippy Lou Brinkman.

Is Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> an unlucky day, or a lucky day? In October of 1967 it



was both, for the Dunes. There was a hot hand at the dice table...50 straight passes that cost the Dunes \$250,000. Sounds unlucky, BUT...they got worldwide publicity that they couldn't have bought for any price.

In 1970, billionaire Howard Hughes considered buying the Dunes, but the Gaming Control Board was not willing to issue any more gaming licenses to Hughes, fearing violation of anti-trust laws.

In December of 1979 the Dunes opened another tower, adding another 300 rooms to the count. The new tower advertised luxurious suites with multi-level layouts, exotic flora and cascading waterfalls. The Dunes offered acres of free parking, two giant swimming pools (the Seahorse Pool and the Olympic Pool), the largest golf course in the state, a convention center, conference rooms and a staff of more than 2,300. The 1960's and 1970's had been good.

In 1983 the Oasis Casino was added to the property.

During one of the renovations, the Sultan had been moved to the golf course, where he was visible to traffic passing on the highway. In 1985 an electrical short in his stomach caused him to catch fire, he was destroyed.

The 1980's were tough on the Dunes. She was getting older, and was sold a couple of times. In 1987 she was sold to Japanese millionaire investor Masao Nangaku for \$155 million. Her new owners weren't able to make the aging property a success, especially as new mega-resorts were opening and providing added competition, starting with the Mirage. It took about 10 years for the Dunes to go from being one of the showplaces on the strip to being a run down high-rise.

**Steve Wynn**

In 1992 Steve Wynn bought the Dunes for \$75 million. At midnight, January 26, 1993, the Dunes closed and the employees were offered a last (free) prime rib dinner in the Sultan's Table Restaurant.

On September 26, 1993, a four-alarm fire started at the Dunes when a construction (destruction?) worker drove a front-end loader over an electrical circuit. Winds of 30 miles per hour fanned the flames, and blew burning embers over the Strip. Caesars

Palace turned on their sprinklers to put out any embers that blew their way.

Barbary Coast and the Flamingo Hilton were advised to turn off their ventilation systems to avoid drawing smoke into the rooms. Because there were no lives in jeopardy (all construction workers had been

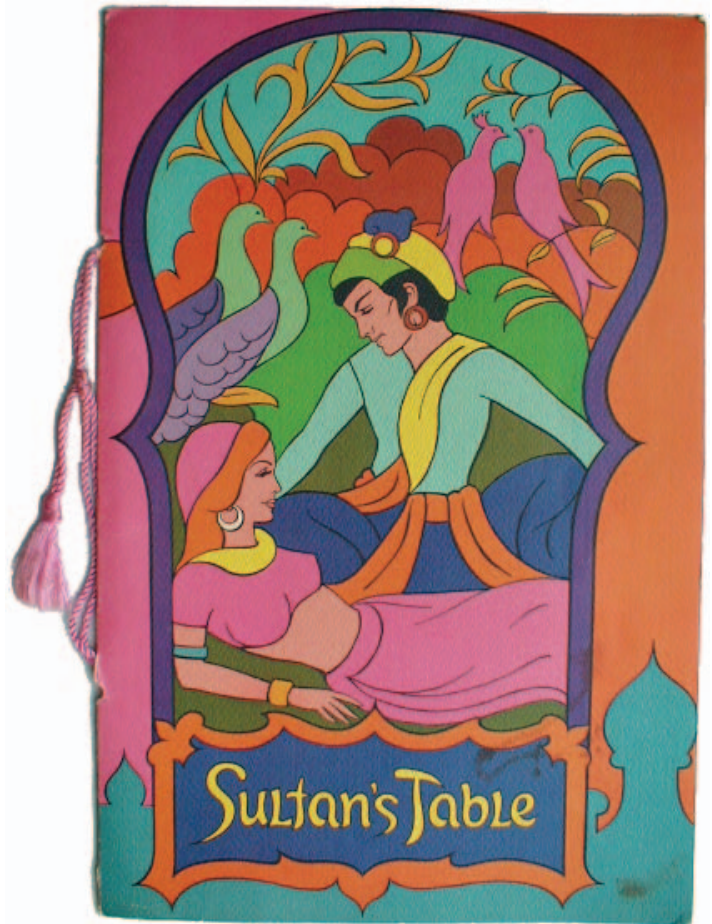
accounted for), and the property was scheduled for destruction anyway, the fire fighting was aimed at preventing damage to other properties. The fire was contained by 7:00 p.m.



On October 27, 1993, from the front of his new Treasure Island Resort, Steve Wynn "fired" a cannon that was aimed at the Dunes. The Dunes casino, sign and north tower were imploded at that moment. It took 365 pounds of dynamite, placed into 426 strategically placed drill-holes, 84 flash-bombs and 281 fire mortars to bring the Dunes down, with the desired effects. The south tower was used, for a time, to house the records of the Mirage and Treasure Island properties. In 1994 the south tower, too, was imploded, but without fanfare.

**The Bellagio**

On October 15, 1998, on the site of the Dunes, The Bellagio opened. It's 36 stories contained 3,026 rooms and suites, and it was built at a cost of \$1.6 billion.



The property holds Lake Como, which has more than a thousand fountains and runs the length of the Bellagio property. At regularly scheduled times the fountains "dance" to amplified music, to the delight of crowds that gather on the Strip to watch.



There is a 12,500 square foot conservatory that has beautifully designed botanical displays. The displays are changed every season.

The lobby ceiling contains a 66' x 30' display of approximately 2000 Dale Chihuly floral pieces, of mouth-blown multi-colored glass. The glass weighs approximately 40,000 pounds.

The casino is 156,000 square feet; it holds 173 table games and over 2,700 machines.



### The Dunes liquidation sale

I really didn't remember when this happened, but it had to have been 1993. George (my husband) and I were in Las Vegas. We happened to see an ad in the paper inviting the public to the Dunes liquidation sale. We were just beginning to get interested in collecting casino stuff, and thought it would be fun to go to the sale. I had visions of getting cheap chips and dice and cards and ashtrays and wastebaskets and glasses and toiletries and do not disturb signs and... and I was trying to figure out how to get all the loot home!

We drove over to the Dunes. There were cars parked all over the place, every side street within 1/2 mile was lined with cars. It was HOT out and after driving around for awhile George finally found a parking place in the Dunes parking lot, somewhere in the back-40.

There was a chain-link fence around part of the property, and hundreds of people were lined up along the fence with more people joining the line every minute. They were only letting 50 people at a time into the Dunes. After some people came out, they'd let the next group of 50 go in.

After standing out in the heat for a couple of hours, we finally got in the door. It was kind of disappointing because there were a lot of TVs and lamps and chairs (like would be used in a banquet room). We wandered around into the well-used kitchens (disgusting!) and into the casino. There wasn't much small stuff around, but we could have bought slot machines or a black jack table or a roulette wheel! There was a tray of keno balls, without a price on it. George carried the tray to one of the liquidators to ask how much, and was informed that they weren't for sale, unless he could produce a gaming license (we could have bought a slot machine, but no keno balls without a license?). She kind of jerked the tray out of George's hands, causing most of the balls to spill onto the

floor. George helped her pick some of them up, then as we walked away we noticed that #69 had rolled off into a corner...

We wandered some more, and saw slot tournament signs hanging from the ceiling. I stood on a chair or a blackjack table or something and managed to yank one of them down. There were some playing cards, I bought a couple of decks for \$10 each (some bargain, huh?), they also had uncut sheets of cards, but I couldn't figure out how to get one home without wrinkling or folding it, so we passed on those.

We found ourselves in a dining room. I can't remember for sure, but it might have been the Dome of the Sea restaurant, as I seem to vaguely remember an empty pool, which would have been where the harp player sat. Anyway, I was hoping for some logo'd silverware...nope. No glasses or dishes either (bummer!). I picked up a keno ticket holder (no name or logo on it), and a couple of small relish dishes (plain glass, no logos).



