

Introduction

THE ULTIMATE COMPANY TOWN David Littlejohn

PEELING OFF THE STRIP

Las Vegas Valley is a flat—a very flat—stretch of about 500 square miles of dry desert land surrounded by smooth, treeless brown mountains. In 1999 it was home to well over a million people. Projecting into the future the valley's current rate of growth (there were about 400,000 people here in 1980, 700,000 in 1990), the Nevada State demographer envisions two million people living in Las Vegas Valley by 2010. This prospect horrifies some residents, who insist that they will be long gone before the two-millionth citizen arrives, at the same time that it tantalizes real estate developers. These million or two million people are or will be here—whether or not they realize or admit it—because of the Industry, as insiders tend to call it, the way people in Los Angeles refer to the companies that make movies and television films.

The Industry in Las Vegas is casino gambling, which its representatives would like you to call the Gaming Industry. For most people this denotes a four-mile stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South called the Strip, which occasionally spills over onto side and parallel streets, from Sahara Avenue at the north end to just past Hacienda Avenue at the south, where it bumps into McCarran Airport. The Industry also implies Downtown, a couple of miles north of the Strip, which was once a genuine downtown,

in between. Clark County covers 8,084 square miles (most of them empty) and had in 1997 an estimated population of 1,106,000—60 percent of the people in Nevada. An alternative definition of the city is what the U.S. Census Bureau calls the Las Vegas Metropolitan Statistical Area (1997 estimated population: 1,262,099). This includes not only all of Clark County, but also Nye County to the north and Mohave County in Arizona, which are presumed to fall within Las Vegas's economic orbit.

These distinctions are important. Las Vegas Valley and its dominant industry generate a great many statistics, some misleading, others conflicting. One reason the statistics may mislead is that those generating or citing them often have large axes to grind. One reason they often conflict is that people mean different things when they refer to Las Vegas.

What I mean, and what most people mean, by Las Vegas is the developed portion of Las Vegas Valley: the freeway-linked area west of Lake Mead that includes the four incorporated cities of Clark County as well as the contiguous unincorporated areas of Paradise, Winchester, Sunrise Manor, and Spring Valley. Logically, these areas should have been made part of the city of Las Vegas in 1946, when casino and other property owners successfully fought off the first of several efforts to annex the Strip to the city.



Jan Morris once described the effect of the Las Vegas Strip on what can appear—once you move away from the radiance of Las Vegas Boulevard South—to be a decent, bourgeois, conservative, even churchy western town. “It is as though some inconceivable alien organism has fallen upon the old depot town,” she wrote, “squatting there athwart the tracks and infecting everything with some incurable, unidentifiable but not altogether disagreeable virus.”

It was my intention, in the experiment that led to this book, to pull this alien organism off of the map of Las Vegas—as if one could insert a thumbnail under the Stratosphere Hotel and Tower, just north of Sahara Avenue, and peel off the map everything down to the black pyramid of the Luxor, plus whatever the Circus Circus people end up building across the street. Just-off-the-Strip growths like the Las Vegas Hilton, the Rio Suites, the Gold Coast, the Maxxim, the San Remo, the Continental, the new Paris, the smaller Hard Rock, and the defunct Debbie Reynolds casino-hotels would presumably adhere to the lifted Strip and be peeled off along with it.

the historic birthplace and commercial center of the city. Although more cluttered by urban reality than the Strip, what Las Vegas promoters now call Downtown is a secondary tourist district of ten major and several minor casino-hotels centered on 2,000 feet of Fremont Street, east of the railroad tracks and Interstate 15. In 1995-96, gamblers left behind \$3.7 billion at the machines, tables, and sports books of the Strip compared to \$683 million Downtown, a fact that gives some idea of the relative importance of the two in the industry that created and still runs Las Vegas.

In actuality, Las Vegas has no downtown, no central business district. Residents shop at a few grand-scale shopping plazas and any one of a hundred strip malls scattered about the valley. There are two upscale retail centers on the Strip—the Fashion Show Mall and the Forum Shops at Caesars—but these depend on visitors for most of their profits. What offices there are (Clark County has about 2,100 attorneys, 1,900 doctors, and 2,600 architects) tend to be strung out along the evenly spaced grid of long, straight boulevards or clustered in a few medium-size high-rises, none of which approaches the height or grandeur of the ruling casino hotels.

Las Vegas can mean the City of Las Vegas proper, which includes Downtown, a cluster of public buildings, and the relatively impoverished West Side but not the Strip, the airport, the university, or most of the residential and commercial development of the past 50 years. Considerably enlarged by the annexation since 1987 of a vast new housing development to the northwest, the City of Las Vegas now encompasses 85,000 acres and had in 1996 a population of 377,000. To anyone except local politicians, voters, and taxpayers, however, it would be absurd to talk about “Las Vegas” and not include the 36 casino-hotels on and just off the Strip, with their 83,000 rooms (scheduled to grow to 91,000 by 2000), their scores of restaurants, their vast meeting and convention halls, their show-rooms and spas and arenas and shops, and their more than 500 acres of covered, often lavishly decorated space in which adult visitors are invited to gamble.

In order to include these, the iconic places of Las Vegas, one must define the city more broadly. Many claims for or statistics about Las Vegas actually refer to the county that surrounds it. Clark County, a political jurisdiction considerably more important than the city, *does* include the Strip, the airport, and the university, as well as Nellis Air Force Base and the incorporated towns of Boulder City (where public gambling is forbidden), North Las Vegas, Henderson, and Laughlin, a ten-casino low-rollers' haven at the pointy southern tip of the state. It also includes a handful of other unincorporated settlements, and vast stretches of desert

It would not be as easy, figuratively or theoretically, to remove from the map the fiction of Downtown—the whole Fremont/Ogden Street tourist experience—because indigenous reality (poor people, pawn shops, prostitutes, drug dealers) continues to intrude on what used to be called Glitter Gulch.

But my goal was to examine the city in which 1.2 million Las Vegas actually live, *beyond* the Strip and Downtown. The latter have been written about, photographed, mocked, and marveled over almost to distraction, like the canals of Venice or the skyscrapers of New York. In 1984, I saw an exhibition, called "Dietro I Palazzi" ("Behind the Palaces"), that took the perverse approach of examining Venice's uncelebrated, nondescript buildings and neighborhoods, those hidden behind the tourist precincts, where 60,000 real Venetians—all that were left on the city's lagoon islands at the time—lived, worked, and played. This is what I have aimed to do with Greater Las Vegas.

At first I thought of this project as a possible object lesson for other American cities, counties, states, and Indian reservations that in the past twenty years have hit on the idea of legalized casino gambling as a solution to their economic problems. In this short time the spread of casino gambling in North America has taken on the force of a tidal wave. First Atlantic City, in 1978; then Indian reservations (which can negotiate the building of casinos independently with their states); then, after 1991, several midwestern and southern states as well as individual counties and cities joined Nevada in this latest rush after gold. As of 1998, fourteen states had voted to legalize full-scale casino gambling, restricted in many cases to "riverboats," many of which never leave port. Indian tribes have opened casinos—including the busiest and most profitable casino in the world, Foxwoods in Connecticut—in 23 states. Offshore boats carry gamblers out of territorial waters from ports in Florida, Georgia, and New York.

Originally, I thought of calling this book *Beyond the Strip: Learning More from Las Vegas*, implying both a tribute to and a step beyond *Learning from Las Vegas*, the groundbreaking study published in 1972 by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, who had worked in conjunction with some of their graduate students at Yale. What Venturi et al. suggested, after their ten-day trip to Las Vegas in 1968, was that the untidy sprawl of the Strip, with its gigantic flashing neon signs—signs more important, both as marketing tools and works of art, than the rather ordinary buildings behind them—represented a legitimate indigenous American art form, which was something more than simply crude, commercial, and non-European. In the decade that followed, other observers of the American scene took up the cause of popular commercial art forms.

Main Street was *almost* all right; Disneyland was the most important architectural landmark in southern California; comic-book and graffiti artists merited gallery exhibitions. MTV taught us a whole new way of seeing.

In Las Vegas, meanwhile, the large, elaborate signs Venturi had admired kept growing larger and more elaborate, often dispensing with neon altogether in favor of light-emitting diodes, in order to compete with the multi-thousand-room tower blocks rising behind them. The biggest sign of all (a freestanding structure 362 feet tall and 192 feet wide), erected by the Las Vegas Hilton in 1993, blew down in a storm the following year.

Meanwhile, strange things were happening to Las Vegas as it spread further out from the Strip and Downtown. For one thing, it became one of the fastest growing urban areas in the United States. In the Census Bureau's estimates of population growth in the five years after 1990, the city of Las Vegas grew by 27 percent; Clark County by 33.9 percent, and the Las Vegas metropolitan area by 33.6 percent. In the same period, the nearest competitor among the nation's 100 largest cities (Aurora, Colorado) grew by 13 percent. Among counties with populations of over half a million, the nearest competitor was Riverside County, California, with an increase of 17.9%.

Between 1950 and 1960, Clark County's growth (165 percent) was exceeded by that of the boom regions of Broward County, Florida (Fort Lauderdale), and Orange County, California. But no U.S. county of comparable size grew faster during the 1960s or '70s and only Riverside County grew faster during the 1980s, when Clark County's growth rates were 15, 70, and 60 percent respectively. Between 1990 and 1997, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Standard Area grew by more than 48 percent—eight percent faster than its nearest rival. Over the 45-year period 1950-95 Clark County grew more than twenty times in size, from 48,000 people to 993,000—a record no other large U.S. county even comes close to matching.

One effect of this astonishing growth is that the second-largest industry in Clark County is construction. In 1995, permits were issued for 29,537 new housing units in the Las Vegas metropolitan area; in 1996, 32,381, almost exactly as many as were issued in the entire Los Angeles-Orange County-Riverside metropolitan area, which had a population thirteen times that of Las Vegas. Greater Los Angeles overtook Las Vegas in 1997, and housing starts in five other metropolitan areas exceeded both of their figures. But all of these areas had populations several times that of Greater Las Vegas, which means that Las Vegas is building new homes at a higher rate than any other city in the country: 32,173 residential unit building permits were issued in 1998.

