



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# REAL PEOPLE IN A MYTHIC LAND BETTING ON TOMORROW



Prospectors bring the gold to this boomtown. The gambling tables keep sucking it up and replenishing the mother lode. Gaming is still Las Vegas' most recognized enterprise. Yet, Las Vegas has also become a tourist attraction for those who gamble only a little, or not at all.

The V in Vegas could stand for variety. The city that changed gambling's name to gaming, has become an entertainment extravaganza. The Las Vegas club scene is hot. Concerts by big-name stars in relatively small venues draw audiences from every corner of the country and the world.

A constant array of talent dazzles — mega stars from every music genre, including rock, pop, country and classical, avant-garde performance art, hit Broadway shows, the conjuring of the world's greatest magicians, pugilistic events such as the heavyweight championship of the world, plus pirate ships doing battle, volcanoes exploding and death-defying high wire acts. The entertainment scene in Las Vegas is crazier than Carnival, more raucous than a Roman circus and busier than rush hour in Hong Kong. And it never stops.



(Left)  
Despite the increasing number of new residents, they are far outnumbered by the sea of tourists that washes through the city every year.  
*Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer*



(Right)  
Families are changing the face of Las Vegas: Contrary to the casinos' controlled environments, some of the city's new playgrounds are in the open air.  
*Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer*



Pundits galore have proclaimed Las Vegas overbuilt, oversold and overdone. The city has repeatedly managed to prove them wrong.

Competition for the gambling dollar is ever increasing. Atlantic City approximates a Las Vegas East. Native Americans have operated Las Vegas-style casinos in California since 1998. As many as 37 other states

allow some type of casino gambling, and 48 states offer a lottery. Yet, Vegas is still the draw.

By 1997 nongaming revenues already comprised 52 percent of the city's total income, yet gaming remains the city's 900-pound gorilla. It not only dominates the area's economy, it is the single-largest entertainment-related revenue stream in the United States. Gaming

In the face of increased competition, Las Vegas is still America's favorite place to gamble.  
*Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer*



proceeds nearly doubled between 1990 and 2000, from \$4.1 billion to \$7.6 billion. During the same period, visitor volume increased from nearly 22 million people to more than 35 million, and between 1996 and 2000, total visitor spending rose from \$22.5 billion to \$31.4 billion.

The booming entertainment/gaming industry, combined with ever-increasing nongaming growth patterns — more than 20,000 housing permits per year since 1988 — have caused some commentators to praise the Las Vegas economy as a paradigm others should emulate.

Beyond its economy, however, there is abundant speculation and discussion about the Las Vegas phenomenon. The city's almost logic-defying success, the ability to host conventions for both pornstars and preachers, and its unique role in sanctioning sin as entertainment have given rise to much prophecy about its purpose and place among American cities.

Cultural anthropologists, columnists and authors have declared that through the nation's acceptance and normalization of previously dissolute behavior, Sin City has become more like the rest of the country, and the rest of the country has become more like it. They claim that Las Vegas is no longer an aberrant but a caldron in which evolving social patterns are forged from the nation's desires. Some analysts have announced that Las Vegas is the prototype of 21st-century America.

It is true that on some levels there has been a homogenization of culture,

not just in America but also around the world. The same brands of food and clothing can be found to some degree in Moscow, Paris, Mexico City and Des Moines. In some ways as the world is getting smaller, the notion of community is expanding.

Although an easing of moral standards may be mirrored in the images that flash on movie and TV screens, or in the nation's acceptance of gaming as a national sport, it isn't plain that reasonable people are confusing fantasy with reality or choosing to live more sinful lives. Most of the nation may no longer look upon Las Vegas



People still come to Vegas to escape the ordinary.  
*Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer*



Las Vegas supported its champion "Runnin' Rebels" with a then still uncharacteristic display of community support.

as aberrant, but it does view it as different, which is a great part of its attraction. One of the reasons people go to Las Vegas is to escape the ordinary.

Why some pundits believe that Las Vegas represents the wave of the future isn't clear.

What is clear is that Las Vegas is a mythic land populated by real people. While it may not be an archetype of America's future, its own future is changing.