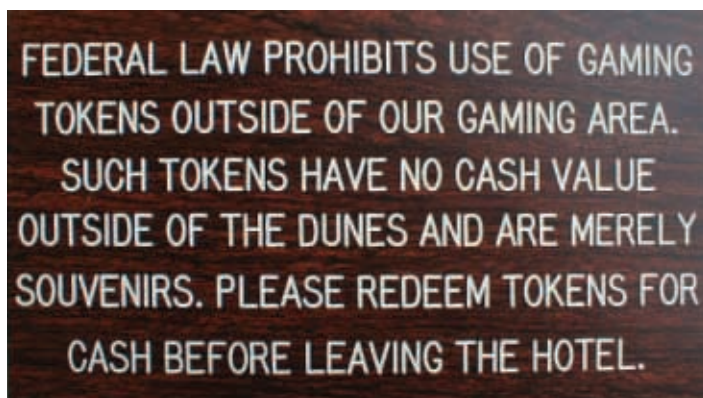
The only small things we'd really noticed, with the Dunes name, were the signs in and around the casino "Redeem Dunes tokens before leaving the casino..." "Federal law prohibits minors from lingering in the Dunes Casino..." that type of thing. Some were double-stick taped to the walls and others were screwed in. We looked around to find something that would pry them off the walls. George noticed a security guard's stand, he looked in it and found a screwdriver, he also found a key. The tag on the key says "Casino Porter H SK". The key itself says "do not duplicate". Neither one says Dunes...bummer!

Anyway, we got some of the signs down, and we got a couple of pictures/transparencies from behind a counter in the Oasis Casino. They were mounted behind Plexiglas, and were back-lit...like slides. Why oh WHY didn't we ever take a camera with us??? I'd give a whole buncha' money for pictures of us getting this stuff, to prove it's genuinely from the Dunes!

They were allowing people to go up to some of the hotel rooms; all of the furniture was for sale. There were only certain floors that were accessible to the public...the elevators wouldn't stop at the other floors. So, we took the elevator up. The elevators were really pokey, and only a couple of them were running. We went to the highest accessible floor (14<sup>th</sup>, I think). The furniture in some of the rooms was AMAZING! There were some real bargains, too, if you needed a pair of fake elephant tusks! There were mirrored headboards that went to the ceiling, great big wet-bars, jungle print overstuffed chairs...everything you've seen in a sleazy movie, and a bunch of stuff you'd find in a classy high-roller suite (and us with no camera...pout, pout!).

We checked out the peephole things in the doors, because they were cool! You could move it from side-to-side or up and down to check out short people, tall people, or people down the hall...and I'd never seen one like that! There was an employee wandering around, so George asked "how much?" The employee said he wasn't sure, but he didn't think they were for sale, someone had bought the doors and would be out in a couple of days to get them. You can guess the rest...George still had the screwdriver in his pocket, so we got a peephole. Hey...just because that guy didn't think they were for sale, didn't mean that we couldn't ask again, downstairs at the cash register, right?

The elevators were so pokey that, after exploring one floor, we took the stairs down to explore the next floor. There was one door we went through...I don't remember



the details, but we were on some kind of catwalk...not outdoors, but somehow just behind the façade of the building. I wish I could remember it better, and George doesn't remember that part at all, I suspect that it was some kind of access to the neon, or something like that. I remember that the only thing between outdoors and us was some smoked glass. I don't think we were supposed to go through that door, but George likes to explore and I follow him, usually protesting all the way!

Anyway, floor by floor we went down and explored each floor as we went. (If you ever go to a hotel/casino liquidation sale, bring your camera!) We were still carrying the few things we'd picked up. I'd paid for the cards, and nothing else had price stickers. We'd asked about prices for the signs, and the person we'd asked was amazed that anyone would want stuff like that. She'd said it wouldn't be more than a couple of dollars for everything that we'd picked up.

After we'd explored the lowest open floor (I think it was the 8<sup>th</sup>?) I started to head for the elevators so we could go down and pay for our stuff, and leave. George wanted to go down another floor, to see what was there...if anything. After my usual protests, I followed him. Again, floor by floor we went down, checking out the rooms as we went. I'm sure I was still uttering half-hearted protests...thinking that we were going to have to climb back UP the stairs so we could take the elevator down (I have no imagination!). As we neared the ground floor, the plan became clear...we'd walk out the stairway door, and hope for the best! Wrong! We couldn't get out. Apparently they'd locked the stairway doors on the lowest couple of floors, probably to keep people from exploring...silly them!

We didn't want to walk back up 8 floors, so we continued down further. We found ourselves in the basement, and LOST! We stumbled across an employee locker room, and it was trashed! The lockers were all open, and



all kinds of stuff was ALL over the floor. We picked up a couple of dealer aprons, an employee handbook, some pens and matches, a couple of Frontier glasses, and a business card holder with the Dunes name on it. Luckily we also found some plastic bags to carry the stuff in!

We tried to find our way out, but we were hopelessly lost and continued to wander around in circles. We ran into another lost soul, who'd done the same thing we had! He'd been wandering for a long time too! I think he was happy just to find other people! The three of us walked around together, and finally found a door that was unlocked. We followed a hall, climbed some stairs, and found ourselves next to a door that led outside. Security guards were stationed outside the door. We walked out, expecting them to stop us, question us, order us to go back in...or something. They didn't. Apparently they were supposed to make sure no one went in through that door...coming out was o.k. Our new "friend" headed for the front of the building, he was going to stand in line again and go back in!! George and I headed straight for the car. It had been a long and tiring day...but it wasn't quite over. George put the key in the trunk lock and turned it. Instead of the trunk opening, the key broke! It was a rental car, so George found a Good Samaritan who gave him a ride to a pay phone, while I waited by the car. The rental car company sent someone out to get the broken key out of the lock, and provide us with a duplicate key. That was the end of our adventure at the Dunes.

### **The Hacienda The eleventh resort on the Strip..."Hayseed Heaven"**

In 1955 Warren "Doc" Bayley, with his wife Judy and several partners, began construction on The Lady Luck Hotel and Casino, on the Las Vegas Strip. As the project moved forward, the other partners dropped out one by one until only the Bayleys and Stanley Burke were left. The Bayleys owned a small chain of "Hacienda" hotels, with locations in Fresno, Indio and Bakersfield, California. When the other partners dropped out, leaving Doc in charge, he changed the name of The Lady Luck to Hacienda, to fit with the other hotels in his chain.

Neither the Bayleys nor Burke had any experience in running a casino; the loss of the other partners also meant that the financing was short. Bayley brought in Jake Kozloff, who'd been involved in the New Frontier and the Golden Nugget.

In June of 1956, the Hacienda opened at 3950 Las Vegas Boulevard South, with 266 rooms on 60 acres, and no casino. The Gaming Control Board, under Robbins



Cahill, had repeatedly deferred issuing the license, but didn't explain why. Finally, off the record, one of the board members told Bayley that the Board considered Kozloff unsuitable, but if his name was removed from the application the license would probably be approved. Kozloff's name was removed, and the license was issued after the admonishment that the board expected the Hacienda to fail, and that the Bayleys would probably go broke trying to succeed. Bayley responded that they were going broke now, and asked that the board please give them a chance. The casino finally opened on October 12, 1956. (Note: several sources say the casino didn't open until early 1957, I elected to go with the date listed in Fuller's *Index of Nevada Gaming Establishments*.)

### **Hayseed Heaven**

The newest resorts on the Strip; the Royal Nevada, Riviera and Dunes were all struggling. New resorts kept opening, and wanting a piece of the pie, but the pie wasn't getting any larger. What Las Vegas needed was a new market. While the other resorts touted luxury, comfort and big-name entertainment, the Hacienda went after the value-oriented customer, and families. When they opened, the Hacienda offered swimming pools, miniature golf and a go-cart track. The track was also used to host Midget National Championship races, which drew large crowds.



Over the years, a 9-hole 3-par golf course, 6 lighted tennis courts, Ping-Pong tables, baby-sitting services, and eventually an RV park were added. Pets were welcome, but had to be registered upon arrival. The Hacienda was often called “Hayseed Heaven”.

**Hacienda Holiday**

Doc Bayley was a promoter. One of his most successful marketing tools was the “Hacienda Holiday”. For \$16 the guest would get their room plus \$10 in promo chips redeemable at the restaurants and bars (later that was extended to include the casino, also). Billboards advertising the special were on several Southern California Highways. In 1967 the property manager went to California to investigate expanding the number of billboards that would advertise the Hacienda Holiday package. Returning to Las Vegas, he encountered highway construction in Victorville. Every car had to stop at the construction, to be re-routed onto the “old” highway. While waiting his turn, he had a flash of inspiration...why not have someone hand out brochures right there, to cars headed in the direction of Las Vegas? He made the arrangements. Arriving back at the Hacienda, he discovered that a dozen of the brochures had already been turned in! He told Doc, who immediately arranged for two pretty girls to hand out the brochures. By September of 1968, they’d handed out over 100,000 flyers; vacationers who were using a Hacienda Holiday package occupied over 100 rooms per night!