Another way to look at the housing construction boom is to judge how quickly a city replicates itself. Between 1990 and 1996, Greater Las Vegas increased its housing stock by 45.2 percent—far ahead of the rate of its nearest competitor, Naples, Florida, with 33 percent, and more than double that of Orlando.

Atlantic City, St. Louis, Biloxi, New Orleans, Detroit—any U.S. city may decide to permit casino gambling within its borders or along its shores. But these cities were established on other economic and social bases, and the introduction of casinos will never shape or define them absolutely, the way the casinos of Downtown and the Strip have shaped and defined Las Vegas.

Much of what has happened to Las Vegas in the last ten, twenty, and forty years has been duplicated by other boomtowns of the American Sunbelt, cities like San Jose, Phoenix, Colorado Springs, El Paso, and Fort Lauderdale. "Destination resort" communities in these favored latitudes—notably Disney's Anaheim and Orlando—share many characteristics with Las Vegas. But a sampling of the other claims and statistics often cited in discussions of Vegas may help explain why I have come to regard the city as worthy of study not as an object lesson, but for its own sake. Many of these numbers and rankings refer to Clark County (which is in effect Las Vegas) or to the state of Nevada; but almost two-thirds of Nevadans live in Clark County.

- Nevada currently has the highest suicide rate in the country—double the national rate. This appears to be true for every age group, although fully 40 percent of the suicides in Nevada are committed by people over sixty-five. It is often said that the teen-suicide rate (or, depending on the source, the rate of suicide *attempts* by teenagers) in Las Vegas is the highest in the nation, but I've never been able to verify this claim.
- Nevada has the highest alcohol-consumption rate in the country, (probably due in part to tourists), with an attendant record for incidence of cirrhosis of the liver. It ranks high among American states in rates of abortions, teen pregnancies, and births to unmarried mothers—43 percent of births in 1996, the third-highest in the country. Nevada also has the highest rate of automobile accidents per miles driven, which may have something to do with its rate of alcohol consumption, and Las Vegas has the fifth highest air-pollution index among American cities. Until recently, Nevada had a higher percentage of smokers than any other state, and in 1997 it still led the nation in percentage of female smokers—more than double California's. Las Vegas has far more than its share of deaths from

lung cancer, coronary artery disease, and cardiac arrest; Las Vegas cardiologist Thomas Ahearn explains, "We attract people whose lifestyles are somewhat less healthy than [the] ideal." Casino employees in Las Vegas, like airline flight attendants, are trained to use portable defibrillators, in case they need to shock heart-attack victims out of dying on their premises.

- Las Vegas claims to be the number-one tourist destination in the U.S., with more than 30 million visitors a year (although Orlando and New York continue to make the same claim). Terry Jicinsky, the chief number-cruncher for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority, explained to me the complex methodology behind the LVCVA's statistical estimates. But statistical estimates, however carefully determined, are not the same thing as actual head counts, and leave room for dispute.
- Since convention delegates have to register to attend, on the other hand, it is clear that Las Vegas has become at least the runner-up to Chicago as the leading convention/exhibition host in the nation, attracting about three thousand such events each year for a total of about three million patrons. Its mammoth civic convention center is smaller than McCormack Place in Chicago, but (along with the private Sands/Venetian facility) may surpass it once the current expansion is complete. Las Vegas's annual Comdex, a computer dealers' exhibition held each November, is the world's largest such gathering, attracting more than 200,000 paid visitors.
- Las Vegas has more hotel rooms than any other city in the world (more than a hundred thousand in 1998, with twenty thousand more either planned or under construction), and the highest average hotel-occupancy rate (87 to 90 percent) of any American city. In 1995, the *Zagat Guide* estimated that it offered the lowest average daily hotel room rate of the thirty-three leading U.S. visitor destinations. Las Vegas currently contains nine of the world's ten largest hotels. In 1998, the world's largest was Thailand's Ambassador City Hotel, but that may change when both phases of the new Venetian Hotel are completed on the Strip.
- Nevada's bankruptcy rate (6.3 per thousand people in 1997) was the fourth-highest in the nation, after those of Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. The national average was 4.2 per thousand.
- According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports for 1995, Las Vegas had the highest total crime rate and the highest rate of crimes against property among all American cities with more than 250,000 people. Police reports for that year placed Las Vegas fourth among

U.S. metropolitan areas of over a million population—after Miami, Phoenix, and Oklahoma City—in the rate of *all* serious crimes; 14.7 percent of these were called “violent.” Along with those of Washington and Atlanta, the city’s crime rate rose markedly in 1996, despite declining crime rates in most American cities. Although other cities had higher rates of homicide and other violent crimes in 1995, Las Vegas ranked lowest in the percentage of “cleared” violent crimes, i.e., crimes leading to arrests (1,950 of 9,421, or 20.7 percent, against a national average of 45 percent).

■ In 1985, Nevada’s high-school dropout rate (teenagers 16 to 19 who have not completed and are not attending school) was 25 percent. By 1992 it had dropped to 14.9 percent but was still the highest in the country. The dropout rate for Clark County in 1996-97 was nearly 12 percent, the highest in the state. Recent SAT and ACT scores for Nevada seniors (and the percentage of high-school graduates taking these exams) have ranked around the middle of the national standings; in funding per student, Nevada has risen to thirty-fourth. But fewer Nevada high-school graduates go on to college than those of any other state except Alaska.

■ Nevada had in 1996 both the highest marriage rate (ten times the national average, due primarily to out-of-state couples who come to Las Vegas and Reno to marry) and the highest divorce rate (more than double the national average). Although out-of-staters once flocked to Nevada for “quickie” divorces, the numbers now represent primarily local residents. The state’s divorce rate has declined markedly since 1980, as other states have relaxed their regulations. “People come here for fresh starts,” explained Lucy Rey, a family counselor. “People come here to declare bankruptcy, people come here to lose something or somebody. And they do it successfully.”

■ According to *Money* magazine, Las Vegas had in 1995 the second-lowest property-tax burden of America’s hundred largest cities, after Knoxville.

■ Although it is the urban center of the thirty-fifth-largest U.S. metropolitan area in terms of population (1996), Las Vegas has the twelfth-busiest airport in the country, and the ninth-largest school district. It does *not* have a major-league sports team, a nationally accredited symphony orchestra or opera company, a theater company that performs throughout the week, or a major art museum.

■ Las Vegas are often blamed for using more water than the residents of any other city in the world: currently 325 gallons per capita per year (down from 360 gallons in 1989), as opposed to half that much

or less for other western cities such as Santa Fe, Tucson, El Paso, and San Diego. (Phoenix and Albuquerque use about 250 gallons a day per capita.) Civic defenders often attribute Las Vegas’s high levels of water use, as they do its crime rate, to the city’s tourists, but their presence increases the average daily population by at most 25 percent. Two-thirds of the region’s water use is domestic; in fact, most of that water goes to keep front-yard lawns green in the middle of a desert. The planners of Summerlin, the huge master-planned community to the northwest, are aiming for water-use levels of one-third the Las Vegas norm by maintaining strict controls over “desert-friendly” planting.



I do not pretend that all of these claims and statistics are accurate, or remain accurate. Las Vegas is the kind of place that generates urban legends, which then become an ineradicable part of its image, and where other statistics change as rapidly as the population. It is often written, for example, that Las Vegas has the “highest number of churches per capita” of any U.S. city, which, if it was ever true, is certainly not true now: there are more churches per capita in half a dozen cities I have investigated, and probably in others. The National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, citing a survey of 1998, asserts that 18 percent of bankruptcies are “gambling related”; Nevada casino interests insist the figure is closer to 2 percent. Neither side has come up with any persuasive evidence. The Las Vegas Metro Police tries in vain to kill the persisting myth of tourists being drugged and having their kidneys removed (presumably for sale). Civic boosters (and no city spends more money per resident selling itself to the outside world) come up each year with wondrous new numbers to help them define Las Vegas’s magical status. The city’s detractors, for their part—in particular, nowadays, people opposed to the spread of casino gambling to other regions—keep discovering or inventing ugly statistics and nasty anecdotes about the lives of Las Vegas, hoping to warn decent Americans elsewhere of the sordid depths to which legalized gambling can lead.

Sixteen of us (and our photographer) drove or flew down from Berkeley several times during 1996-97, then fanned out beyond the ever-more-overwhelming signs, facades, casinos, and showrooms of the Strip and Downtown that had spellbound Professor Venturi’s Yalies in 1968. Who, we wanted to know, lived under all the red-tile roofs represented by those

and Industrial Roads; running on either side of the Strip, carry some of its spillover: parking lots and garages; lesser restaurants, casinos, and motels; the sprawling convention center; the Las Vegas Hilton; and a fair amount of urban dreck. The easternmost line in the grid is Nellis Boulevard, which leads south from the air-force base. After Nellis hits the diagonal of Boulder Highway, near the lively Sam's Town complex, the highway demarcates the rest of the valley's edge—although a great deal of new development, including the Sam Boyd Stadium, or “Silver Bowl,” and an \$18-million Mormon temple consecrated in 1989, has already begun spreading towards the foothills east of Boulder Highway and the grid.

For most of the valley, the western limit of paved roads and habitation (as of today; it will be further west tomorrow) is Durango Drive. Large new housing tracts in the northwest—Summerlin, The Lakes, Canyon Gate—have pushed the boundaries of inhabited Las Vegas three or four miles beyond Durango towards the mountains. Between Nellis Boulevard and Durango Drive you cross, at mile intervals, Lamb, Pecos, Eastern, Maryland Parkway (the most important north-south boulevard, after the Strip); portions of Paradise and Rancho; Valley View, Decatur, Jones, Rainbow, Buffalo, and Cimarron.

Here, then, is an overview of the “real” Las Vegas, stripped of the Strip and Downtown: twelve wide roads, each a mile from the next, running east and west. Every mile, as they cross one of the fourteen similar roads running north and south, stoplights help to guide traffic into shopping malls, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants. Laid across this checker-board are three major diagonals, as well as the snaking loops of two interstate highways—the means by which people get in and out of town. Along, in-between, and, increasingly, beyond the wide gridlines live more than a million people.