From The New Frontier to The Old Homestead

Las Vegas has changed direction many times. From desert oasis, to Mormon settlement, ranch country, mining center, railroad town, city of vice and entertainment extravaganza, it has successfully reinvented itself again and again. Yet, for years, despite its worldwide renown and big-dollar image, and although millions of people continually passed through it, Las Vegas remained a small, wide-open western town.

People called it the new frontier. The local population, whether they wore boots and jeans or alligator shoes and fedoras, didn't want to be told what to do. They called themselves independent and self-sufficient. They were anti-authoritarian and anti-government.

UNLV former head basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian



Las Vegas had always valued winners above community. The individual's rights reigned supreme and winning was the goal. It seems appropriate that one of the first forces forging Las Vegas's disparate factions into a sense of community was a rogue band of winners.

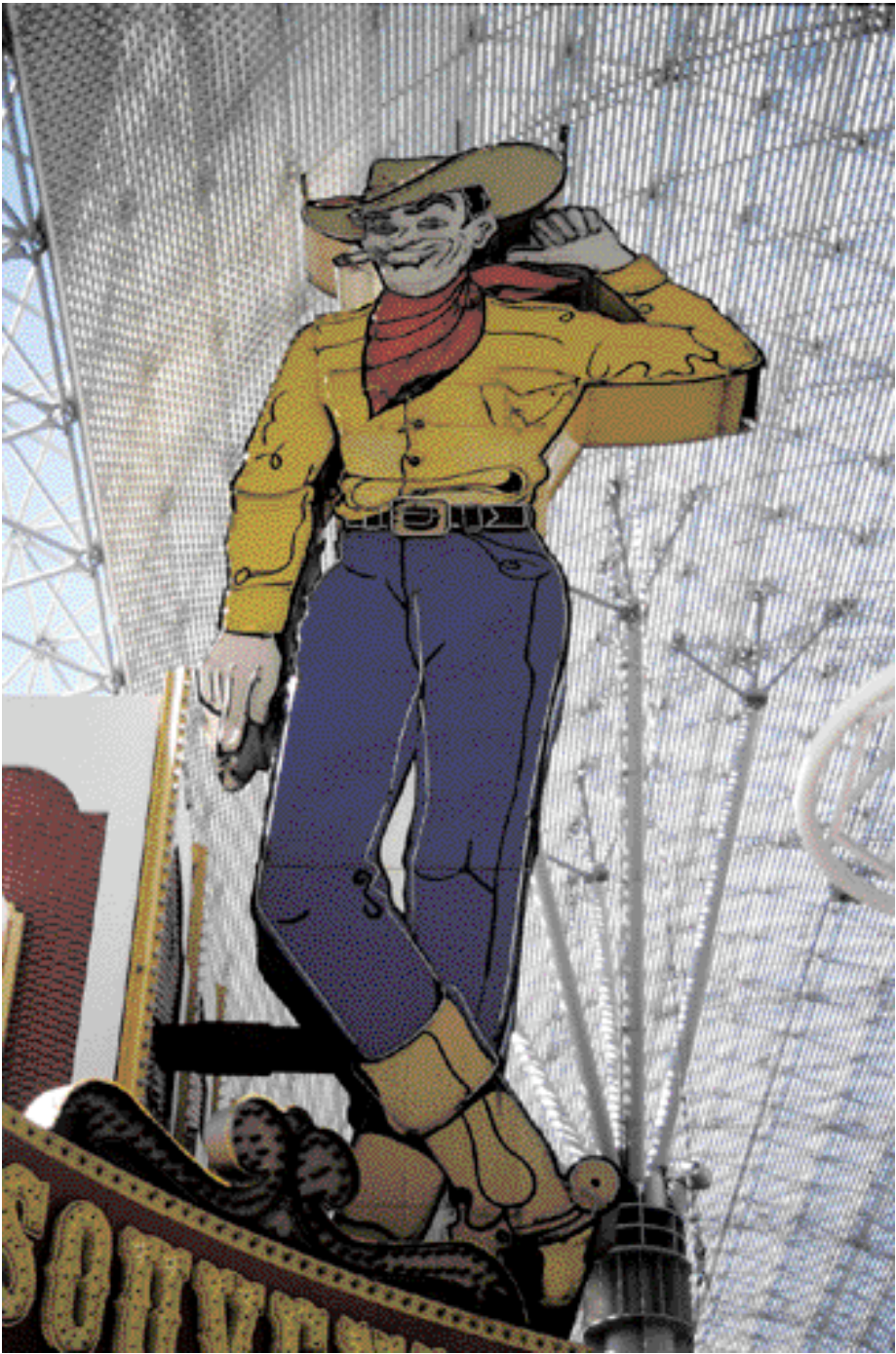
Jerry Tarkanian, then basketball coach at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV), and his championship team, the Runnin' Rebels, became a focal point of identity for the city's residents. Las Vegas always loved sports. Games are a gamble, and there's always a winner. The city loved the Runnin'Rebels because they were fast, flashy and, above all, winners.