In 1978 the Hacienda Holiday package was still being offered, though the price was up to \$39.78 per person, and it was called the Hacienda Champagne Holiday. The package was for 3 days and 2 nights and included a deluxe air-conditioned room, champagne breakfast (midnight to 6:00 a.m.), champagne brunch (10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.), gourmet buffet dinner (5:00 to 10:00 p.m.), Midnight show in the Fiesta Room with one cocktail, one 3-spot keno ticket, one cocktail at Island Bar, free daily



champagne party (5:00 to 6:00 p.m.), a complimentary flight bag, one bottle of Hacienda Champagne, unlimited use of the tennis courts and swimming pool, free parking, and all taxes and gratuities.



**Location**

The Hacienda was nearly two miles south of the other Strip resorts, so it was the first resort encountered by the travelers from Southern California. At times this worked to their advantage. During the extra-hot summer months, many of the travelers would stop at the Hacienda for a cool drink. If they liked the Hacienda, they might not go any further. Also, since they weren’t close to any of the other resorts, anyone that came in by plane or bus often didn’t bother to leave the property.

Doc did his best to see that a lot of guests came in by plane. Thanks to the remote location, planes were able to land right on the Hacienda property. Doc started with one plane then added another and another. He had a DC-4, equipped with a piano bar, that ran nightly flights from Burbank. He eventually ended up with a fleet of 30 planes, flying the customers in. Reportedly, in 1962, Bayley’s planes flew in 150,000 people. There were so many flights, that the Hacienda was investigated for running a commercial airline. Doc tried to convince officials otherwise, but with as many as 70 flights a week landing at the Hacienda, his arguments were futile (the Civil Aeronautics Board allowed 10 flights per month). Most of the planes had to go.



**The plane, the plane!**

Have you ever noticed the Hacienda plane suspended from the ceiling in the baggage claim area at McCarran airport? I have. I never realized there was a story behind it, but there is...

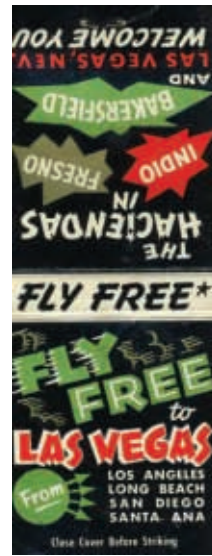
In October of 1958, it was announced that pilots Bob Timm (former Hacienda slot department head) and John Cook would be attempting to break the world endurance flight record, which was 50 days. It was to be a fund-rais-

er for the Damon Runyon cancer fund, and Doc Bayley guaranteed that the minimum donation would be \$10,000. Later it was estimated that the donations would be from \$150,000 to \$500,000, but I never found the actual amount. Anyway, it was also, of course, a publicity stunt for the Hacienda.

The plane selected was a single-engine Cessna 172 Seahawk, which was 26'6" long. Everything was stripped from inside the plane, except the pilot seats, and then it was outfitted with a mattress and an extra 95-gallon fuel tank. The Hacienda name and logo were painted on both sides of the plane. They bought a fast pick-up truck, and assembled a ground crew. Members of the ground crew were Norbie Prada, Doyl Hickman, Roy Young and Bill Marhold.

Before the flight took place, the pilots and ground crew practiced re-fueling. The practices took place on the main road near Pahrump, which was straight and isolated. The plane would fly at an altitude of 20 feet, over the truck, while both were going about 70 miles per hour. The plane crew would drop one end of a rope to the ground crew. The ground crew would attach one end of a fuel hose to the rope, which would then be pulled up to the plane. The nozzle was inserted into the fuel tank, and then the ground crew would pump 95 gallons of fuel to fill the tank. Once perfected, it took about three minutes for the maneuver to be executed. Once the real flight began, the same rope was used to get food, water and clean clothes up to the plane. There was at least one time, during the actual flight, that the fuel truck malfunctioned. A red 1956 Thunderbird, which was used as a "crash wagon" by Alamo Airways, was brought in to save the record. The T-bird carried fuel in 5-gallon cans, which were hauled up to the plane to keep it airborne until the truck was back in service.

The actual flight began on December 4, 1958, from McCarran Field. The pilots took turns, flying in four-hour shifts. Luckily the plane was equipped with autopilot, as there was more than one time that the active pilot dozed



off. One of the pilots realized they'd flown over a mountain range after he'd dozed off while on duty! The flight path went over Nevada, California and Arizona, and the flight ended on February 7, 1959, after a record setting 64 days, 22 hours, 19 minutes and 5 seconds! A record that remains unbroken to this day, except by astronauts.

Much to the disappointment of Doc Bayley, the newspapers had refused to publish anything about the flight until the plane had been aloft for 30 days.



At that point they deemed it newsworthy. Also disappointing to Bayley, the newspapers figured out that it was a publicity stunt, and they refused to mention the Hacienda's name in the article. They went so far as to block out

the Hacienda name that was painted on the sides of the plane! To salvage what publicity he could, Doc installed a booth near the cashier cage, where Hacienda guests could follow the progress of the flight and even talk to the record-breaking pilots.

### The end of an era

Doc Bayley died on December 26, 1964, leaving his estate to his wife, Judy. Judy was urged to sell the Hacienda, as well as the shares held by the Bayleys in the New Frontier, and the El Rey Resort in Searchlight. Judy had been involved with her husband in running the Hacienda, at least during the early years, and she decided to run the resort herself. She was the first woman to run a Las Vegas Strip hotel/casino. Joan Rashbrook was her friend and assistant.



Judy quickly discovered that the Hacienda had financial problems. There was no money in the bank, bills were unpaid, and there was a large mortgage on the property. She and Joan met with the mortgage holder, who agreed to take the Frontier shares in partial payment of the debt.

Judy and Joan managed to borrow some cash from friends and relatives, and they did whatever needed to be done to keep the resort running...even bussing tables in the buffet. Their hard work paid off, and finances improved. Judy also took the time to become involved in many local charity events, including fundraisers for cancer research.

On December 31, 1971, Judy Bayley died from cancer, leaving her shares of the Hacienda to Joan Rashbrook. After running the place for over a year, Joan sold out to Allen Glick's Argent Corporation. In 1973 the Argent Corporation sold 15% of the Hacienda to Paul Lowden.

In 1977 the Gaming Control Board forced the Argent Corporation to sell all of their Nevada casino holdings, due to a massive skimming scheme that was uncovered at the Stardust. Paul and Sue Lowden bought the Hacienda. Later they would also buy the Sahara, from Del Webb.

In 1980 an 11-story tower was added, with 300 rooms. By this time the resort had ten buildings and an RV park, plus the Little Church of the West (which had been moved from the Frontier property), on 48 acres of land. Also in 1980, after the MGM fire that killed dozens of people, it was realized that the Hacienda's fire protection system was woefully inadequate. Over \$250,000 was spent on new sprinkler systems, alarms, smoke detectors and PA speakers in every hotel room.

In the early 1990's Redd Foxx played at the Hacienda.

The IRS claimed that Redd owed over \$900,000 in unpaid taxes, and the income from the Hacienda helped keep the IRS at bay. George and I went to see Redd, and the show was a riot! At the start of the show, Redd warned that some of the audience might be offended by his humor. He said that anyone was welcome to leave at any time...this was his show, and he was going to say whatever he wanted. A few people did walk out of the show. By the end of the show, most of us that stayed were holding our sides, which hurt from laughing so hard! But, believe me, no one would have ever accused Redd Foxx of being politically correct!

A “new” magician, Lance Burton, began headlining at the Hacienda in 1991. Lance got his start with a 15-minute act as part of the Folies Bergere show at the Tropicana, then moved to the Hacienda. He played there until June of 1996, when he moved to the Monte Carlo to perform in the new Lance Burton Theatre.