ON PLANNING, COMPANY TOWNS,
AND THE HEAVY HAND OF THE INDUSTRY

You might think, from the paradigmatic grid I have described, that Las Vegas was a model of urban planning, like Washington, D. C., or Savannah. In fact, like other Sunbelt cities designed more for automobiles than for people, more by property speculators than by city planners, it often looks an unreadable chaos of non-planning, in which developments emerge like random spores miles from one another, with nothing but empty desert in between. Almost all new building has taken place along the mile-apart roads, leaving the city with vast barren

tens of thousands of building permits, inside the houses and condominiums and apartment buildings that every day reached closer towards the mountain walls that enclose Las Vegas Valley? Why had they come here? Why had they stayed? What did they do, at work, at home, in their spare time? What did they think of their famous, their infamous city? How did they regard, how were they personally affected by the industry that so visibly dominates this, the ultimate company town?



Once you peel off the Strip and Downtown from a map or bird's-eye view of Las Vegas, what you are left with is basically a rectangular grid of boulevards spaced at one-mile intervals. (In some areas, the intervals vary. The rectangular grid is broken by a few jogs and wiggles, as well as three major diagonal routes: Las Vegas Boulevard, Boulder Highway, and the northern portion of Rancho Drive. The two interstates fly over everything.) In the 1950s, when they still reached only a few blocks into the desert, the best-known of these boulevards were renamed after the hotels that had been erected at their intersection with the Strip—an early indication of Las Vegas's identity as a company town. San Francisco Street became Tropicana Avenue; Boggs became Flamingo. Half a mile south of Tropicana, where the Hacienda Hotel stood until it was blown up in 1996, was Hacienda Avenue. North of Flamingo, helping to advertise other early resorts, were Desert Inn Road and Sahara Avenue. Once the main roads were taken, the Dunes, Sands, Riviera, Circus Circus, Hilton, and Stardust Hotels had to settle for short streets that ran alongside their properties. Recently, new hotels have given their names to minor access lanes.

The other major east-west lines in the grid, south of Hacienda to the Henderson city line, are Russell, Sunset, and Warm Springs. Heading north from Sahara (the city's southern edge) you cross Charleston, Bonanza, Owens, Lake Mead, Carey, Cheyenne, and Craig. By the time you have reached Cheyenne (the route east to Nellis Air Force Base) these ruler-straight roads tend to be bordered by blank miles of flat desert scrub. Up here, yet-to-be-exploited *terrains vagues* are marked only by occasional signposts stuck among dusty clumps of sagebrush and tumbleweed balls, advertising real-estate developments or candidates running for last year's political offices.

These east-west roads are cut by similar, if less interesting, north-south axes. With a few key exceptions, most local (as distinct from tourist) development took place on the avenues running east and west. Paradise

gridlock-free streets; a regional park system; alternatives to suburban sprawl; and, most importantly, a revision in Nevada's gambling-dependent tax structure, which might enable Las Vegas to obtain the billions of dollars it requires for new and improved roads and schools, as well as water, sewer, and power lines.

Eight years closer to the millennium, another meeting was convened (called "Preview '97") at which a dozen high-powered speakers offered dire warnings about the future of Las Vegas. By 1997 "infrastructure" had become a local buzzword, as casino presidents and property developers, seconded by pundits and politicians, expressed common fears that the valley might be growing too fast—though no one wanted to be the first to suggest controls, let alone limits to future growth. "We need to take a look at how many people this valley can hold before it gets dangerous," the gathering was told by Stephen Wynn, president of Mirage Resorts, whose hotels employed at the time more than eighteen thousand of those people. "We can't see if we can fill up every inch of desert with houses and shopping centers." The goal was to get more tax money out of somebody—preferably somebody else—to pay for the essential facilities all these people require (roads, water, schools, some form of mass transit), at a figure then estimated at \$7 billion, or \$7,000 for each tax-resistant citizen.

In 1983 the county's staff of professional planners drew up a comprehensive map (approved by the Planning Commission and reevaluated each year), indicating (1) which sectors of unincorporated territory they regarded as suitable for development; (2) semirural areas where expansion *might* take place, once services were in place; and (3) vast outlying areas they hoped to retain, if not as empty space, at most as equestrian-oriented ranches (or "ranchettes") of an acre or more. The planners' goal was to direct most newcomers to already-populated districts in order to minimize both sprawl and the cost of extending services. But Jeff Harris, head of the county's long-range planning effort, admitted that if sufficient pressure was brought to bear, outlying areas would be rezoned to accommodate large developers. "The Board [of County Commissioners] has been pretty good about retaining our 'no-growth area' right now," he said in 1997, "with the exception of those large, major projects which have economies of scale, and the bucks behind them. Of course, when they do build something, it just blows us all to hell anyway."

The introduction of gigantic new residential projects like Summerlin or Lake Las Vegas obliges planners to rip up their maps and start over. The owners of both of these developments *asked* to be annexed to adjacent cities, which are currently perceived as more hospitable to large, master-planned communities than the county is. Speaking for the county, Harris

spaces that have yet to be filled in. From the air, the edges of Las Vegas can resemble a chicken-wire fence, with rags and feathers of development caught along the wires, clustering where they intersect. Huge tracts of new housing are approved (Clark County prides itself on how much more rapidly it grants building permits than its California counterparts) even when they lie far from existing road networks, water and sewer lines, fire stations, and schools, because this is where developers are able to find the cheapest federal land. Since 1946, the Strip casinos and other property owners south of Sahara have fiercely resisted absorption into the City of Las Vegas, on the presumption that county commissioners were easier to buy and control than city-council members, and for fear of having to pay for Las Vegas's needs.

Not that the cities of Las Vegas, Henderson, and North Las Vegas have been models of enlightened planning. Eager to annex new industrial parks and master-planned communities proposed for adjacent desert lands, they readily amend their own master plans to satisfy developers and duel with one another to attract new business, which rules out any unified, county-wide planning. The "Fremont Street Experience," an extravagant light-show canopy designed to draw patrons to Downtown casinos (paid for in large part by the Las Vegas Redevelopment Agency and the local Convention and Visitors Authority), and the emergence of new casinos in outlying neighborhoods, indicate that the three cities are no less eager than Clark County to cater to the wishes of the Industry.

Every few years, the county or its cities convenes a series of "strategic planning" workshops and committees, with the intention of devising long-range schemes for improving life in Las Vegas. In 1985, the City of Las Vegas announced plans for a futuristic "maglev" (magnetically levitated) people-mover, including a downtown transportation center where the system's coaches would connect with efficient buses and quaint trolleys. Only one part of the project was ever built; it was then torn down (at a cost of \$4 million) after Strip casino magnates objected. Two years later, the Downtown plan was expanded to include a Florida developer's proposed two-square-block "festival marketplace." The casino he opened there (with a generous city subsidy) declared bankruptcy after four months.

In 1989, a group of 300 citizens convened by both the city and the county met throughout the year to draw up a plan called "Las Vegas: 2000 and Beyond." Some of the no action items they ended up proposing were either banal or unattainable; but most of them were reasonable, and some were essential. Many of their recommendations have been implemented—except, of course, things like city-county consolidation, or at least coordinated planning; a workable mass-transit system; a scheme for

It is only by metaphoric license that Las Vegas, like Los Angeles or Washington—two other American cities on which the label is frequently pinned—can be called a “company town.” This country has a long history of genuine company towns, most of them originally built, owned, and controlled entirely by mining or lumber companies to provide homes and other services for the workers they needed to attract. In *The Company Town in the American West* (1966), James B. Allen describes 191 such towns, some dismantled, some abandoned and in ruins, some sold off to their residents, and some still functioning as company towns at the time, with populations of a few hundred people; these include copper-mining and smelting towns in Arizona and Nevada, lumber-mill towns in California and the Northwest, and coal-mining towns in Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. In most of these towns, every house, store, utility, and public service was at one time owned by either a local entrepreneur or a large national corporation (Phelps Dodge, Kennecott Copper, Anaconda, Pacific Lumber, International Paper, Georgia-Pacific, Kaiser Steel). Some even issued their own scrip (think casino chips) to serve as money in company stores. Henderson, Nevada—now a part of Greater Las Vegas—began life as a company town; so, in a way, did Boulder City to the north. Las Vegas was originally owned by a railroad. At one time people even talked of Montana as a “company state,” so great was the hold of Anaconda Copper over its legislature and newspapers. When the state legislature rejected the company’s plans for a reservoir in 1969, one reporter wrote, “No one could remember an impertinence of that order before.”

In eastern states, towns and cities grew up under the ownership and control of manufacturing enterprises, whose names they sometimes bore—Pullman, Illinois; Hershey and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Corning and Steinway, New York.

With differing degrees of benevolence and occasional gestures toward democracy, the owners of these towns were also their managers and city officials. They determined rents and regulations, hired the police, appointed the school board, and lay down moral codes regarding things like drinking and prostitution. Peddlers and solicitors were banned, and unions were unwelcome—a fact made clear by the Pullman Company strike of 1894, in which federal troops were called in to put down strikers. What is now called paternalism led some of these towns to provide hospitals, churches, and schools, parks and recreation, in addition to profitable company stores.

Allen’s summary of the “intangible spirit” of a genuine company town may have a certain resonance for visitors to Las Vegas:

insists, “We would never have allowed Lake Las Vegas”—a \$4-billion oasis of wealth slated to be built around a 320-acre artificial lake with five golf courses and six resort hotels, seventeen miles southeast of the Strip.

Harris may privately harbor no-growth ideals, but of course he can’t admit to that and keep working for Clark County. Talking about the so-called second straw—a projected second pipeline from Lake Mead, designed to accommodate imagined future water needs—he confessed, “Part of me deals with the growth side, and says it’d be a great way to control growth—not to put the damn thing in.” But he knows it’s going to happen. The county, he says, slipping into Vegasese, is “betting on the come”: budgeting for a new pipeline on the gamble that water not yet allotted will eventually arrive.

DL: You say you “assess growth impacts,” but then what can you do with your assessments? In California, people can hold up controversial new developments for years with lawsuits, and demands for environmental impact reports.

JH: We have a different process here, a different philosophy. I take my direction from the board. I have no ability to limit growth.