The Runnin' Rebels really were rebels of a sort. They came from a small team at a small college in a city without a basketball tradition. Their coach was a rogue, who stood up to authority and backed up his arrogance with victories.

The team was a perfect metaphor for Las Vegas. Flashy upstarts who lacked tradition, they shot to the top of the rankings and emerged NCAA champions in 1990. The city embraced them exuberantly.

Las Vegas was no longer just Sin City, it was an all American city, home to one of the most recognized college basketball teams in the nation. It was a sign of normalization; it was also a badge of community spirit. The tributaries of transience that flowed through the Las Vegas population like flash floods rolling across the desert's surface, merged into a solid stream of community support.

The 1990s were a watershed decade in the city's history. Unprecedented population growth and casino expansion, record numbers of visitors spending record



Having long abandoned attempts to market itself as a "frontier town," Las Vegas is now a leading-edge community in the New West.



More and more Americans, from retirees to young families just starting out, are coming to Las Vegas to find a place they can call home. Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer



Rather than the fast life, many new arrivals are seeking a good life. Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer



amounts of cash, and the emergence of a significant nongaming economy changed more than the face of Las Vegas. The city was developing a soul. Many newcomers included not just people seeking a dream, but many willing to build themselves a piece of the American Dream.

The city's Old West identity was reduced to image long ago. And today, the only way a mobster might still have a stake in a casino is by owning stock in its controlling corporation. Las Vegas still is a wide-open western town. The spirit of freedom flows through the streets, billows in the breeze and lingers in the air. Many of the city's newer residents, however, while relishing freedom, breathe easier when the atmosphere also offers a sense of security.

A stronger feeling of community, although nascent, is developing. Increasing numbers of new residents are advocating a government more concerned with its citizens' welfare. These elements of the populace, who have arrived mostly since the 1990s and have swelled the city's population at a record pace, are considerably different from many of their predecessors. Previous immigrants were often escaping an old life as much as seeking a new one. They were quite content to be left alone. The newer arrivals are demanding services they believe are a citizen's due. They want better schools, parks, libraries, and the public spaces that are essential to form and nurture a community.

The big O of opportunity has always spun through the Las Vegas Valley like a whirlwind. Since the 1990s those swirling opportunities have expanded in an even larger circle. Prospects in Las Vegas are bigger, better and more diversified than ever.

The chance to win big, to escape the humdrum existence of daily life, to latch on to a dream has always pulled people to Vegas. Since the 1990s, however, the opportunity many newcomers seek in Las

Vegas does not hang on the flip of a card or shake out with a roll of the dice.

Lawyers and bankers, accountants and city executives, shoemakers and veterinarians, people in virtually every occupation under the sun, have streamed into Las Vegas at a rate averaging 60,000 new citizens a year for the past 15 years. They include blue-collar workers displaced from jobs in California and elsewhere. Many find good-paying union jobs in the Las Vegas Valley and enjoy a higher standard of living than they did back home. Construction workers come in their pickups from Idaho, Montana and Oregon to help build the fastest growing region in the nation.

Nevada is a Right-to-Work state, yet many unskilled or semiskilled workers come to Las Vegas and find

union-protected jobs with relatively high wages in the service sector. They begin to fashion a solid middle class life. Hal Rothman, in *Neon Metropolis*, writes about a skyscraper at McCarran Airport making \$80,000 per year and dealers at the Bellagio routinely taking home more than \$75,000.

Not long ago most of the doctors that relocated to Las Vegas were either gamblers, enthusiasts for the desert lifestyle, or cantankerous cowboys. Today, graduates of the nation's top medical schools are choosing to practice in Las Vegas where they find an ever-growing need for their skills and an expanding array of partnership/practices and hospitals.