In 1995 Circus Circus Enterprises, Inc. bought the Hacienda for \$80 million, and they closed it on December 1, 1996. On December 2, they invited the Salvation Army and Opportunity Village to come in and remove the furnishings, which could be sold to raise funds that were needed by the charities. On December 4, the Little Church of the West was moved to a new location, 2/10 of a mile south, and to the Eastern side of the strip, where it would reopen on December 11. On the night of December 12 the Hacienda’s doors were opened one more time, to a group of firefighters who used the closed and dark hotel for a mock training drill.

**The end...eventually!**

Then, on December 31, 1996, the Hacienda was imploded during a 90 minute live-telecast, with thousands of people attending the implosion in person. The plunger was pushed, and a huge cloud of dust rose as the building fell. At that point, most television stations cut away, to show other fireworks and New Year’s Celebrations. When the dust settled, the crowd in attendance saw that much of the Southern-most part of the



JUDY BAYLEY PRESENTS  
the Las Vegas  
**HACIENDA HOTEL**  
"\$15,000,000 First on the Fabulous STRIP"  
"EXCITING" Entertainment "ROUND THE CLOCK" In The JEWEL BOX Lounge  
★ LIBERAL SLOTS ★ \$25,000 LIMIT KENO  
★ TWENTY ONE (BLACKJACK) ★ POKER  
★ ROULETTE ★ CRAPS  
**FREE Champagne PARTY** 5 PM TO 6 PM DAILY  
600 LUXURIOUS ROOMS WITH TV (300 WITH COLOR)  
9 PAR 9 HOLE GOLF COURSE ON HACIENDA GROUNDS FRIENDLIEST CASINO IN LAS VEGAS  
LARGEST HOTEL POOL IN NEVADA

Hacienda Hotel was still standing! The demolition team assured the audience that it would be down by daybreak, with the help of a few ropes and a crane.

The hotel would go down...but she didn’t make it easy for those who sought to destroy her! By the next morning, January 1, 1997, a stairwell, some rows of rooms and the end of the hotel building were still standing, in spite of the overnight efforts of the demo crews. By noon the frustrated crews brought in a wrecking ball, and relentlessly pounded the building with it over and over again, for an hour. Holes were knocked in the building, but she still wouldn’t tumble. Finally the crew resorted to chopping at the base of the building, knocking out larger and larger chunks of the foundation. Just after 2:00 p.m., 17 hours after the initial implosion, the Hacienda finally caved in.



Part of the Hacienda still lives. The 40-foot neon sign, with the famous horse and rider, was taken to the neon boneyard and restored. It spent some time at McCarran Airport, and is now part of the neon museum at the

Fremont Street Experience.

## Mandalay Bay

Hayseed Heaven is gone. Its site is filled by the humongous Mandalay Bay Resort, which opened on March 2, 1999. The resort was built at a cost of \$950 million, and it opened with over 3300 rooms and suites.

Over \$10 million was spent on ads for the new resort. Dan Ackroyd, Jim Belushi and John Goodman headlined a parade of Harleys riding through the front door. (I think that stunt sounds like something that might have happened at Hayseed Heaven!)

As the name Mandalay Bay suggests, the resort has a water theme with a 14 foot long aquarium in the lobby, which holds 12,200 gallons of salt water. The property has an 11-acre tropical water setting that includes a beach with sand and surf. The surf pool was designed to support surfing competitions.

There's a 30,000 square foot spa, which includes a 3,000 square foot fitness center. There are shops, several lounges, over a dozen restaurants, a lazy river ride, 3 pools and a jogging track.

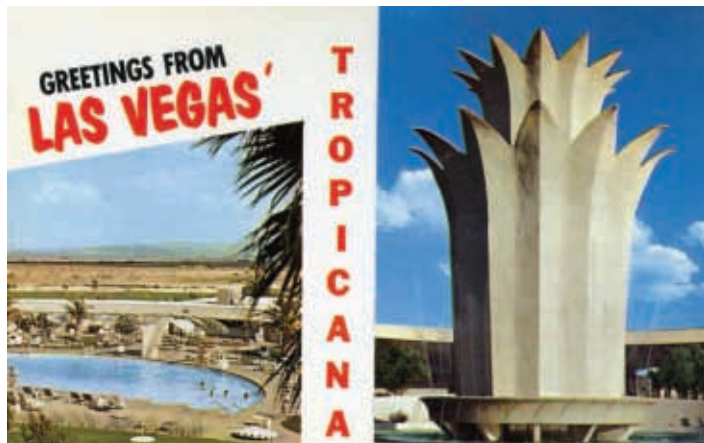
The 135,000 square foot casino contains 122 table games, 2400 slot machines, a 300-seat race and sports book, and a high-limit room.

In the 1950's, there was nearly two miles of empty desert between the Hacienda and the Dunes. Now the same stretch of desert, between the Bellagio and Mandalay Bay, is home to the Monte Carlo, New York-New York, Excalibur and Luxor.

## The Tropicana

**The twelfth resort on the Strip...“The Tiffany of the Strip”**

Ben Jaffe, part owner and board chairman of the Fountainbleu Hotel in Miami Beach, came to Las Vegas in 1955. He bought 40 acres of land on the vacant southeast corner of the Strip and Bond Road (now Tropicana Avenue). Jaffe wanted to build the finest resort in Las Vegas, and with that in mind he organized the Bond Estates Company to build the resort. The Tropicana was designed by architect M. Tony Sherman, and built by



Taylor Construction, both from Miami. Jaffe had no casino experience so leased the casino operations to New Orleans gambler “Dandy” Phil Kastel. Kastel’s wife, Margaret, thought it would be fun to decorate the Tropicana so showed up every day in her fur coat, telling the workmen what to do.

Construction was in full swing on the Stardust before it began on the Tropicana. Unfortunately for Jaffe and his partner Charles Baron, Tony Cornero decided to pay construction workers double wages, in order to speed up com-



pletion of the Stardust. Jaffe was forced to bring in a crew of masons from California, as none were available in Vegas. That, with other cost overruns that Jaffe wasn't prepared for, forced him to sell his shares of the Fountainbleu to raise another \$5 million to finish the Trop. The Tropicana was finally finished, and at a cost of \$15 million it was the most expensive Las Vegas resort to date.

Cost overruns weren't the only problems that confronted Jaffe. The Gaming Control Board wouldn't license "Dandy" Phil Kastel as the casino manager. Seems that "Dandy" Phil had some mob connections, and that pesky Control Board thought they could keep the mob out of Vegas. The licensing battle went on for awhile, some sources say nearly a year. "Dandy" Phil eventually backed out of the deal, and the licensing moved forward.

The Tropicana finally opened on April 4, 1957, at 3801 Las Vegas Blvd. South, with 300 rooms. Lush landscaping surrounded the Olympic-size swimming pool that was in the central courtyard of the tropical-theme hotel. The focal point, as seen from the strip, was the 60-foot tulip-shaped fountain that was lighted by rose and blue neon, and was set in a shallow 110-foot reflecting pool. Lieutenant Governor Rex Bell cut the ribbon to open the beautiful new resort. Monte Proser's original musical production "Tropicana Revue", which starred Eddie Fisher, was the highlight of the opening festivities. The theater-restaurant, with a stage that encircled much of the audience, would accommodate 450 patrons for dinner. Things were good.

### More than meets the eye

On the evening of May 2, 1957, there was a shooting in New York, in an apartment house on Central Park West. The victim was Frank Costello, who was known to be in the upper echelons of the mob. A single shot was fired, and blood streamed over the side of Costello's face. The gunman hurried past the shocked doorman, out to a waiting car, and sped off. Costello sank down onto a sofa and held a handkerchief to his bleeding head, he muttered "Someone tried to get me". He was rushed to nearby Roosevelt Hospital, where doctors



worked on the superficial wound that was behind Costello's right ear.

While the doctors worked on Costello, detectives searched his clothing. In his bloodstained suit jacket they found a slip of paper with handwritten notes. Costello claimed that the slip of paper wasn't his, and he had no idea how it got into his pocket. One of the notes, *Gross casino wins as of 4/27/57 \$651,284*, was found to be the exact figure of the Tropicana's receipts in her first 24 days of business. It was established that Michael J. Tanico, a cashier at the Tropicana, wrote part of the note. The Beverly Club in New Orleans, whose owners included "Dandy" Phil Kastel, Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky, had previously employed Tanico. Some of the handwriting was identified as belonging to Louis J Lederer, who also held an interest in the downtown Fremont Hotel. The Gaming Control Board ordered that Lederer be removed from the gaming industry.