DL: You can’t tell people not to come, of course. But you can make expansion difficult, as they’ve done in Portland [Oregon] or Boulder City.

JH: That’s not the board’s direction. Their job, and therefore my job, is to accommodate growth in Las Vegas Valley. To sustain it.

DL: So the two-million population projections—officially that doesn’t bother you?

JH: No. We look to limiting factors. We look to land availability. We’ve drawn a line we call the Ultimate Growth Boundary—which of course it may or may not be. It’s determined by topography, administrative boundaries: Red Rock, Nellis, the bombing range, Lake Mead to the east. Within that area we still have lots of available land.

DL: And as for water, you buy the water district’s argument that “we can get it because we can pay for it”?

JH: Yes. Money is the only limiting factor. And for many property owners here, money is not a problem. They are willing to invest millions in property and just hold on to it, earning nothing from it, betting on the future. And that tells you a lot.

In the company town...there is a somewhat intangible overtone which seems to run through all phases of its life and is definitely connected with the complete dominance of a single company.... It might be described as the complete saturation by the company of the town, its inhabitants, and all its surroundings—the complete dominance of the business of the company in everything that is seen or talked about....

When visiting a typical copper town, for example, a person first drives through miles of barren desert, knowing that at the end of the narrow highway is the sole reason for the road's existence....

In many company towns the whistle at the company plant is a regular part of community life. It not only determines the shifts, which in turn regulate family life, but it also tells time and provides a curfew.... All this is only natural to the long-time resident, but the visitor cannot help observing that this illusive but veritable saturation by company business of everything is a very real and distinguishing feature in the company town.

The term "company town" has been enlarged in recent decades to signify not so much the historic, company-owned town—of which very few are left—as the company-dominated town, like Rochester, New York (Eastman Kodak), Poughkeepsie, New York (IBM), Flint, Michigan (General Motors), Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Gary, Indiana (U.S. Steel), or Midland, Michigan (Dow Chemical). It also extends to cities, virtually created by large government installations, like Huntsville, Alabama, and Los Alamos, New Mexico.

Such cities were in the news frequently between the 1970s and 1990s, because of the disastrous social and economic effects they suffered from slowdowns, cutbacks, and in some cases total shutdowns of the dominant powers. Two hundred fifty American textile plants closed during the 1980s, bringing devastation to many eastern and southern cities and towns. The once-mighty American steel industry laid off 70 percent of its employees between 1950 and 1995, wreaking havoc on places like Steelton and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The near-fatal impact of General Motors' shutdown in Flint became the subject of Michael Moore's hostile 1989 documentary *Roger and Me*—Roger being Roger Smith, the elusive CEO of General Motors. Butte, Montana proposed making a grim tourist attraction out of the slag heaps and polluted open pits left after nearly a century of ownership and exploitation by Anaconda Copper and its successors. Many of Rochester's cultural institutions, founded by and kept afloat on Eastman Kodak largess, bear the name of the city's longtime economic protector (The Eastman School of Music, The George Eastman House, The Eastman-Rochester Orchestra), and suffered along with the city when Kodak radically downsized in the 1980s.

Las Vegas should most accurately be called a "single-industry town," along the lines of Lowell and Lawrence (textile mills), Brockton (shoes), Pittsburgh (steel), Detroit (cars), Akron (tires), Grand Rapids (furniture), Toledo (glass), Peoria (tractors), or Hartford (insurance). Its dominant industry—gambling, and servicing gamblers—is divided among about a dozen owners or co-owners of major Strip hotels and a few locally based or family-owned off-Strip companies, backed up by slot-machine manufacturers and similar adjuncts. But single-industry towns are no less vulnerable to the fickle winds and whims of the global economy than single-company towns. (Detroit is the glaring example, but Houston lost more than 200,000 jobs during the 1980s oil crisis.) As Clark County school superintendent Brian Cram likes to say, "The casinos are our steel mills." This is where his high-school students look for jobs; this is the sacred cow all Nevada politicians treat with deference; this is the industry Las Vegas depends on for its survival.

Because of the horror stories of the 1980s and the legends of industrial tyranny identified with places like Pullman and Lowell, the phrase "company town" has become a term of abuse. Few grown-up cities want to be thought of as single-company (or even single-industry) towns. Economists and bankers advise them to "diversify" as a cushion against future shocks.

"The company town is a fundamentally flawed economic organism," wrote a *Business Week* reporter of Poughkeepsie in 1995 ("The Town IBM Left Behind"). "Dominant employers foster dependency in their communities, dulling the incentive to take risks." "Company towns," wrote William Fulton ("On the Manifest Destiny of Vegas," *Governing*, October 1995), "only grow beyond their roots when the politicians stop giving the company everything it wants."

Las Vegas's best-known newspaper columnists, Jon Ralston and John L. Smith of the *Review-Journal* and Mike O'Callaghan (a former two-term governor) and Jeff German of the *Sun*, are not afraid to take on the overwhelming political influence of the industry, and the timidity or impotence of most elected officials in addressing it. In fact, like many Las Vegasans, they sometimes seem almost cynically resigned to both situations. "There are a few forces in the city, but the one that moves the mountains,

the one that makes the sun rise, is the gaming industry," says Smith. "The Industry is ubiquitous. The movie industry doesn't have one-tenth the clout in L.A. that the Industry has here."

Does the gaming industry control an excess of political power in Clark County? In the spring of 1997, I posed that question to a number of well-educated Las Vegans.

"Ask the state's governor, Steve Wynn, what he thinks. Of course gaming controls an excess of political power in Clark County!"

"The gaming industry controls the political system, absolutely. Thus, it is responsible for most of the negative manifestations of life in Clark County."

"Oil controls Alaska as gaming controls Nevada, and that will never change."

"The gaming industry not only controls an excess of political power in Clark County, it has spread its behind-the-scenes tentacles to such entertainment and basic household resource centers as favorite NFL-team sports bars and supermarket slots."

"Obviously. Politicians support contributors, resulting in gaming having significant control."

"The fact that the city won't press annexation of the county and take responsibility for the Strip is evidence that the city doesn't believe it has the power or strength to impact the industry."

Others cited non-gambling constituencies that held what they believed to be equal or comparable political influence and power: the Mormons, the unions, the mining interests. "I believe the land developers have a firmer grip on local politics than the gaming corporations, which are often remotely headquartered."

Still others regarded the proposition as true, but in no way surprising, unique, or even improper. "Why not? It's the major industry." "Unfortunately true; where there is money there is power." "Money talks." "Although not admirable, it is hardly surprising."

"Our economic base is gaming and tourism. Without it we cannot support the community, there would be no reason for Las Vegas."

"Obviously: without gaming Nevada would be the poorest state in the Union. Except for gaming all we have is a little farming, ranching (BLM [The U.S. Bureau of Land Management] controls the vast majority of land), mining, military (particularly bombing and gunnery ranges), and, perhaps, nuclear-waste disposal."

"Yes, it is true—but he who pays the piper calls the tune—see Detroit and automobiles, Bay Area and hi-tech industry, Portland and timber, etc. Why would it be any different here? Gaming is the reason this city exists

and the political landscape is heavily influenced by gaming. Is it excessive? No, in my opinion." (From the vice-president for public relations at a major casino-hotel.)

Letters to the editors of the local daily and weekly papers suggest that many Las Vegans are suspicious of the political clout of the casinos, just as citizens elsewhere are suspicious of the power and influence of wealthy businessmen and corporations in their communities. But apart from such predictable expressions of opinion, is there any evidence that the gambling industry does, in fact, exert the kind of control over Las Vegas one identifies with the proprietors of a company town?



Businesspeople from outside Nevada are often surprised to learn how quickly and readily building permits are granted in Las Vegas for multi-thousand-room hotels and additions, with little or no demand for the kind of "environmental-impact reports" their builders would be obliged to offer elsewhere. Although regulations and inspections were tightened after a series of disastrous, image-blackening hotel fires in the early 1980s, these thirty- to fifty-story towers are still approved, erected, and opened for business with remarkable speed. New hotels, moreover, seem consistently able to persuade the county planning commission to build new access roads for them, to condemn lesser properties to accommodate them, to alter building codes, or to block off or reroute existing streets.

The struggle for control of the sidewalks along and intersecting Las Vegas Boulevard South offers an interesting illustration of the power of the larger hotels. In 1993 MGM Grand persuaded the county commissioners to declare the sidewalk alongside its hotel private property in return for an easement guaranteeing public access—an agreement the hotel has felt free to amend in order to keep away "undesirable" members of the public, such as strikers, sidewalk vendors, and sex-industry leafleters.

In 1994, the hotel demanded that Culinary Union picketers be arrested for trespassing on its sidewalk. Obliging the hotel, Metro police arrested more than five hundred strikers. When a Nevada deputy attorney general protested these provisions as unconstitutional, he was asked to resign; when he refused, he was fired.

In 1992, Mirage Resorts asked for and obtained from the county planning commissioners permission to build bleachers on "their" sidewalk (in front of the Treasure Island Hotel) to accommodate viewers of the popu-

tougher with what it perceives as unsympathetic politicians. "Early on, if people were really objectionable to what we're trying to do, we would try to defeat them in elections," he says. "And we were successful." He described the ways by which his late, legendary partner, lobbyist Jim Joyce, used to apply muscle to legislators and "take care" of candidates—which sometimes meant taking them out of office. "The ninety-seven session has brought me to the reality that it was time to go back to playing the way we had to play before. We've already put the word out with the two state senators that we will not support them. And I believe that because of that, to a large measure, one of them is talking about running for something else, and one of them is talking about not running."

Although the Nevada Resort Association does not itself make campaign contributions, it will be very explicit in its advice to its member properties—which include almost all the major casino-hotels in Nevada—about where *their* donations should go. "We are going out and taking a very firm position in any number of races," Bunker said.

