

Las Vegas as a Symbol: Goffman and Competing Narratives of Sin City

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Dmitri Shalin has demonstrated the importance of Erving Goffman to the field of sociology, and in this case to the sociology of Las Vegas as a gambling, resort, and urban center. But Goffman also was part of a trend, or more accurately what became a trend, and he played an important role in it. When Goffman came to Las Vegas in the late 1950s and early 1960s in connection with his field work as a downtown casino dealer, “the city of non-homes,” as he called it, was at a turning point in a variety of ways. When he published his findings in the late 1960s, including his essay “Where the Action Is,” Las Vegas was positioned for another turning point that he helped to coax onward: becoming an important field for scholarship. This essay attempts to explain the Las Vegas in which Goffman found himself, and the Las Vegas whose understanding he went on to enhance with the publication of his work.¹

By the late 1950s, when Goffman began plotting his field work, Las Vegas had given him a field to work in by managing to become part of the national consciousness. That road had been less likely than it seemed at the time or since. Since the town’s founding on May 15, 1905, as a repair stop on the Los Angeles to Salt Lake railroad, Las Vegans promoted an image of their area. At first they sought new industry, along with touting the town’s possibilities as a mining center, an agricultural community, and a health center.²

While early Las Vegans sought to promote an image of their community, the next generation and those that followed would prove more adept and successful in that quest. In the 1930s, with Hoover Dam’s construction and the state’s legalization of gambling, Las Vegans’ long-held hopes for tourism became a reality. Hundreds of thousands visited the dam annually to see the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” and Las Vegas benefited. In addition, in the 1930s and early 1940s, Las Vegas marketed itself as “Still a Frontier Town,” with casinos downtown and on the fledgling Strip taking western names and including such attractions as the “chuck wagon buffet” at the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier Village theme park behind the eponymous hotel.³

Las Vegas changed its marketing strategy and image just after World War II. At the behest of Chamber of Commerce president Max Kelch, Las Vegas raised money for promotion and hired a national advertising agency. By 1949, the chamber had gone in-

1 Dmitri N. Shalin, “Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene,” *UNLV Gaming Research & Review Journal* (20:1), 7; Erving Goffman, *Where the Action Is* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).

2 On early Las Vegas and promotions, see Ralph J. Roske, *Las Vegas: A Desert Paradise* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1986); Eugene P. Moehring, “Town Making on the Nevada Frontier: Las Vegas, 1905-1925,” in Francis X. Hartigan, ed., *History and Humanities: Essays in Honor of Wilbur S. Shepperson* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 81-104; Joan Burkhart Whitely, *Young Las Vegas, 1905-1931: Before the Future Found Us* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2010). References to Las Vegas history come from these works, others to be footnoted, and the following: Geoff Schumacher, *Sun, Sin & Suburbia: The History of Modern Las Vegas* (Revised edition, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2015); Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2001* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Rex J. Rowley, *Everyday Las Vegas: Local Life in a Tourist Town* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2013); A.D. Hopkins and K.J. Evans, eds., *The First 100: Portraits of the Men and Women Who Shaped Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1999).

3 Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-2000* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), 1-72.

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house and created what became known as the Las Vegas News Bureau. Photographers and videographers worked with hotel publicists to create a variety of short films, photos, and advertisements that sought to establish Las Vegas as an ideal place for adults to play. After Walt Disney opened his dream park in Anaheim in 1955, Las Vegas increasingly became known as an “Adult Disneyland” with “daytime sun and nighttime fun,” and neon signs lighting the Strip and downtown’s “Glitter Gulch,” and would continue to shape its image into the 1990s with its family theme and the early 2000s with its “What Happens in Vegas” campaign. With the postwar economic boom and such transportation improvements as bigger airplanes and the beginnings of the interstate highway system, Las Vegas was indeed positioned for a prosperous tourism industry.⁴

Goffman saw all of this and more, but he also saw a city on the precipice of significant change. In 1958, Nevada had been part of a national Democratic sweep that elected, among others, Governor Grant Sawyer, who took office pledging publicly to expand and enhance gaming control and privately to fight for civil rights. Responding to the state’s history of machine politics, Sawyer had run on a platform that proclaimed, “Nevada’s Not For Sale,” and he and his regulators instituted a new Gaming Commission in 1959 and, in 1960, the List of Excluded Persons, better known as the Black Book, which barred a dozen alleged mobsters from Nevada’s casinos. Within the past few years, the Bank of Las Vegas had opened and begun lending money to casinos, and the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund had started to do the same, opening new possibilities for expansion in Las Vegas.⁵

Sawyer’s other issue, civil rights, also was coming to the fore. As Sawyer said, in running for office, he could ill afford to risk alienating the overwhelming majority of Nevadans who had little or no interest in civil rights, but he made clear to the African American community that he would be on their side—and he was. In his first legislative session as governor, he tried to create a state Equal Rights Commission but failed, thanks to the control that rural counties exerted in the legislature: with each of the state’s 17 counties entitled to one state senator, many of Sawyer’s actions failed by large margins.