The shadow of suspicion of hidden mob-ownership now darkened the brightly shining new resort. Jaffe himself wasn't considered squeaky clean, as it was reported that he gambled and ran punchboard cards just over the border in Mexico. Anxious to clean-up his standing with the Control Board, Jaffe brought in well-known Las Vegas businessman J. Kell Houssels to help run the Tropicana.

### J. Kell Houssels

Houssels originally came to town as part of a surveying crew for the Hoover Dam project. In 1931 Houssels bought the Old Smokeshop on Fremont Street, then converted it into the original Las Vegas Club. Later he expanded into other business ventures, including ownership in Las Vegas's first cab company, Lucky Cabs. He purchased interest in the El Cortez Casino in 1941, as well as the Showboat, and would eventually be a part owner of the Union Plaza. Houssels also worked with City Hall to develop and promote Las Vegas. His reputation in the town was above reproach, and the Control Board readily licensed him to help run the Trop.

Houssels bought six-percent of the Trop, and managed it with the assistance of Robert O. Cannon, whose local experience had been gained at the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier. One night in 1957, gamblers had been winning heavily and Houssels quickly borrowed a large amount of cash from the El Cortez, which he rushed to the Trop in a paper shopping bag, to make sure all bets were adequately covered (accounts vary from \$50,000 to "several hundred thousand dollars"). Under his leadership the



Tropicana was doing well, and in 1959 Houssels bought out Jaffe's interest in the resort, though Jaffe retained ownership of the land.

In 1959 entertainment director Lou Walters (father of newswoman Barbara Walters) imported the French spectacular "Folies Bergere" from Paris, a show that is still playing today, nearly 50 years later. Much like the town itself, the show is constantly reinvented so that it remains entertaining to repeat visitors. My husband and I went to see the Folies a few years ago; one of the acts was a dance routine performed to the song "Lady in Red". Both dancers were fully clothed, and it was one of the most sensual things I've ever had the pleasure to watch.



### The 1960's

In 1961 the Tropicana bought 120 acres of land across the street to the east. It was used to build a par-70 18-hole golf course and country club. The Clubhouse was styled like a southern mansion. The Club offered a night lighted driving range, pro shop, coffee shop, cocktail lounge, gallery lounge, dining room, TV room, and dressing rooms with lockers. The resident pro was Milt Ross, a Class A PGA pro.

J. Kell Houssels enjoyed horse racing. In the late 1930's he maintained stables for 13 thoroughbred horses at a California racetrack. I found a reference that said Houssels won \$69,000 at Hollywood Park, on July 6, 1963...but it didn't say whether that was from betting, or

whether he owned a horse that won, or...? Shecky Greene played in the Showcase Lounge at the Tropicana. Shecky had an unusual clause in his contract...it required that a racehorse be named after him! So, to honor the contract, Kell named one of his horses "Shecky G.". In 1961 Shecky G. won his first race, at Pamona Park.

The coolest thing that I found about Houssels' horses is that one of them, Bymeabond, won the Santa Anita Derby in 1945, earning \$50,000 in prize money. The jockey was Georgie "The Iceman" Woolf. If The Iceman's name sounds familiar...remember the movie Seabiscuit? Georgie was the one who rode Seabiscuit to victory over War Admiral in a match race at Pimlico. Bymeabond also ran in the 1945 Kentucky Derby, under jockey Fred A. Smith. Bymeabond was taken to the inside early, forcing the early pace. He made a bold bid on the stretch turn, but gave way steadily in the last quarter, finishing 6<sup>th</sup>. Sorry...I got way "off track" here (groaaaaaan!), I'm supposed to be at the Trop in the 1960's, not California in the 1940's!

One of the acts at the Trop was Gus Augspurg, with his "girlfriends" (which were baboons). In 1965 one of his baboons, Mary Jane, somehow escaped. After she'd been missing for several hours, a phone call was received at the Trop asking if they were missing a baboon. Luckily a neighbor had spotted Mary Jane and fed her cookies to keep her attention until Gus's wife Casey could get there to pick her up. Another baboon incident occurred when Gus and friends appeared on Jack Kogan's TV show. Seems one of the "girls" ran Jack off the set so she could play with the station's kitten mascot!



There were approximately four hundred rooms added, during 3 expansions in the 1960's. The rooms were all air







conditioned, and most (if not all) of them had their own patios.

In 1961 the Tropicana bought a Tiffany Rolls Royce for the use of "Special Guests".

In 1969 J. Kell Houssels married one of the Folies Bergere dancers, named Nancy.

### The 1970's-the mob at the Trop

In 1970 Houssels sold his shares of the Trop to Trans-Texas Airways. A year later, Trans-Texas sold to Deil Gustafson from Minnesota. In 1974 the Gaming Control Board learned that Gustafson's company was using the Trop to loan money to known Detroit mobsters, and they forced him to sell a controlling interest in the resort. The buyer was chemical heiress Mitzi Stauffer Briggs.



In 1975 another group of investors, Associates of the Tropicana, bought into the resort. Joe Agosto, who was appointed to head the Folies Bergere show and later ran the hotel, represented the group. Nevada officials later discovered that Agosto was sending cash to mobster Joseph Aiuppa of Chicago, as well as to mobsters in Kansas City and Milwaukee.

The FBI set up wiretaps on the phones of reputed mobsters in Las Vegas, and their suspected associates in Kansas City. Information gathered from the wiretaps, and other eavesdropping methods, uncovered a skimmming scheme that was in place at the Trop. In 1981 a Kansas City Grand Jury indicted seven of the alleged mobsters, and in 1983 all seven were convicted. One account that I read said that during the trial, Joe Agosto, who'd turned government witness, had a heart attack and died. Gustafson was tried and convicted in a separate case, involving check fraud at the Trop. The Control Board required both Gustafson and Briggs to sell their shares.

In 1977 the 22-story, 600 room, Tiffany Tower was added. Also added was the world's largest Tiffany leaded-glass canopy, over the gaming tables. Due to the size and construction of the canopy, special "shock-absorbers" had to be installed to keep the canopy from cracking or breaking when the building vibrates. I seem to recall that there was a great shot of that ceiling in the 1984 movie "The Vegas Strip War", which was Rock Hudson's last movie, and also starred Sharon Stone. A ton of great casino shots in the film.

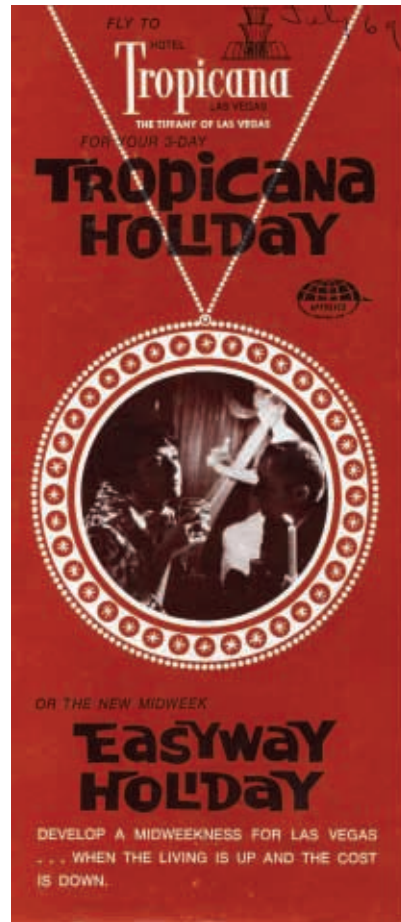
In the late 1970's the Tulip Fountain was removed.

**Ramada Inns...Aztar...Columbia Sussex...  
Who's next?**

In 1979, the Ramada Inn Hotel chain acquired the Tropicana, leasing it from Jaffe's family. In 1985 they began a major renovation project that featured a 5-acre water park, and added the 22-story Island tower. They re-themed the hotel, calling it "The Island of Las Vegas".

In 1989 Ramada Inns formed the Aztar Corporation, to run the Tropicana properties located in Las Vegas and Laughlin, Nevada, as well as the one in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The Jaffe family retained ownership of the land in Las Vegas until 2002, when they sold it to Aztar for \$1.2 million. A year later, Aztar announced that the Trop would be undergoing a major renovation and expansion, which would nearly double the number of rooms. That didn't happen.