Of course, other interested groups, like the Culinary Union and the Southern Nevada Homebuilders Association, do the same thing, but no other group has the resources or persuasive powers of the assembled owners of the casino-hotels. In 1996, the Culinary Union mounted a successful campaign to defeat an incumbent state senator who was also an anti-union hotel owner; in 1998, the union's efforts were influential in a number of races. But the general perception in Clark County is that *no one* has a chance of winning or holding onto elected office without the support of the Industry. Even offending an industry leader like Stephen Wynn (whose sensitivity to offense, and taste for litigation, have helped make him one of Las Vegas's more colorful overlords) can spell the end of a political career. "In Nevada," wrote columnist John L. Smith in his biography of Wynn—for which his publisher was sued—"a few politicians survive more than one campaign without the blessing, and the financial backing, of the state's largest industry." He cited the case of Jan Lavery Jones, the mayor of Las Vegas, who decided to run for governor in 1994. "She criticized a couple of gaming people—gaming attorneys—for the so-called 'fixed' nature of the system, and said some things that I consider quite accurate. But she changed her tune very shortly. She was basically hounded into silence, and ended up losing the election by a very large number." (Mayor Jones lost another race for governor in 1998.)

The Nevada Resort Association expects the positions of elected officials (including judges) to mirror its own as closely as possible on such issues as gaming taxes, building permits, hotel and casino regulation, traffic access, and keeping the Strip (and at least the relevant blocks of

lar "volcano," which erupts every 90 minutes after dark—despite the bottleneck it would create in pedestrian traffic. "Someone else will have to worry about the traffic," owner Steve Wynn told the pliable commissioners, who later narrowed the busy boulevard for a pedestrian path behind the bleachers so that people could still walk by during eruptions. Three years later, Mirage Resorts got the state Department of Transportation (backed by the Attorney General) to relinquish control of the sidewalk altogether so that they could ban T-shirt vendors and leafleters who might compete with their show, or lower the tone of their piece of the Strip. Las Vegas hotel-security forces have the right to detain people they regard as obnoxious from *in front of* as well as inside their properties. In 1997, the owner of the former Sands Hotel property (now the Venetian) asked the planning commission to declare the sidewalk in front of *his* planned hotel private as well. It is hard to imagine department stores, theaters, office buildings, or hotels in New York or Chicago being allowed to negotiate agreements like these.

In general, the "understanding" between the major casino-hotels of Las Vegas and the city and county police appears to favor the former automatically in any disputes with people they regard as bad news. After nine hundred strikers were arrested during a two-month strike against the hotels in 1984, one union leader protested, "From judges to cops, the state was completely aligned with the casino owners." Casinos have the right to eject or bar anyone from their premises for any reason (including being clever enough to win regularly at blackjack) and to detain undesirables in their own lock-up rooms until the police arrive. The state attorney general will pursue visitors accused of cheating at cards or writing bad checks across state lines on the casinos' behalf in efforts to obtain repayment or extradition.

In almost every Las Vegas-based political race in recent years—for city, county, state, or national congressional office—casino owners have provided about half the campaign funds for winning candidates. The point, insists Richard Bunker, chief spokesman for the major casinos since 1987, is not to influence legislation directly, but to buy access. "When I interview a candidate, I don't say, 'You must vote for me on every issue that I bring to you. I want you to know that my contribution to you gives me one thing, and that's access. I know the time constraints in Carson City [the state capitol, where the legislature meets only for five months every other year]. I want to be able to tell you I need ten minutes, or thirty minutes. If I cannot persuade you of the merits of what I'm doing in that time, I do not expect you to support me.'"

And yet Bunker also declared that the Nevada Resort Association—the casino owners' lobbying group, of which he is president—is about to get

Fremont Street) clear of undesirables—picketers, prostitutes, drug dealers, teenagers, vendors, beggars, and leafleters. In recent years, association lobbyists have persuaded the state legislature to vote for a strict limit on the punitive damages that can be awarded to guests injured in their premises, and to restrict the number of new casinos that can be built, with exceptions for casinos currently proposed for properties owned by their members and friends. With the help of a congressman from California, the association won in 1997 a long-sought \$160 million interchange at Barstow (a notorious bottleneck for tourists from southern California). It is always pushing for expanded terminals, gates, and runways at McCarran Airport. Both of these efforts are intended to ease and increase the flow of gamblers to Las Vegas. But the association remains ever alert against the imposition of new taxes or regulations. It lost a fight against a 1/4-cent raise in sales taxes to pay for new water resources in 1996-98.



Each of the chapters that follow was intended to examine one aspect of life in Las Vegas away from the Strip and Downtown. But no matter how far removed the subject, reference to these places often turned out to be impossible to avoid. It is on the Strip, after all, that many immigrants from Mexico find jobs. It is here that teenagers cruise; that union members work or picket; that security guards keep watch. When all the reports were in, I was struck by the degree to which the heavy hand of the Industry controlled virtually every area of life in Las Vegas Valley.

Most of the crimes committed (or deterred) inside casinos are under the control of the city's hundreds of private security guards, who compose an army four times the size of the county police force. But the burdens placed on the Metro Police are considerably increased by the nature of casino visitors, both criminals and their victims. In no other American city does so much actual cash float so freely about. In her essay on police and security guards, Heather World describes a popular trick played on tourists at McCarran Airport, in which a pair of thieves surrounds an unwitting victim at the X-ray conveyor belt and delays the tourist long enough to snatch a suitcase or bag. "This is Las Vegas!" detectives Kevin Johnson and Keith Blascoe of Metro's tourist-safety unit exclaim in unison. "People come here to gamble," says Johnson, "to double their money. They've always got a couple of thousand U.S. on them."

Teenagers are not legally allowed to gamble, or even to linger on the sidewalks of the Strip after 9 p.m. If they risk either diversion, they may

find themselves hustled out of casinos by vigilant security guards or sent on their way by cruising Metro police. But those whose job it is to worry about local teenagers claim that their problems are intimately tied up with the unnatural work hours, the transient workforce, and the unusual values of a gambling-based city. Young residents often feel that Las Vegas is so fixated on selling adult entertainment to adult customers that it doesn't even want them around. A local family therapist told Marie Sanchez, "People come here to work and get caught up in gambling very early. This is what we do best here and it's very seductive. Adults gamble, lose money, then lose their job in this right-to-fire town. Then their family goes. That's what causes a lot of suicide and depression...."

"This town assimilates its own. A twenty-one year old client of mine was thinking of getting out. But his mother, who is high up in a casino here, got him a job as a valet parking cars. He's making sixty thousand dollars a year—to park cars! I don't see him leaving. Las Vegas kids will grow up and become part of the industry, and they'll continue to perpetuate generations of Las Vegas kids who grow up and assimilate back into the structure. They'll continue to perpetuate the things this town needs to support its economic base" ("Growing Up in Las Vegas").

Although many older Las Vegans we talked to—particularly the better-off and better educated—insist that they have nothing to do with the city's casino culture ("We sometimes go for the shows"), many residents admit that neighborhood casinos have become the senior centers of choice for thousands of local elderly people. As Michelle Ling explains in "Bingo!," small-stakes gambling, particularly at bingo, video poker, and quarter slots, has become an essential part of life of a great many Las Vegans over sixty-five. It provides them with friendly company, free transportation, cheap food, and a degree of entertainment and excitement that to them seem worth every quarter they lose, infinitely preferable to the county's senior centers or staying at home watching TV. One well-known professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV)—whose aged mother loved taking the free shuttles to Sam's Town—insisted that the greatest value of many neighborhood casinos was, in fact, their function as social centers for old people living alone. He told me of one old dear who had become such a pet of the dealers, runners, and waitresses at her favorite casino that many of them showed up at her funeral.

Neighborhood casinos, which remain largely unknown to visitors familiar with the legendary establishments on the Strip and Downtown, have become a substantial part of the Industry. In 1997, the larger neighborhood casinos—particularly the Boulder, Palace, Sunset, and Texas Station Hotels, along with Sam's Town to the south and the Santa Fe to

So although most people in this "company town" do not work for the company, and may even pretend to ignore it, is obvious that the economic power of the gambling industry lies behind both Clark County's extraordinary growth and the combination of prosperity, misery, and chaos that has come in its wake. If nothing else, the constant public clamor to have the Industry subsidize a greater share of growth-related costs suggests that local citizens regard its role as central, like that of the all-powerful courts of seventeenth-century England and France. This is where the power and wealth are centered; so this is where decisions must be made. Many people believe that "casino values" have affected tens of thousands of people who have never set foot in a casino. The establishments aligned with the Nevada Resort Association and the Fremont Street Experience have made major efforts to rid their sidewalks and premises of prostitutes; and yet most Las Vegas still regard the gambling industry and the sex industry of Clark County as intimately related.

THE VOICE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

One risk of this project was that, in focusing on what seemed to us especially interesting groups of people (adolescents and old people, sex workers and the indigent, Westside blacks and north-side Hispanics), institutions (like the new non-denominational "megachurches"), or problems (the 24-hour work cycle, overstretched schools, an endangered water supply), we would end up ignoring the opinions and concerns of the majority of Las Vegas. Within this majority are a great many contented middle-class citizens who insist that, apart from the Strip and Downtown—which are really "just for tourists"—Las Vegas is a "town like any other," full of good-hearted, hard-working family people who are active in churches and community organizations, who work for a great number of good causes, and whose children join the Scouts and play Little League ball. Except in angry letters to the editor written in defense of their city—and few people I have met in this country are as defensive as the Las Vegas middle class—such people are rarely heard from in articles or books about the city. We hear from Steve Wynn and the hookers, Wayne Newton and Local 226, Mike Tyson and the high-rollers who fly into town for his fights; but very little from the people who fill up the new housing projects, golf courses, shopping malls, and churches.

Most of us did talk to civic leaders and satisfied citizens. But a deep-rooted hostility to or suspicion of Las Vegas was not always easy for us to overcome. In an attempt to counteract this, and add some balance to our

the north—were showing greater profit increases than many of their better-known brothers. The casinos at Sam's Town, on the Boulder Highway, and at the handsome new Sunset Station, in Henderson, are larger and more profitable than most of their counterparts in town. In late 1997, billboards along I-95 tempted locals to a new neighborhood casino by asking, "Are you Tired of the Strip Too?"