Before the 1990s, educated professionals, including teachers, architects, lawyers and financial planners, may have come to Vegas for fun but very few made the city their home. That changed during the 90s. A large number of young professionals relocated to Las Vegas, creating a sizeable upper middle class with, in many cases, only a very indirect link to the gaming industry. These motivated men and women find great demand for their services and enjoy good positions, a high standard of living and continued growth.

An increasing number of retirees are also enjoying the area's relatively low cost of living and high value for the dollar. Retirement communities, such as Del Webb's Sun City in Summerlin, Sun City-McDonald Ranch, and Anthem, have had great success. Retirees and young professionals appreciate the incredible entertainment possibilities, entrepreneurial spirit and cosmopolitan atmosphere, without the dirt and danger so prevalent in America's other big cities.



## Multiculturalism

Perhaps the mob first brought multiculturalism to Las Vegas. The gangsters who ran the city for so long represented a melding of various ethnicities, including Jewish, Italian and Irish. Las Vegas and its multicultural makeup have evolved considerably since then.

Between 1990 and 2000 the populations of both Clark County and the city of Las Vegas increased by more than 85 percent, while the city of Henderson grew by a whopping 170.1 percent. Much of the population increase was of various racial and nationality groups. Las Vegas is developing a more eclectic ethnic composition.

The number of Latinos in Clark County increased 264 percent during that decade, from 85,000 to more than 300,000. In 2000 they comprised 20 percent of the population. In Census 2000, more than a third of the students in Las Vegas public schools were Latino.

During the same period, the Asian population of Nevada soared 156.2 percent, or 90,266 persons, with 72,547 living in Clark County and 22,879 of those residing in Las Vegas, comprising nearly 5 percent of the city's population. Census 2000 placed Clark County's African-American population at 124,885 people (9.1 percent), with 49,570 (10.36 percent) living in the city of Las Vegas.

Although the United States has made great strides in reversing past discriminatory practices, people of color continue to encounter prejudice to one degree or another almost everywhere in the country. Southern Nevada's record of race relations is not unblemished. The discriminatory deed restrictions in North Las Vegas and the institutionalized segregation in Basic, Nevada,



(Left)  
In addition to a sea of suburbia that now surrounds the city, luxury condominiums, ranging from several hundred thousand dollars into the millions, are going up right off The Strip. Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer

(Right)  
The desert sands are disappearing beneath rooftops. Photo by Rex M. Oppenheimer



The first African-American family to move into all black Carver Park in segregated Basic, Nevada  
*UNLV Special Collections*



The Moulin Rouge, 1956, an integrated nightclub in the heart of Las Vegas'ghetto, attracted black and white performers and patrons.  
*UNLV Special Collections*



(Left)  
Many minority workers who left low-paying jobs without benefits in their hometowns have found the ticket to a good middle-class life in Las Vegas.  
*Photo by  
Rex M. Oppenheimer*

(Right)  
Growth can be a multi-edged sword. In addition to amplified pollution worries, the increasing atmosphere of normalcy created by the influx of families and a growing middle class that derives its living from nongaming sources, can threaten Las Vegas' image as Sin City.  
*Photo by  
Rex M. Oppenheimer*



which later became Henderson, are recounted in an earlier chapter of this book.

The opportunity to make money lured African Americans to Las Vegas, as it did almost everyone else. In 1940 there were only 178 blacks in the city, but that number had multiplied to 15,000 by 1955. Most of them worked in service and back-of-the-house jobs. Throughout the 1950s African Americans were not permitted to enter Strip hotels through the front door.

African Americans could walk through the front door of the The Moulin Rouge. The famed inter-racial nightclub opened in the city's black ghetto, Westside, in 1955. Black and white performers and patrons partied many a night away at the club, which for a time was the coolest after-hours spot in town.

Many histories credit a 1960 consent decree with integrating the Strip. Dr. James McMillan, who headed the Las Vegas chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the early 60s, offered a different perspective.