Somewhere in this period the Gambler's Hall of Fame and Museum occupied a portion of the Tropicana's ground floor. They displayed the most wonderful collections of ashtrays, china, chips, postcards, swizzle sticks, photos and other pieces of gaming history that I've ever seen in my life. The Trop replaced the gaming history with a Titanic Display, I believe.

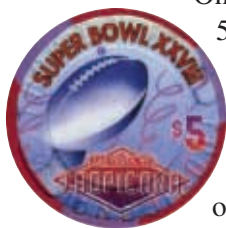
In 2006 the Columbia Sussex Corporation acquired Aztar for \$2.8 billion. Columbia announced a \$25 billion upgrade that would destroy much of the existing hotel. They said the property would expand to more than 10,000 hotel rooms by 2010. They announced that they would retain the historic Tiffany Theater and keep the Folies Bergere show.

space, a wedding chapel and 61,000 square feet of gaming space. The casino is filled with video reel and multi-game slots, blackjack, craps, roulette and poker. In addition, the Tropicana offers a seasonal swim-up blackjack game by the Coconut Grove Bar.

Unfortunately, Tropicana employees aren't happy. Columbia has laid off over 300 workers from the Las Vegas property, in an effort to cut operating costs. Costs have been cut, but so has the service to the customer, as well as upkeep and maintenance to the hotel and grounds. The Tropicana, once known as the most elegant show-place on the Strip, is getting shabby and run-down.

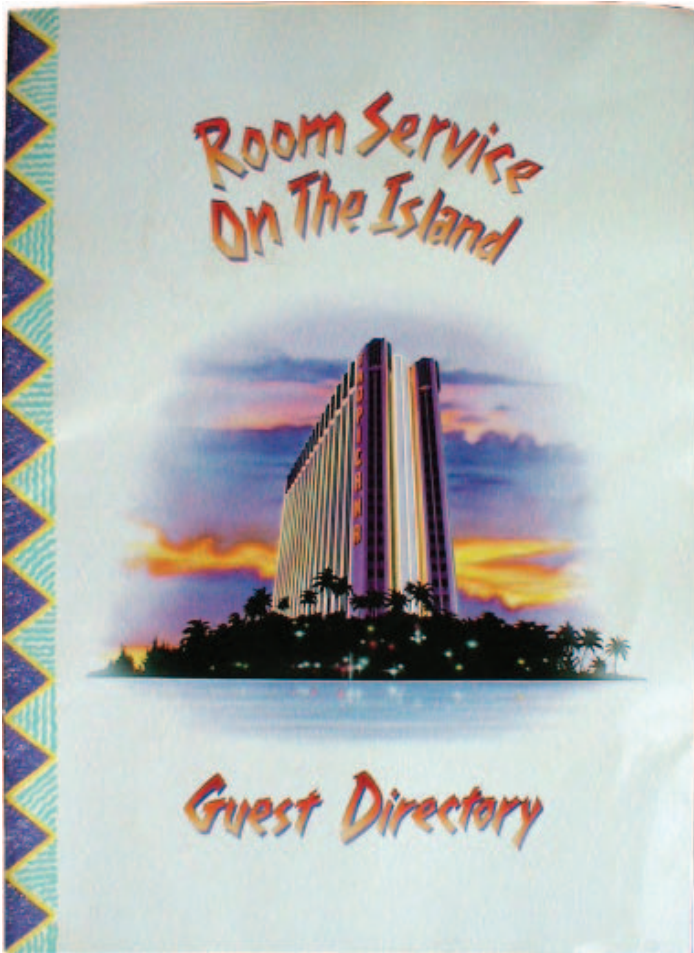
On Wednesday, December 12, 2007, Atlantic City Gaming Officials denied the renewal of the AC Tropicana's gaming license. They said that the AC Trop failed to meet New Jersey's standards for financial responsibility, character and integrity. The board ruled that a trustee will operate the casino until a buyer is found. Columbia Sussex is appealing.

Time will tell what affect that will have on the Las Vegas Tropicana...



On April 4, 2007 the Tropicana turned 50. The hotel has 1,871 rooms and suites, six restaurants, a five-acre tropical garden oasis with three swimming pools and whirlpools, a full-service spa, a styling salon and barber shop, over 100,000 square feet of convention





**The Stardust**  
**The thirteenth resort on the Strip**

**Anthony Cornero Stralla**

He was better known as Tony Cornero. Cornero made his first fortune during prohibition; his specialty was overseeing the unloading of illegal booze from large ships waiting off of the California coast, to smaller boats that would get the booze to shore before dawn. Cornero was caught, convicted of a felony, and did time. Then prohibition was repealed, so he had to find another occupation after his release from prison.

Tony, with his brothers Frank and Louis, headed for Las Vegas. Early in 1931, Tony and his brothers built the *Meadows Casino*, near the intersection of Fremont and Charleston. It was reportedly the first “classy” casino in town (as opposed to “sawdust joints”, which appropriately described most of the early casinos). Most of the guests were local, they didn’t need hotel rooms so, only two months after it opened, the Corneros sold the 30-room hotel but retained the casino. On labor day, 1931, the hotel burned to the ground. The Corneros kept the casino until 1932. That was the end of Tony’s first venture in Las Vegas.

Tony headed for California, where he ran gambling ships, including the *SS Rex*. There were constant battles with state and local officials, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. At least one time, when officials tried to board the *Rex*, Tony’s crew sprayed fire hoses at them, to keep them at bay! Eventually, though, deputies did board the *Rex*. They axed roulette wheels, threw craps tables overboard, and enjoyed taking pictures of the mayhem. Tony took his battle all the way to the California Supreme Court, claiming that his business was legal, but eventually he lost the war. So, for awhile, Tony ran a legitimate shipping company.

In 1944 Tony headed for Las Vegas again. He leased the casino in the Apache Hotel building, downtown, and changed the name to the *SS Rex*. We’ve been told that the light fixture (which looks like carvings of Neptune) over the main bar at Binion’s was removed from the *SS Rex* ship, and was installed in the *SS Rex* Casino by Tony Cornero. There were, of course licensing problems for Cornero. Several months after the *SS Rex* opened, the landlord severed all connections with him. Once again Cornero headed for California, to operate the *SS Lux* off shore. Once again, he found himself battling with officials. Once again, he lost.

**If at first you don’t succeed...**

In the early 1950’s Tony Cornero was in Las Vegas again, preparing for his third venture into the Las Vegas gambling scene. This time he would go all out...he didn’t want his hotel to have just 200 or 300 rooms, like most of the new hotels had when they opened. No...his hotel would have 1500 rooms! Each section of rooms was to be named after a planet, and there would be a space-age motor scooter to carry the guests to their rooms. The hotel would cover 40 acres of land...the world’s largest hotel! The hotel would be called *Stardust*. (There is some indication that Cornero originally planned to call his resort *Starlight*. I couldn’t find much, but I saw one ad with that name).





In 1954 Cornero bought 36 acres of land next to the Royal Nevada. He set up a company that he called *Stardust Inc.*, then printed up stock certificates, which he sold to his investors, at \$10.01 a share. Of course, he hadn't registered the stock with the Securities and Exchange Commission, but that was just a formality...wasn't it? He got the money; the customers got the stock certificates, and construction began. Simple enough. If money ran a little short, sell a few more certificates. He ended up selling some \$4 million in unregistered stocks. Not being registered, the stocks weren't underwritten. Ultimately stockholders took the case to court, where the judge ruled that Nevada residents who'd bought stock could keep their ownership, non-residents lost their investments.



Tony Cornero paid cash as he went. A truckload of materials was delivered...he paid cash. Construction workers worked...he paid cash at the end of the week. He went over to the Desert Inn to shoot some craps...he paid cash. There was a lot of construction going on in Las Vegas in the 1950's (that's one thing about Vegas that hasn't changed!) and there weren't enough skilled workers to go around. It took a lot of time to build something the size of the Stardust, but Tony was anxious to see his dream turn into reality. He began paying union laborers double wages, to get the job done faster. Of course, double wages plus materials and some gambling (a man had to have an outlet at the end of a long day, didn't he?) meant that the money started to run out.

In 1955 Tony set up the first of several meetings with Moe Dalitz and Meyer Lansky. He needed money to finish the Stardust, which would be the world's biggest hotel

and the world's biggest casino, and he would be willing to take them in as partners. Over time, they loaned him several million dollars, so progress could continue.