But the national civil rights movement had echoes in Nevada. In 1955, the first African American dentist in Las Vegas, James McMillan, arrived and joined a cohort of educated, middle-class African Americans forced to live in segregated West Las Vegas. That year, the area welcomed its first true resort hotel, the Moulin Rouge, which closed after six months because of a variety of financial problems, but prompted the arrival of Bob Bailey, a veteran entertainer who joined the civil rights movement, as did other performers who came to work at the hotel. For the rest of the 1950s, they organized political action groups, economic boycotts, and a variety of other activities.

4 “The Mob on the Run,” KLAS-TV-8, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1987; Larry Gragg, *Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

5 Grant Sawyer, Gary E. Elliott, and R.T. King, *Hang Tough! Grant Sawyer: An Activist in the Governor’s Mansion* (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 1993).

When Goffman went to work in downtown Las Vegas, he was in a white community. The 2012 television series *Vegas*, starring Dennis Quaid as Ralph Lamb, a longtime Clark County sheriff, included a scene set in the Golden Nugget, which had opened in 1946. It showed signs by the bathrooms saying, “Whites Only.” This perfectly depicted the racism and segregation of the area, although no such signs appeared; African Americans were not allowed in casinos except as porters and maids, and occasionally as entertainers—but only occasionally. Finally, in March 1960, after the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins, McMillan, as president of the NAACP, demanded that Strip and downtown casinos desegregate, and the Moulin Rouge Agreement of that month led to all but two of the area’s gambling properties finally permitting African Americans to gamble, eat, drink, and stay in their rooms. McMillan said he told his contact with the casino owners, “I don’t have any money. I’m not trying to cut into their business. All I’m trying to do is make this a cosmopolitan city, and that will make more money for them.”⁶

Thus, when Goffman worked in Las Vegas as part of his research, he unwittingly opted to do so at an unusual and a pivotal time in the area’s history. How much it affected his research, or how conscious he was of it, is debatable. One irony is that at the time he shifted in his research from dealing cards to counting them, state gaming regulators concentrated on using the Black Book to try to keep out mobsters, but later shifted their focus to card counters and various cheaters. As a dealer and as a card counter, Goffman worked in a world that was corrupt in a variety of ways—or at least in different ways from academe. While frequenting casinos tied to organized crime and used to launder or skim money in connection with numerous illegal enterprises, Goffman worked and played in areas that could be crooked and violent. As one longtime Las Vegas attorney, Ralph Denton, put it, “There’s a temptation in a gambling house for a dealer to, in the vernacular, ‘swing.’ The only way a house can protect itself—at least this is their view—is to be able to fire a dealer without having to prove he’s cheating.” Similarly, dealers and card counters could be subject to violent reminders to behave. At the Horseshoe, owned by legendary gambling operator Benny Binion and operating in the downtown area where Goffman worked, Binion’s unsympathetic biographer observed that “suspected cheaters were beaten by the dozens under Binion’s reign. The lucky ones left the Horseshoe with a couple of broken fingers. Others departed with fractured arms. A Horseshoe bartender said the incidents were so common that he didn’t even notice them anymore. One guard admitted to an investigator that over the course of about ten years roughly a hundred patrons were beaten by security.”⁷

Between that background and the rumors, which Professor Shalin has discussed in his work, of a connection between Goffman and longtime Las Vegas resort operator and mobster Moe Dalitz, the sociologist could have been understandably reluctant to reveal exactly where he worked and who he met. In 1967, Goffman published some of his findings and conclusions in his collection of essays, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior*. Just as he had come to a Las Vegas on the cusp of change, he began to publish his work at a time that Las Vegas was beginning to undergo a metamorphosis, as a resort city and as a subject of scholarly inquiry.

The late 1960s marked a turning point more for the industry that drove the Las Vegas economy than for the community itself, although the results shaped and reshaped the future of Las Vegas. In 1966 and 1967, several events and individuals began or became part of that transformation:

6 James B. McMillan, Gary E. Elliott, and R.T. King, *Fighting Back: A Life in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 1997), 95.