The Hispanic immigrants who throng to Las Vegas in search of work, as Bill Dauber points out in "El Pueblo de Las Vegas," have rarely been able to break into high-paying building-trade union jobs, let alone upper-level, high-visibility positions in the big hotels. But they now represent the largest single group among the tens of thousands of low-echelon, back-of-the-house hotel workers: maids, porters, dishwashers, bus boys, janitors, stock clerks, laborers, and the like. Such jobs may be looked down on by unemployed black or white workers, but they usually represent an economic step up for Mexican Americans and their neighbors from south of the border.

Those who report on such groups as labor unions, homeless people, teenagers, and the city's black population learned how Las Vegas's all-absorbing concern for its "image" can affect such people's lives. They learned of the degree to which politicians, police, and hotel managers will collaborate to keep the Strip "visitor-friendly," which means, among other things, cleared of panhandlers, protesters, and local teenagers—particularly black and Hispanic teenagers—who might frighten out-of-town gamblers away.

A counselor from a community health center said, "Ninety percent of my clients have gambling and alcohol problems. Drugs, meth, cocaine. Heroin is starting to come back. Gambling is one of the ways to raise money for this. Just being around the casinos they have access to free alcohol." Those who work to find jobs for the poor worry that the first day's wages will be lost to the lure of the casinos. "All you need is four or five bucks converted into quarters and there's this fantasy of hitting the jackpot" (Malcolm Garcia, "Down and Out in Vegas").

Other phenomena covered in the pages that follow are related not so much to the gambling industry as to the remarkable fact of "boomtown" growth itself, a condition Las Vegas shares with a number of other cities of the American Sunbelt. These include such issues as the rapid surge in new residential housing; a school system unable to cope with tidal waves of troubled new students; the fundamental problem of providing water for millions of people moving into a desert; and new nondenominational churches that are trying to supply everything these people have lost, or left behind.

report, I wrote early in 1997 to some four hundred Berkeley alumni residents in Clark County, describing our project and inviting their participation. About a hundred replied, including (with their spouses) fourteen attorneys, eight UNLV professors, seven doctors (and a medical-center manager), seven real-estate brokers or appraisers, five reporters or writers, five school teachers or counselors, three engineers, three people in the insurance business, two clergymen, two Howard Hughes executives, two casino executives (and a retired blackjack dealer), two architects, two family therapists, a psychiatric nurse, a stagehand at Cirque du Soleil, an artist, a banker, a Department of Energy scientist, an ostrich farmer, a librarian, a medical secretary, a golf-course marketer, a computer salesman (specializing in casino sales), a geologist, a retired air-force officer, an "investor," and a deputy district attorney. Among these were a large number of retired people and housewives active in volunteer roles. In March we met with fifty of these people at the Gold Coast Hotel.

Even among these willing aides, graduates of our own university, we encountered the suspicion of and hostility toward outside examiners that might be expected from the citizens of a maligned and often caricatured city. One attorney warned us in advance, "We Las Vegas tend to be somewhat skeptical of participation in such projects because we have been the subjects of so many studies by outsiders intent on ratifying their predetermined conclusions.... Your students may love us or hate us, but they will not be able to ignore the vibrance and potential we presently enjoy." "Remember," wrote a native-born civic leader, "real people live here!"

Several of these people complained about the distorting fixation of the national media on casino-hotels and gambling, and Las Vegas's persistent Sin City image. "No, we don't all live on The Strip. No, we don't all have a gambling problem. Yes, we do put up Christmas lights. Basically, this is a normal community with all the problems and pleasures of any large city."

There seems to be no question that living in Las Vegas generates a kind of prickly defensiveness against criticism from outside—even though, as we shall see, locals are quick to criticize the city themselves. Decades of movies, TV shows, and popular books and articles about mobsters, crime, gross taste, and sleazy sex have created an international image that even new residents of Las Vegas have to deal with. One public-interest attorney, who moved here after 34 years in San Diego, listed as one of the major problems facing Las Vegas "gaining social acceptance from outside Nevada." When presented with some of the statistics cited above (on crime, suicide, child abuse, bankruptcy, divorce, and other signs of social dysfunction), many Las Vegas simply countered that things were no better elsewhere, and often a great deal worse. (The cities most often cited as

"worse" were New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles.) These people may well have been unaware or in denial of the facts, or extrapolating from their own relatively safe and comfortable enclaves. "They [the ignorant reporters from outside] don't realize that in the suburban neighborhoods it may as well be Phoenix, Tucson, Albuquerque, or any other southwest city." As for the sneered-upon excesses of the Strip, these may come down to nothing more than a difference in taste. "Las Vegas's tackiness," wrote a UNLV professor, is "worn as a badge of pride."

"We have none of the problems of older cities with inner-city generations of social problems," wrote a particularly defensive civic booster (Cal '63), director of a large neighborhood casino-hotel and former regent of the University of Nevada. "Most of our problems with violence are imported from Los Angeles gangs looking for new markets for drugs.... The high-profile characters who come to town for sporting events draw undesirables who add to our negative publicity (e.g., Tupak Shakur).... All of the negative attributes given to Las Vegas are found in all other large cities in the U.S." "The city without high crime, prejudice, and dysfunctional government should cast the first stone," wrote a retired artist who once lived in Manhattan, where she felt the effects of street crime and racial prejudice. "New York has these problems in spades. Almost every big city has such problems."

What is it that drew them to Las Vegas, and what keeps them here, these proud and sensitive middle-class Las Vegas? My respondents ranged in age from about twenty-five to eighty-two; their median graduation year from Berkeley was 1969. There were very few natives, but then Las Vegas had a population of only about twenty thousand when my average respondent was born. The reasons most of them moved here initially (other than to retire) were almost always job- or income-related. Their companies or government agencies had transferred them, or downsized; the architecture (or building, or banking) industry had dried up in San Diego or Honolulu; they were eager (or desperate) for a new job; they could earn more money (teaching, selling insurance, practicing law) in Las Vegas than they could in their previous home. A few cited the heady challenge of working in a wide-open, go-ahead town. The basic attractions most often cited were the climate; the lower taxes and cost of living generally; the "excitement" and available entertainment; the friendly people; the positive attitude towards business; and the ease of escape to other places.

Almost everyone talked or wrote about the weather. Warm winters were stressed by retirees from the East and Midwest. A former Bay Area resident raved about the warm summer evenings, when she could float in

her pool by moonlight. A desert-loving artist—who obviously lives some distance from the Strip—grew poetic in praise of the atmosphere:

Las Vegas has well over a hundred magic days each year—i.e., little or no humidity with a temperature that could be up to 85 and still be comfortable. Fully 80 percent of the sunsets are wonderful. The air is still; it's so quiet you can hear the chirping of the critters as dusk approaches. The sky goes from pale blue to deepest blue black; the moon is huge and just over there, and you can actually see a sky full of stars.

Interestingly, almost as many people—often the same people—listed the appalling summer heat (105-110° days are not uncommon) as one of the least attractive aspects of life in Las Vegas: a good reason to visit relatives back home, or at least stay indoors with the air-conditioning on high.

Almost everyone who answered my questions cited "lower taxes" as a major reason for moving to or remaining in Las Vegas. Nevada has no state income tax (a situation enjoyed by residents of Alaska, Florida, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming as well). Its 7-percent sales tax, however—something one rarely hears mentioned—is the fifth-highest in the nation (seven states have no sales tax at all). Homeowners almost inevitably insist that they pay comparatively low property taxes, get more home for their money than homeowners elsewhere, and enjoy a generally lower cost of living; but that depends on what they're comparing themselves with. Las Vegas is indeed cheaper for most people to live in than Los Angeles, San Diego, or San Francisco; but in 1995 the American Chamber of Commerce found the cost-of-living index and the average price of a new home higher in Las Vegas than in most other southwestern cities.

Along with Las Vegas' professed pleasure at their low tax burden goes their realization that the casinos are paying most of their public-works bills. A 6.25-percent tax on gambling profits—a rate far lower than any other state's—pays more than a third of Nevada's annual expenses. A number of people I talked to conceded glumly that taxes would probably have to be raised soon, if Clark County was to pay for many desperately needed things—primarily water, schools, better roads, and improved local services made necessary by the runaway growth of the last twenty years. But they are of several minds on the question of where those revenues should come from.

Our property taxes are lower than they would be without gaming. But it would be better if our government and schools were LESS dependent on gaming and we had higher taxes.... At some point, homeowners will have

The ultimate beneficiary, the gaming industry, should bear the burden. If gaming wants to be the only game in town, let them pay.... There will have to be a modest general increase in hotel-casino tax support.

Make builders pay impact fees for new developments' roads, schools, sewers, fire and police.... Make all new growth pay for its own infrastructure.... Longtime residents resent increased taxation to pay for growth they don't want, schools they don't want.

To some degree, the same ambiguity underlies praise for what new residents—particularly former Californians, who make up more than 40 percent of them—regard as the more "affordable" cost of housing, food, and other things in Las Vegas. They praise the casinos, in particular, for providing inexpensive meals and entertainment, subsidized by the gambling losses of others. But when I asked them if my wife and I should consider leaving Berkeley and moving to Las Vegas when we retired, many local citizens were taken aback. Retiring to Las Vegas, they felt, made sense primarily for less adventurous or less imaginative older people on fixed incomes, who were able to sell up in California and get more house for their money in Vegas: for them, the warmer weather, the lower taxes, the cheaper housing, the golf, the sense of security, and the cheap entertainment were enough. "But if you can maintain your life style in San Francisco in a satisfactory manner, I cannot see why in the world you would want to live here.... I wouldn't cast aside anything you are comfortable and happy with until you are sure you would be as happy here." This banker from Northern California added, "I know of some people who retired here from the Midwest and hated it so much they eventually went back to their snowdrifts and tornadoes."

Although a surprising number of the business, professional, and retired people we met insisted that they never gamble, and try to avoid the Strip altogether, others admit that they love the excitement, the 24-hour lifestyle, the entertainment provided by the casinos. "It's a lot of fun living here," wrote a sixty-three-year-old housewife and substitute teacher. "There are not enough hours in the day to take advantage of all the fun things to do, many of which are free. And then there so many exciting personalities coming to town to entertain."