Of course there was a small matter of a gaming license. Tony was a convicted felon. He'd previously been denied a gaming license; later he'd received a license, only to have it revoked. Apparently Tony was an optimist, because he went before the Gaming Control Board once again. Once again, he was denied. He'd gone too far with the project to abandon it, and he struck an agreement with Milton "Farmer" Page, who was licensed as an owner of the downtown Pioneer Club. Of course, Farmer wanted to manage the casino his way, and Tony wanted to make his own decisions...but all that could be worked out later, at least there was a license.

Then, on the morning of July 31, 1955, while shooting craps at the Desert Inn, Tony Cornero clutched his chest, collapsed and died. Some say it was a heart attack.



Others speculate as to why the glass he'd been drinking from was whisked away to the kitchen to be washed, and why it was two hours before anyone called the Sheriff. There was no autopsy. Whatever the cause...at 55 years old, Tony Cornero crapped out.

The Stardust was about 80% complete when Tony died and construction stopped. Construction workers hadn't been paid for two weeks, and no one knew who was in charge. The hotel was boarded up and fenced off, and stayed that way for nearly two years. A creditor's committee moved in to try and straighten out the mess in Federal Bankruptcy Court. Finally Mrs. John Factor, sister-in-law of cosmetics magnate Max Factor, was allowed to purchase the Stardust. The Factors were the backers for Dalitz & Company, who would officially assume control in September of 1958. The Stardust's plans were revised, somewhat, and work began again.



**A dream comes true...finally**

On July 2, 1958, nearly three years after Tony Cornero died; the Stardust opened at 3000 Las Vegas Blvd. South. It opened with 1032 rooms that were advertised as "Astronomical luxury at down-to-earth prices" (rates started at \$6 per day). The Big Dipper swimming pool was 105 feet long; the casino was 16,500 square feet; the lobby was 13,500 square feet and was decorated in rich red and deep brown colors with indirect lighting. The Café Continental theater-lounge had seating for 700. The resort opened with the French revue *Lido de Paris*, starring Jacqueline Du Bief. The most noticeable thing about



the 'Dust was the sign on the building; it was a 216 foot long "galaxy" that weighed 29 tons, and used 7,100 feet of neon tubing and 11,000 lamps to create a glow that was visible from 3 miles away!

The Stardust offered the largest casino in Nevada (probably the largest in the country). In addition there was the Stardust Country Club four miles to the east, The Stardust International Raceway was to the west of the property, the Stardust bought a drive-in movie theater that had closed and it was reopened as the Stardust Drive-In. They even offered a supervised playground for the youngsters, and riding was available at Horseman's Park, on the Stardust grounds. When the adjoining Royal Nevada went bankrupt, the Stardust bought it, thus adding more rooms and another swimming pool. The Royal Nevada's casino was turned into the Stardust Auditorium/Convention Center.

The Stardust was successful. It seems that Tony Cornero's dream came true, even though he wasn't around to see it.

**The 1970's**

In 1969 the Los Angeles based Parvin-Dorhmann Corporation bought the Stardust. Ashtrays and postcards of the time say "A Recrion Resort"; Recrion was an offshoot of Parvin-Dorhmann. In the early 1970's they had the 'Dust up for sale, and along came developer Allen R. Glick.



Glick came to Vegas in 1972 and purchased the Hacienda Hotel and Casino with the intention of tearing it down to build a mobile home park. He changed his mind, decided to run the Hacienda himself, and applied for a gaming license. His application was approved. He found out that the Stardust and the Fremont Hotel (downtown), both owned by Recrion, were for sale. He approached Al Baron, assets manager of the Central States Teamster Pension Fund, for financial backing. Baron tried to warn him that “business partners” came along with teamster money, but Glick persisted. By 1974 Glick owned the Stardust and Fremont, and the Chicago mob owned Allen Glick.



### “Lefty”

Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal was a highly skilled sports handicapper, from Chicago. He’d been a professional gambler, he’d run his own bookie joint, and in 1971 he was hired by the Stardust as a floorman. Lefty was very smart, and when he saw the amount of cash that went through the casino, he began to get ideas on how to increase that cash flow even more. He told some “friends” that if he could get into a position of authority, there would be a big increase in the casino profits.

When Glick took over the Stardust, his “partners” told him to promote Rosenthal, so Glick made him the Director of Nevada Operations, for the Argent Corporation. Then the Gaming Control Board entered the picture. Seems that anyone that holds an upper-management position in the casino industry had to be licensed by Gaming, as a Key Employee. Gaming told Glick that Rosenthal wouldn’t get a license, period. Over the next several years Rosenthal had different titles at the Stardust, including food and beverage director and entertainment director. Rosenthal would hold a position for awhile, then Gaming would step in and say the position needed to be held by a licensed person. Finally, Rosenthal hosted *The Frank Rosenthal Show*; a television show that was broadcast from the Stardust. Regardless of his title, everyone (including Allen Glick) knew his real position...he was the Boss!

One of the ideas that Rosenthal dreamed up was to add a race and sports book to the



casino. Before 1975, race and sports betting was handled in small “bookie joints”. In September of 1975, the Stardust opened an 8,000 square foot book, with plush chairs, multiple television screens, and numerous boards to display race results.

### Siegfried & Roy

It was 1970 when Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn came to Las Vegas for three years, to perform a 15-minute act in Donn Arden’s *Lido de Paris*, at the Stardust. In 1973 they left Nevada to perform elsewhere, then they came back to perform at the MGM, in the *Hallelujah Hollywood* show, for the next several years. In 1978, learning that Siegfried & Roy’s contract was up for renewal, Rosenthal wanted them back with the *Lido*. He sent Bernie Yuman, a “gopher” with ambition, to the MGM, promising him \$500 if he could get the magicians to Rosenthal’s office, for a meeting. There was 20 minutes left in the MGM’s second show when Bernie ran out the door. Bernie managed to get into the magician’s dressing room, and persuaded them to meet with Rosenthal. Rosenthal doubled their salary, and made sure the dressing rooms and animal quarters were all that the magicians requested. He also agreed to give them star billing, with the *Lido*, and allowed them to be the 30-minute closing act. They stayed at the Stardust until 1981, when they moved to the Frontier, to star in *Beyond Belief*.

### Skimming

Rosenthal was in charge of a huge “skimming” operation that included both the Stardust and the Fremont. The “skim” was cash that wasn’t included in the official count. If the cash wasn’t counted, it wasn’t reported. If it wasn’t reported, it wasn’t income. If it wasn’t income, it wasn’t taxed.

Skimming started in the early days, when casino owners had to pay back loans that didn’t show up on the books. If someone borrowed a million dollars from Meyer



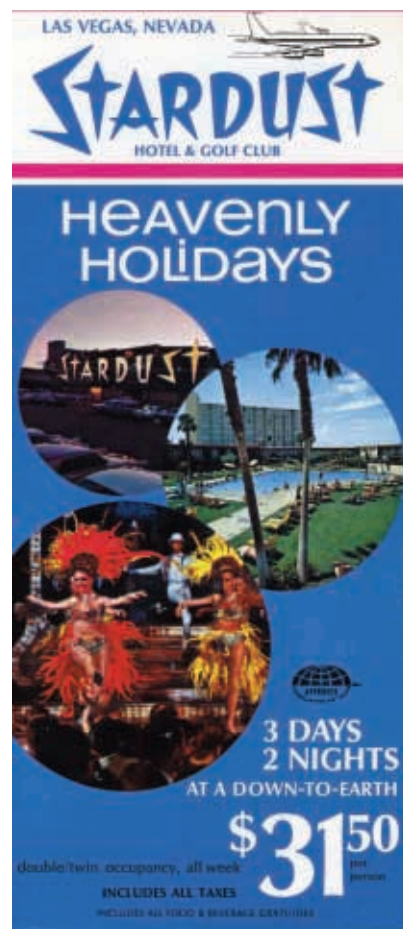
In the count room, the coins weren't individually counted they were weighed. The Stardust managed to adjust their scales to under-report the value of the coins on the scales. The coins that weren't included in the official count were rolled, then were placed in kiosks around the casino floor. Before the days of bill-validators, the change girls would sell rolls of coins to slot players. They would take the bills they received, and put them into the cash drawers in the kiosks, and take out more rolls of coins. At night more rolls of coins would be added to the kiosks, and the money would be removed from the cash drawer. None of that cash ever showed up in the counting rooms. It was estimated that \$12 million a year was being skimmed, by this method.