7 Ralph L. Denton and Michael S. Green, *A Liberal Conscience: Ralph Denton, Nevadan* (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 2001), 211; Doug J. Swanson, *Blood Aces: The Wild Ride of Benny Binion, the Texas Gangster Who Created Vegas Poker* (New York: Viking, 2014), 290-92.

—In August 1966, Jay Sarno and his partners opened Caesars Palace, the first truly themed Strip resort since the Last Frontier and the harbinger of the Strip’s future of offering ersatz (or cleaner) versions of Venice, Lake Como, The Great Pyramids, and Medieval England, among other places. A significant percentage of the funding for Caesars Palace and Sarno’s next property, Circus Circus, came from the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund, and organized crime would go on to play a role in these properties.⁸

—In November 1966, Nevadans defeated Sawyer’s bid for a third term, electing Republican Paul Laxalt, who went on to be one of the fathers of the modern conservative movement, becoming widely known as Ronald Reagan’s closest friend. During the campaign, Sawyer had attacked the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover for illegally wiretapping casino owners, prompting Hoover to oppose his reelection. Laxalt promised Hoover that he would clean up the industry, and the first step in that process was the passage of the Corporate Gaming Act, which eased the licensing for corporations. Laxalt hoped that Wall Street’s involvement in the gaming industry would drive out the mob. He turned out to be wrong: the mob found ways around it, and other forces led to its departure.

—Also in November 1966, Howard Hughes arrived in North Las Vegas by train, and an ambulance transported him to the Desert Inn, operated by Moe Dalitz, a longtime casino owner, land developer, and organized crime associate. The following April, Hughes bought the hotel from Dalitz and began a shopping spree that also eliminated mob ownership of the Frontier and Sands Hotels. In theory, Hughes cleared out the mob. In practice, the mob remained involved in some of his casinos and now had the freedom to skim and launder without the responsibilities of ownership and control, but Hughes did bring Nevada a new level of respectability that it had previously lacked.⁹

—In the summer of 1967, Si Redd moved to Reno to run Bally Distributing Company. The company later became International Game Technology. A onetime jukebox salesman, Redd understood the importance of exciting and fun games, and the need to let computer experts do what they needed to do. Redd began a revolution on the casino floor that reduced the number of table games and the size of the pits, and expanded the role, importance, and profitability of slot and video poker machines.¹⁰

—In 1967, with its previous owners in trouble for skimming linked to organized crime kingpin Meyer Lansky, the Flamingo became the first hotel owned by Kirk Kerkorian, who turned it into a more profitable and honest operation, shocking state officials by reporting considerably higher winnings and revenues than the hotel’s mob-connected owners ever had. Kerkorian used the Flamingo to train his staff to open The International, the hotel he was building just off the Strip. Later, he sold the two properties to Hilton and built the original MGM Grand (now Bally’s) and the current MGM Grand—three times opening what was then the largest hotel-casino in the world.

—In 1967, a young graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and his new wife moved to Las Vegas and obtained a small percentage of the Frontier, and profited when Hughes bought it. Soon, Steve Wynn became a favorite of Bank of Las Vegas leader Parry Thomas, who helped him acquire land that provided the basis for his acquisition of the downtown Golden Nugget.¹¹

This combination of events did a great deal to trigger what happened fully two decades later: the boom that characterized Las Vegas from the opening of The Mirage in 1989 until the Great Recession struck in 2007. These developments in the late 1960s had the intended effect of changing how at least some of the outside world viewed Las Vegas.

⁸ David G. Schwartz, *Grandissimo: The First Emperor of Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Winchester Books, 2013).

⁹ Geoff Schumacher, *Howard Hughes: Power, Paranoia & Palace Intrigue* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Jack Harpster, *King of the Slots: William “Si” Redd* (New York: Praeger, 2010).

¹¹ John L. Smith, *Running Scared: The Life and Treacherous Times of Las Vegas Casino King Steve Wynn* (New York: DaCap-Press, 2009); Jack Sheehan, *Quiet Kingmaker of Las Vegas: E. Parry Thomas* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2009).

They also had the unintended and unrelated effect of coming at approximately the same time as a change in how the scholarly world viewed Las Vegas. Goffman has received less attention than some others who studied the area in the same period, which reflects the failings of those of us who have written about it since.