In a 1997 article in the *Review Journal*, McMillan recounted that at a time of increasing civil rights awareness and action, it was his responsibility to attack the blatant discrimination at the Strip establishments, where blacks washed the dishes but couldn't stay in the hotel or play in the casino. McMillan planned a march, but it never came off. According to McMillan, the mob bosses didn't want black people demonstrating in front of Strip casinos. A few days before the scheduled demonstration, the mobsters agreed to integrate the casinos. The former NAACP leader credits Moe Dalitz's influence as an important factor in the casino's decision to integrate.

While many members of the minorities face discrimination and only find low-wage jobs in the Las Vegas



Valley as they do elsewhere in the nation, there are differences. One major variation is the availability of unionized jobs in the service sector, which allow many minority individuals to enter the middle class.

The availability of these jobs has attracted large numbers of Latinos from California. Many of these are women who worked in semiskilled jobs, such as maids or restaurant help, on the West Coast where they earned low wages with no benefits. In Las Vegas they have found unionized jobs as hotel maids, or in the kitchens of the Strip casinos, where they earn a substantial income and receive good benefits. People who could barley get by, and certainly not get ahead, in California are able to purchase homes and enjoy a promising middle-class lifestyle.

One exception to this is the construction industry, which in Right-to-Work Nevada is nonunion. While Latino women are finding union jobs in the service industry, many Latino men are building houses in the city's subdivisions as nonunion labor.

Like most cities, Las Vegas had a traditional ghetto area, the Westside. Also, as in many other cities, new immigrants from some minority groups often seek out communities of people from the same nationality or linguistic group, forming enclaves within the city. Yet, the area's recent, rapid growth and the opportunities to earn good wages in the service sector have helped integrate its many new suburbs far beyond the levels achieved in many other American cities.

### Whither Thou, Las Vegas?

Some pundits have prematurely forecast Las Vegas' demise. These doomsayers have often opined that the city had overbuilt its number of hotel rooms and had outlived its uniqueness. These critics often seem to

imply that the Las Vegas miracle will peter out, if for no other reason than that nothing lasts forever.

Las Vegas has seen phases of prosperity end. Yet, rather than vanishing, the city has morphed into a new vision of itself. In its journey from desert oasis on the Spanish Trail to the world's most popular destination, the city has had many lives.

For most cities, growth has often been a two-edged sword. Increased population bolsters the economy by attracting additional businesses and fosters greater community development, but it puts great strain on the infrastructure and city services. Traditionally, Las Vegas citizens eschewed services in favor of lower taxes and less involvement, and wanted to be left alone.

The legions of newer arrivals over the past decade have strained the city's existing resources while demanding even greater services. Las Vegas is expanding as never before. Its gaming/entertainment industry is growing, but so is a large segment of the population only marginally associated with that industry if at all.

Many of the city's newer citizens comprise families with children and parents who try to teach good moral and ethical values. These families have formed sound communities and support schools, sports teams, service clubs and groups. They are increasingly challenging Las Vegas' traditional libertarian and libertine environment.

The old Las Vegas took seed in the Wild West; its ethos was branded by hard-chiseled individuality and lawlessness. Meyer, Bugsy and the boys took heed of no one. They catered to people's desires and made anyone who objected an offer they couldn't refuse.

Some commentators have said that Las Vegas has become more like the rest of the country and that America has become more like Las Vegas. They are referring to the city's patina of respectability, its conversion of gambling to gaming, and to the nation's greater acceptance of what used to be considered sin.

Yet, America has changed in other ways, too. While some behavior that used to be called licentious is now considered libertarian, acts that were once thought of as sophisticated, such as smoking, are now seen as taboo. More cities are banning smoking in bars, restaurants and other places where the public congregates. When the mob ran the casinos, they answered to no one. The corporations must answer to their shareholders. The potential exists for the city's increasing normalization, through its growing population and expanding nongaming opportunities, to affect its ability to be Las Vegas.

Despite various marketing campaigns to present Las Vegas as a family vacation center, the town's main lure continues to be decidedly adult entertainment. Casinos cater to the pursuit of easy money. Luck is hailed, cheered and worshipped 24 hours a day.

Will the influx of families, the greater demand for public services and normalization jinx Las Vegas' magic touch? Will the new advocates of community squelch the freedoms that make Sin City such an attractive destination? Or will the city's new image as the whole world's center ring keep the spotlights shining?

It's a gamble. You can bet on it!



Can decadence and suburban family values coexist?  
*Photo by  
Rex M. Oppenheimer*