Rosenthal couldn't do everything himself. He needed someone to make sure that his orders were carried out. Tony "The Ant" Spilotro was the muscle-man that the mob sent to Vegas to fill the role. Useful when he arrived in Vegas, Spilotro eventually proved to be a hindrance. He had an affair with Rosenthal's wife, he got involved with drugs, and he set up a burglary ring. He was drawing unwelcome attention to Frank Rosenthal and the Stardust. Rosenthal tried to keep him away, but Spilotro felt that he was beyond taking orders.

In 1982 a car bomb blew up Rosenthal's car, in an attempted murder. Rosenthal's estranged wife died later that year, from a drug overdose.

Lansky, it was a cash loan "just between us". The loan and interest had to be paid back in cash, off the books. Susie Berman, daughter of mobster Dave Berman, remembers going into the counting room with her father. She watched as the owners sorted money into stacks, by denomination, then divided it "three for us, one for the government, two for Meyer." The owners had to make a profit—that's why they were in business. Meyer had to be paid back, or the casino owner wouldn't stay in business. The government's stack would be counted, reported as income, and taxed. Everyone was happy with the set-up until the government figured out that they weren't getting their full share.

The Government started making rules and regulations to try and clean up the casino industry. Agencies were set up to regulate licenses, and to oversee accounting procedures. Casino owners were no longer allowed in the count rooms. A Nevada Gaming Commission person was placed in the count room, observing the count and recording the figures for the government. As more government controls were put in place, less money was going to the mob...and the mob saw that as a bad thing.



Spilotro was arrested for heading up the burglary ring. The Feds were closing in. By 1983 the state had suspended the gaming license of Argent, pending revocation of the license. Rosenthal was listed in the “Black Book”, the state Gaming Commission’s list of persons who were officially barred from entering any Nevada casino. He moved to California. Other mob bosses were arrested and some did time in prison. Spilotro and his brother were found, a few years later, beaten to death and buried in a shallow grave in the middle of a cornfield in Indiana.

For more of the story of the mob-controlled Stardust, get the movie *Casino*. It was based on the book of the same name, that was written by Nicholas Pileggi, which tells the story much better than I ever could. The names have been changed, but the story is there.

### The Boyd Group

The state removed Argent from controlling the casino, but they didn’t close the Stardust. The state asked Boyd Gaming to come in and manage the casino, while hearings were held to determine whether Argent could stay in gaming. Argent retained control of the non-gaming areas. Initially Argent gave Boyd a hard time, but they became more cooperative after time, realizing that they were reaping the profits of Boyd’s management. Boyd Gaming received only a flat fee for managing the casino. Boyd had been managing the Stardust for about a year when an Argent attorney approached them. Argent had lost their license, and felt that they would lose their appeal. They wanted to know if Boyd was interested in buying the Stardust and the Fremont, which was also owned by Argent and was involved in the skimming operations.

Boyd agreed and on February 28, 1985 ownership officially changed hands.

In 1988 Boyd spent \$50 million to expand and renovate the property, and in 1991 they added a 32-story hotel tower.

On February 28, 1991, the *Lido de Paris* show took its final bow, after being part of the Stardust since 1958. Twelve totally different versions of the show had been produced in France, then sent to the Stardust. Nearly all of the early performers came from France, with the shows. Later versions of the show used mostly

American performers. The costumes were designed and created in France. As each version of the show ended, the costumes and scenery were taken out into the desert and burned, under the supervision of Federal Agents, to avoid paying import taxes on them.

In 1993 Sam Boyd passed away, which left Boyd Gaming in the hands of his son, Bill. In that same year, Boyd Gaming went public.

In 2006 it was announced that the Stardust would close, to make room for Echelon Place. Echelon Place will be built on 63 acres and will include the 2,600-room Resort Tower and the Suite Tower with 700 suites. Two spas are planned, two theaters and more than 25 bars and restaurants. There will be landscaped pools, shopping and more than a million square feet of meeting and convention space. Three additional hotels are expected to be part of the property, each with additional amenities. Opening is scheduled to be 2010.







**The first...**

In June of 1981, George and I saw the *Lido de Paris* show, which starred Siegfried and Roy, and the show was incredible! It was the first show I ever went to, in Las Vegas. It was also the first program/ticket stubs that I saved as souvenirs. Unfortunately, by the time we started collecting NV casino items, the program and stubs had been lost or discarded. (Sigh...timing is everything!)

We never went to many buffets, but the buffet at the Stardust was the first LV buffet that I ever went to. I still remember watching the lady at the next table, as she carefully wrapped a few dinner rolls in napkins and placed them in her purse.

The slot club at the Stardust was the first one I ever joined. Not that I cared about being a slot club member, but they gave two Stardust pens to you for signing up...I wanted the pens! I still have the slot card.



The Stardust was the first hotel to offer me a free hotel room for two nights. WOW...I couldn't believe they did that...for little ol' ME!!! Yeah, I felt like a VIP!

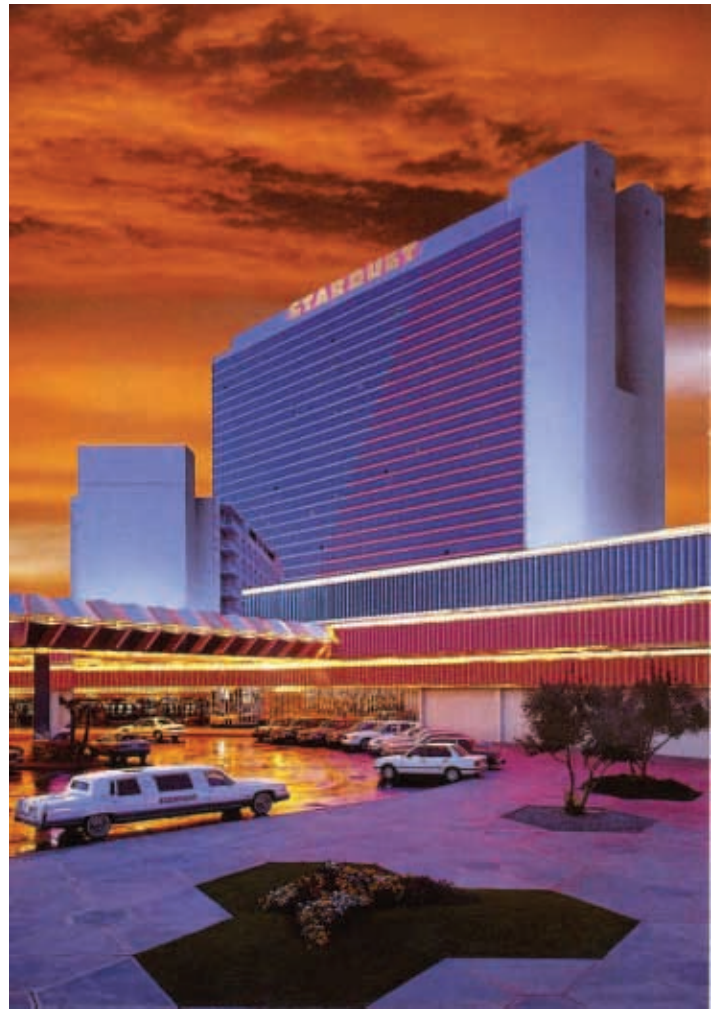
For these reasons, for the memories and the nostalgia and the history, I think the Stardust is the resort I'll miss the most.

**Disclaimer**

I hope this series of articles has been as enjoyable to read as it has been to write. To the best of my knowledge, all of the information in the article is correct; unfortunately, different sources sometimes provided very different "facts" for the same incident. For example...remember how Frank Costello was shot, and wounded, in the lobby of his apartment house? One source said he was "fatally shot"! Oops!

**Credits**

Some of the reference books used for these articles include: *"The Stardust of Yesterday"* by Heidi Knapp Rinella; *"The First 100, Portraits of the Men and Women*



*Who Shaped Las Vegas"*, published by Huntington Press; *"Las Vegas, The Entertainment Capital"* by Donn Knepp; *"Resort City in the Sunbelt"* by Eugene P. Moehring. I also used various issues of *"Chip Chat"*, and auction catalogs by club member Doug Saito. Additional information came from various websites, postcards, and hotel brochures.