At the time Goffman came to Las Vegas and subsequently wrote about it, he had little relevant literature on which to rely. The only two histories of Nevada that had treated Las Vegas seriously by the late 1950s and early 1960s were the Works Progress Administration's history of and guide to the state in 1940 and Richard Lillard's wise and impressionistic *Desert Challenge: An Interpretation of Nevada*, which had come out in 1942; by the time his study of Las Vegas appeared in 1967, James W. Hulse, a Nevada native and professor at the university in Reno, had just published *The Nevada Adventure*, a middle school-level textbook. As for studying Las Vegas, writing about the city tended to fall into two categories: casual looks at its resort culture, such as *Las Vegas: Playtown U.S.A.* in 1955 and *Las Vegas: City Without Clocks* in 1961, or muckraking attacks on the mobsters who controlled most of the major casinos, as in *The Green Felt Jungle* in 1963 and *Gamblers' Money* in 1965.¹²

But just as the image of Las Vegas began to change, at least subtly in some people's minds, in the late 1960s, the tide showed signs of turning in the same period. In 1964, Tom Wolfe, a pioneer of the creative "new journalism," published an essay in *Esquire*, "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!" that appeared the next year in his collection, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. As Wolfe wrote, "Long after Las Vegas' influence as a gambling heaven has gone, Las Vegas' forms and symbols will be influencing American life. That fantastic skyline! Las Vegas' neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story-high display signs, parabolas, boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids, and all the rest of it, are already the staple design of the American landscape outside the oldest parts of the oldest cities. They are all over every suburb, every subdivision, every highway"¹³

Reflecting this influence, architectural scholars Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published their seminal *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972. Their subtitle—"The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form"—suggested its examination of such issues as urban sprawl, the role of space and lighting, and commerce. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour obviously influenced others in their field, but they also signaled that Las Vegas could be a worthy topic for serious study in ways that it had not been before.¹⁴

In the early 1970s came more steps toward scholarship on Las Vegas. The publication of Stanley Paher's *Las Vegas—As It Began, As It Grew* marked the first attempt to explain the area's early history in book form. It was more coffee-table than scholarly, but solidly researched, and focused on history and community rather than gaming. Perry Bruce Kaufman of the University of California, Santa Barbara, completed a dissertation on the history of Las Vegas from 1930 to 1960 that focused on civic boosterism; the combination of his dissertation and his research aided future scholars. In 1973, Russell Elliott, a longtime professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, and a child of the White Pine County copper boom, published the state's first full-length history textbook, although his focus on Las Vegas was limited at best. During the same era, Ralph Roske, hired at UNLV as a dean in 1967, returned to the classroom, taught extensively on

12 Works Progress Administration, *Nevada: A Guide to the Silver State* (Portland: Binsfords & Mort, 1940); Richard G. Lillard, *Desert Challenge: An Interpretation of Nevada* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942); James W. Hulse, *The Nevada Adventure: A History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1965); Ed Reid, *Las Vegas: City Without Clocks* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961); Ed Reid and Ovid DeMaris, *The Green Felt Jungle* (New York: Trident Press, 1963); Wallace Turner, *Gamblers' Money: The New Force in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

13 Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965).

14 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972).

Nevada and Las Vegas history, and encouraged students to research the subject, adding to the unpublished background literature. Also, the University of Nevada Oral History Program, begun in Reno in 1965, conducted interviews with several longtime Las Vegans.¹⁵

Granted, these may not have seemed nationally important, but they were. A spate of books and articles that take Las Vegas and gaming seriously have been appearing with regularity at the national and international level, perhaps starting with criminologist Jerome Skolnick's *House of Cards: The Control of Casino Gambling*, published by Little, Brown, in 1978, and enhanced our understanding of the community in the past three decades. As a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian noted, research by graduate students assists other scholars who "use those works to create the context," and this has been true of the lesser known research by UNLV students, among others.¹⁶

It is not that Erving Goffman is or was responsible for modern scholarship on Las Vegas; that would give him too much credit or, perhaps, blame. But it is safe to say that when a renowned sociologist chose Las Vegas as his means to the end of understanding action, and published his findings in a work that, nearly half a century later, remains crucial in his field, it meant that Las Vegas was finally becoming a subject for serious scholarly inquiry. For that reason, and many others, those who study, teach, or write about Las Vegas—indeed, those who live and work in Las Vegas—are in his debt.

15 Stanley W. Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began—As It Grew* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1971); Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973); Perry Bruce Kaufman, "The Best City of Them All: A History of Las Vegas, 1930-1960" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1974). The UNLV Department of Special Collections includes a large number of papers and oral history interviews by Roske's students.

16 <http://www.c-span.org/video/?164051-1/political-biographies&start=2852>