Bishop Daniel Walsh, who came here in 1987 to lead the Catholic diocese of Las Vegas after twenty-five years of service in California, admits that he misses the convenience of 24-hour stores when he returns to San Francisco for a visit. Like the Convention and Visitors Authority, some citizens really do believe that Las Vegas is "the entertainment capital of the world," and are thrilled by the presence of so many resident and visiting performers. Some recreational gamblers are candid about the joy they

here for thirty-seven years.) Master-planned communities like Summerlin and Green Valley clearly work hard to create a sense of community within their walls (one has only to read their chirpy newsletters) but not everyone enjoys that kind of regulated neighborliness. Residents of long standing feel, or perhaps have created around them, a far greater sense of community than newcomers. One old-timer, in fact, blamed "all these new people from the East" for destroying the traditional Nevada-Western frontier ideals of hospitality and politeness. Retirees, day-shift workers, and people who feel settled in their homes and jobs obviously see this issue differently than swing- and night-shift workers (of which Las Vegas has so many); workers insecure in their jobs; or people who change addresses—and watch their children change schools—every year. Some cite the presence of Nellis Air Force Base, UNLV, even "Saturday-night craps at your favorite neighborhood casino" as valuable nodes of community building in a transient, ever-spreading town. The local Boy Scout council, with 22,000 scouts and 5,500 volunteer adult leaders, is one of the largest in the nation; 9,500 children participate in Boys and Girls Clubs, 7,250 in Girl Scouts, and many more in the athletic programs of the Clark County Department of Parks and Recreation.

We heard over and over of the vitality of the churches of Las Vegas—in particular, of "my" church or synagogue, which for many recent residents (see chapter 9) has become the single most important force in their lives. Although most of those who identified their denomination were mainstream Protestants, a sense also emerged that the presence of so many family-centered and morally disciplined Mormons and Catholics helped to create the strong sense of community they craved.

People in business praise Las Vegas (as they do Clark County and Nevada) for its "excellent business climate," by which they mean fewer taxes and regulations than they would have to put up with in California or Arizona—a point the Nevada Development Authority makes with hampering insistence when trying to entice businesses from elsewhere to relocate in Clark County. "The thing that really makes Las Vegas great," one small businessman told our spring banquet, "is its entrepreneurial spirit." He was proud of the hundreds of strip-mall shops, he insisted, and the hundreds of small-scale building contractors, because each one indicated a brave new adventurer in the free-market sea of Clark County. "The government is off your back, the mindset is open to new ideas, the elected officials have a vision of economic progress."

Many residents blessed Las Vegas for being easy to escape, and within ready reach of more-attractive places. These desirable other places range from nearby attractions like Lake Mead, Red Rock Canyon, and Mt.

take in the ready availability of their favorite games, and the added pleasure of getting free meals or shows in return for their investments. But most of those who cite gambling as one of the city's "attractions" insist that they are not among those attracted.

A few of the Berkeley alumni in Las Vegas agreed with what we had heard from local social workers, teachers, counselors, and psychiatrists: that the city's constant influx of new residents, its constant rebuilding and expansion, its gambling-based economy, and its huge 24-hour service-sector workforce made it difficult to maintain or establish any sense of "community."

We're nearly all from somewhere else [wrote a 38-year-old Strip casino executive from Northern California, who had lived in Las Vegas for six years] and have family ties, loyalties, etc. in other states and cities.... Our community is adding people at such a furious rate, it is tough to come together. When people are unsure how long they will stay, whether they'll like it or find success here, I believe roots are put down in a very tentative way, and may not really be sunk for years—or until another generation of family grows up. Time will tell. I suspect California was much like this a hundred years ago.

But many of our sample group disagreed. The civically active director of an off-Strip casino was especially adamant: "There are probably more 'community' organizations in Las Vegas per capita than in any other city in the U.S.," she wrote. "This is probably one of the most community-minded and generous cities in the world. This city doesn't know the meaning of the phrase 'We can't do it.'" She went on to list a wide and active array of service clubs, volunteer programs, sports activities, and churches. There is, she insisted, "no better place to live, work, and retire." We were frequently told how generous and open Las Vegas were—*away* from the tourist center. "People away from the Strip fairly outdo themselves to show you just how friendly they are." (And yet, this same person wrote, you may scarcely know your next-door neighbors, because they come and go so often.)

There remains among residents a wide, even bitter division of opinion on this question of community. We held a dinner in December 1996 at an off-Strip French restaurant to hear opinions on the city's problems and prospects from local journalists, politicians, and professors. The discussion over coffee and dessert exploded into an angry dispute over whether or not Las Vegas had a "soul." ("This city has a black hole where its soul ought to be," declared one local writer/reporter—a comment that drew down the wrath of Myrna Williams, a feisty county commissioner who had lived

Charleston to the ski resorts of Lake Tahoe, Mammoth Mountain, and Utah; Grand Canyon and Zion National Parks; other southwestern desert regions; and "real" cities like Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, and San Diego. (How many people living in these cities, I wonder, would list as one of their advantages their proximity to Las Vegas?) On the other hand, residents of other cities might well envy Las Vegas their easy access to a large and reasonably efficient airport, and the number and relative cheapness of daily flights to and from so many U.S. destinations—a boon provided by and for the resort and gambling industry, of course.

Among other reasons cited for moving to or remaining happily in Las Vegas were the cultural and sports opportunities, about which opinions differ; the unlikelihood of floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, blizzards, and snow; the "safe, secure neighborhoods" (some retirement communities, like Sun City-Summerlin, have particularly passionate advocates); the golf courses; the school system ("A lot of parents complain, but they should try other school systems!"); and the city's "small-town" feeling.



There is no reason to suspect or distrust these claims of contentment. Those who say they enjoy the job opportunities and low taxes of Las Vegas, the natural as well as the economic climate, the churches and schools and libraries and cultural events and community activities, are not fooling themselves, or speaking in bad faith: they are telling the truth. You can live a reasonably happy life in Las Vegas, whether or not you make use of the tourist center.

One rhetorical excess to which these good people are often driven, however, is to assert that, precisely because of its churches and schools, its Boy Scout troops and Little League teams, Las Vegas is "just like any other city." It is not. If not precisely a company town, Las Vegas still very much a one-industry town, not all that different from Detroit or Pittsburgh in their heyday. As the industry goes, so goes Las Vegas.

It seemed arrogant at the time, but Steve Wynn was right to mock the pretensions of "economic diversification" represented by the opening of the Levi Strauss distribution center in 1996, of which the Development Authority seemed inordinately proud. "You would have thought the Hoover Dam was being built again," he said. "The party they threw was so disproportionate to the amount of people hired, but everybody was so happy. And the rolling thunder that accompanied the arrival of

Citibank—oh, my God, it was like, Hallelujah!" Levi Strauss hired about four hundred people. Citibank's credit-card operation in Las Vegas hired sixteen hundred employees. Mirage Resorts Inc. has more than twenty-five thousand.

Like every thinking Las Vegas, Steve Wynn knows perfectly well what makes Las Vegas different from other American cities. He knows who pays the bills and who (therefore) calls the shots. Every doctor, lawyer, architect, clergyman, banker, real-estate developer, teacher, grocery clerk, carpenter, prostitute, and drug dealer in Las Vegas ultimately depends for survival on the people who lose their money gambling on the Strip and Downtown—and, increasingly, in outlying neighborhoods as well. In most cases, the ordinary—or at least ordinary college-educated—citizens I talked and wrote to were as quick to find fault with their city as any prejudiced and unthinking outsider might be. "Basically," wrote one candid citizen, "the 'Sin City' perception is not a mislabel. Gaming (greed), sex, and alcohol dominate the community."

The most serious problem confronting the city and county is what most residents regard as totally unplanned growth. The growth is not, of course, totally unplanned, as we have seen: both city and county have large staffs of dedicated and conscientious planners. But their best advice and intentions are frequently overridden by elected politicians and the two industries—casino-hotels and property development—politicians attend to with greatest respect. A minority of my respondents profess to find the rapid growth "exciting," a way to keep the economy "vibrant." Most free-market businesspeople resist the idea of placing any controls or limits on growth, like the "ring around the valley" proposed (and killed) in the state legislature in 1997. Such measures would be "inconsistent with the spirit of entrepreneurialism." (How quickly Las Vegasans pick up the word "entrepreneur" and its derivatives!) Others may dream of growth limits but concede that they are politically impossible given the power structure of southern Nevada—"the last outpost of the Wild West," as one person called it. "Nothing but the marketplace will ever limit the growth of casinos." Most educated Las Vegasans simply rail against the runaway expansion of the last ten years, without any clear idea how to stop or control it. "Where else does the phone company publish two phone books a year in an effort to cope with turnover?"

We can't manage growth.... Too many people too quickly spells disaster.... The government can't keep up with the infrastructure and other problems.

I believe the raging growth will only be brought under control by some unanticipated disaster. Las Vegas is a desert and will not change because of development efforts.

The city's greatest problem is handling the phenomenal growth rate and the subsequent problems that creates: traffic, schools, water, public services, etc.... Population growth must be halted until these problems are solved.

Growth is out of control, first in gaming, which brings in lots of low-income workers, secondly in retirees, who don't want to support schools, parks, roads, utilities, police, etc.

The attitude that growth pays for itself—which it does not—will be our major problem in the long run.

The chaos of the last ten years drove us back to California.

So far as I know, no Las Vegas daily newspaper, no city-council member, no county commissioner, no labor union, and no major industry or professional group has ever dared publicly suggest setting limits on growth in Clark County. County commissioners lobbied aggressively against the "ring around the valley" proposed in 1997. "Any idea of 'controlled growth' is treated by the political elite as being on a par with communism," wrote one Las Vegas architect. Some people who appear to have thought seriously about growth-related problems hold out hopes for limiting them by better coordinated and more thoughtful long range planning; raising the price of water; charging developers realistic impact fees; maintaining stricter zoning requirements; and consolidating city and county governments.

The one result of Las Vegas's record growth that almost every resident mentions with disgust is the increase in traffic congestion, a complaint that may simply represent a longing for the simpler and smaller city of the past. At the right times of day, using side roads and detours, I found Las Vegas no harder to get around than, say, San Francisco or Los Angeles. But traffic tie-ups on the Strip and the major east-west boulevards can be time-consuming and frustrating; and the automobile domination of Los Angeles is precisely what many people came here to escape. The solutions proposed (better public transport; more and wider freeways; better traffic flow management; and a monorail down the Strip, between Downtown and the airport) are unlikely to relieve a situation in which (according to a 1997 study cited by Mark Smith, former president of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce) eighteen new north-south lanes, and twenty new east-west lanes would have to be built by the year 2015 just to keep traffic congestion from getting *worse* than it is today. Even if such an imperial roadbuilding project made sense economically, there is simply nowhere to build that many new lanes.

The second-most-common area of complaint (or fear for the future) among local citizens regards natural resources, specifically, water and air. With regard to the continuing availability of water for this essentially

bone-dry city, many citizens I spoke to cited the now-standard doomsday prediction: available sources of water (underground or Colorado River) will run up against the population wall around the year 2005, and Las Vegas who refuse to face that fact are simply "in denial." Others accept the Southern Nevada Water District's assurance that water in the West will always go to whoever is willing to pay for it, and that Las Vegas will always be wealthy enough to cut deals with ranchers and farmers, other western states, and the federal government in order to get all the water it needs. Given the latter attitude, it is not surprising that some people believe that "[Water-] conservation efforts in the state are a joke." One attorney declared, "Las Vegas lacks a community ethos that would support conservation"—and local government the guts to impose conservation rules on residents and hotels.

Air pollution and smog (the city was placed on a "severe" non-compliance alert in 1997, which could lead to major cutbacks in federal highway funding) are obviously an outgrowth of the astonishing number of cars on the roads. Although county planners I spoke to insist that the situation has improved markedly since 1990, some local residents still rail against the city's general carelessness about environmental (and the related human) realities. An architect who moved to Las Vegas in 1995 wrote,

It has all the worst attributes of the L.A.-Orange County syndrome, i.e., Strip city with total dependence on the automobile, sprawling "slurbs" with no sense of place or belonging, high violent crime rate, energy inefficiency—total dependency on air conditioning for five-plus months; physically non-responsive to the realities of the natural environment.

Many people cite Clark County's beleaguered public schools as another major problem. They regard the local schools as inefficient, overcrowded, or simply not good enough, and fear that the situation will not improve as long as so many of their fellow citizens remain "indifferent to the importance of a quality educational system." Many simply fear that the county cannot build *enough* schools, fast enough. "Some of them are on double sessions from the first day they open their doors. Youngsters are tired of being rezoned so often [that] they go to a different school every year." Others regard Las Vegas as generally "unfriendly to children," and blame the gambling industry for high-school dropouts and low SAT scores.

Gaming doesn't require an education beyond high school for most of its jobs, therefore quality education has a low priority.... Jobs are so easy to get [that] it is hard to keep a lot of kids in school long enough to graduate... If you earn \$70,000 parking cars at a hotel (and don't pay tax on most of it), why would you encourage your children to get an education?

The question of "cultural deprivation" depends on what you regard as culture, and how important it is to your life. Some local residents accustomed to the cultural offerings of older cities profess themselves discontent. "The city badly needs a cultural center" ... [there is] a lack of cultural activities within a 200 mile radius." But to people content with Siegfried and Roy, the Liberace Museum, and the National Finals Rodeo, remarks like these may sound like the whining of East Coast or California snobs. A number of respondents professed themselves delighted with the county's new libraries and the university's classical-music series.

Snobbery does seem to underlie a number of people's critical remarks about their fellow citizens. One man complained of the "low intellectual level of the population, most of whom work in the service industries," and said that he found it "hard to meet intellectual peers." Others were disdainful of their conception of the typical residents of "adult" subdivisions, people they regarded as limited in imagination, bored and boring, obsessed with thrift, security, gossip, and their health problems. Residents of master-planned communities were regarded as isolated, self-centered, and burdened with intolerably restrictive codes designed to homogenize their building, decorating, and behavior.

Educated persons have something of a challenge living in Las Vegas, because so many of the cultural icons appeal to the obvious and the vulgar. The professional class has in effect to isolate and inoculate itself in order to survive.

This is basically a very blue-collar town, which could be positive or negative, depending on your perspective. It is a little more blue-collar than I would like to see.

Finally, a number of these middle-class, churchgoing Las Vegas expressed a disgust at the "low moral tone" set by the gambling industry—as if its existence came as a great surprise to them after they chose to move here.

For those with no interest in gaming it is necessary to ignore—or actively, mentally oppose—the messages of the fast-buck culture.

The moral tone set by the gaming industry is one of complete sleaze. It encourages people to throw away their money on the illusion of quick riches. People who have a weakness for gambling, who are seeking escape from unfulfilled lives, do not do well in any community where gambling is so vigorously promoted. Family life is bound to be adversely affected.

Fundamentally, I think the industry is not eager to see improvements in the quality of life because it may detract from their operations.

It's sad to stop at a 7-11 for gasoline at 4 a.m. and see people with their quart of milk and loaf of bread going sour and stale as they put in another ten dollars.

My hope is to get out of this hellhole within the next five or ten years.



As I wrote at the outset, I originally envisioned this project as our effort to "learn more from Las Vegas"; to offer a series of lessons for other U.S. cities contemplating the turn towards a gambling-based economy. I no longer regard this as useful or even possible. Las Vegas, I have concluded, is unique, and may therefore have no lessons—economic, social, or ethical—to pass on to the rest of the country. Although incorporated in 1905, the city we see was essentially created in 1931 by and for casino gambling. Monte Carlo or Sun City, in southern Africa, may have similar stories to tell. But you cannot fairly compare the situations of Atlantic City, Biloxi, Detroit, or New Orleans; all of these cities had long histories of a mixed social and economic base, before reaching out to casino gambling in recent years. Gambling has been the *raison d'être* of Las Vegas for two-thirds of a century.

Over and over, I heard two commonplaces about Las Vegas that I now regard as equally and fundamentally wrong: first, that Las Vegas is at heart "just like any other city," and second, that the legalizing of casino gambling in some other city will turn it into "another Las Vegas." Not a chance.

THE NEVADA ATTITUDE

Beneath the uniqueness of Las Vegas lies a century-old "Nevada Attitude," or complex of attitudes, that has permitted or encouraged not only casino gambling but also legal prostitution; do-as-you-will marriage and divorce laws; a hostility to taxes or regulation; a brazen defiance of the federal government, not unlike that of Brigham Young in 1857; an indifference to environmental concerns and the downside of uncontrolled growth; the most positive possible climate for entrepreneurs of every sort, from nail polishers and strip-club owners to home builders and telemarketers; unusually free-wheeling land speculators; brazenly commercial doctors and lawyers; three decades (from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s) of virtually unchecked dominion by organized crime; a tradi-

tion (shared by other cities) of pliant or corrupt elected politicians and police; a defiant resistance to any kind of planning; lax building codes and inspections; and an unusually cynical approach to sports, from amateur basketball to professional boxing, thanks to which people like Jerry Tarkanian and Don King have been elevated to local heroes almost on the level of Bugsy Siegel, Del Webb, Howard Hughes, Liberace, Frank Sinatra, Wayne Newton, Elvis Presley, Steve Wynn, and Siegfried Fischbacker and Roy Horn.

Many people I talked to, including native born Nevadans as well as newcomers, boast freely of this "Nevada Attitude." It is vividly demonstrated in the final chapter of this book, which deals with the anti-federalist rebel ranchers who live just north of Clark County. What interests me about this phenomenon, and hence about Las Vegas, is the broad range of feelings and beliefs it is able to encompass, few of which are exportable out of state. Insofar as it exists, the Nevada Attitude seems to include a "Don't Tread on Me" hostility to any kind of outside interference; but also a "can-do" spirit that involves a willingness to take risks and work hard, in the belief that even the most intractable problems can be solved. It embraces both a defiant acceptance (or at least a blind-eye toleration) of legalized gambling and prostitution, unfettered property speculation, and unrestricted smoking and drinking—and a social conservatism often identified with the Mormon Church.

It was the spokesman for another church, however—formerly a teacher at my old high school, near San Francisco—who expressed to me most ardently what Las Vegasans admire about the spirit and energy of their fellow citizens. I will let Bishop Walsh have the last word.

Las Vegas is the finest community I've ever lived in. The nicest people I've ever met are right here in Las Vegas, the most generous people I've ever met, the most community-minded people I've ever met. This is a wonderful city, a wonderful town. It's frontier, it's new, it's like I'm sure San Francisco was like at the turn of the century, such a dynamic place. San Francisco was built on gold, and silver from Virginia City. We're building a community here on a different sort of mining. But it is a dynamic community, full of wonderful people....

The city cut our budget for housing emergency shelter by thirty thousand dollars. Well, that means that for two or three months we'd have to close the shelter. I can't make that up, nor can Catholic Charities. I made public our need, and Elaine and Steve Wynn came forward with thirty thousand. They're not of our faith, but they saw the need, and boom!

I think that's the general spirit: a can-do city. It is such an exciting city, and I find the people wonderful. Our local parishes are so totally engaged.

Of course the great challenge is growth. But I would much rather be worrying about building churches than closing them, the way they are in San Francisco. I wish you could fly a few of those surplus churches down here. With the growth we have experienced here, we built ten new churches in the last nine years—all of which the parishioners have to pay for themselves, one-third in cash, one-third in pledges, one-third as a loan from the diocesan bank which they have to pay back....

Our parish communities are *alive*; the people are alive, they're involved! I've had people come from San Francisco, and they say, 'My God, I'd like to bring my children down here—I mean, to see a real church, a vibrant church!' Most of the people are moving in—they're not native sons and daughters, there are very few of them: so there's a vibrancy in our communities, an outreach to newcomers. We had our diocesan celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the Spanish-speaking community yesterday at the Shrine [the Shrine of the Most Holy Redeemer, just off the Strip, opened in 1992], and we had about fifteen hundred people there. Such a wonderful community.



Many of the interviews and much of the research for this book were conducted between December 1996 and June 1997. Although several of us have returned to Las Vegas since, and made efforts to update facts and statistics, the ages and situations of most of the people we talked to have been left as they were when we encountered them. The stately pace of book-publishing is outrun by the frantic changes of urban life, especially in a city that re-creates itself as often as Las Vegas does. But I believe that our pictures of the city remain fundamentally true.