

# Becoming Respectable: A History of Early Social Responsibility in the Las Vegas Casino Industry

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Each year, millions of visitors to Las Vegas, NV drive, ride, or walk past a Catholic church located at 302 Cathedral Way, in the shadow of the Encore hotel-casino. For many, the church's brightly colored façade seems to pale in comparison to the towers of neon that line the Las Vegas Strip. It's likely that even those who do notice the Guardian Angel Cathedral have no idea about its origins or the significance of the church to Las Vegas's history.

You might say, however, that the Guardian Angel Cathedral is one of the earliest examples of corporate social responsibility in the casino gaming industry. Those who have trouble with the idea of conflating gambling with social responsibility would be further puzzled to know that the man who donated land for this particular Catholic Church, Moe Dalitz, was himself Jewish. Furthermore, Dalitz, at the time a (mostly silent) part-owner of the Desert Inn Hotel and Casino, was – in a former life – a key member of the so-called “Cleveland Syndicate,” one of the Midwest's largest organized crime families (Green, 2002).

This article examines the early history of social responsibility in Las Vegas, paying special attention to the early casino owners and operators who held connections to organized crime. It details a process of “becoming respectable,” whereby men otherwise known as mobsters and criminals (and, by extension, their wives and families) gained recognition and sometimes admiration for their efforts to improve the Las Vegas community. It also looks at joint efforts by several casinos to contribute positively to the community and demonstrates that the gambling interests that helped to build the city of Las Vegas were, in fact, inextricably intertwined with the community that they unwittingly generated.

## **Gambling and organized crime: An unholy alliance**

After its founding as a town in 1905, Las Vegas grew slowly in its first two decades. Construction on the nearby Boulder Dam brought a boom to Las Vegas's notorious vice businesses in the early 1930s, as government workers were unable to drink or gamble in Boulder City, the government town that housed them. Once the dam was completed, however, the city's growth slowed.

Contemporary lore on Vegas history likes to tell the city's next chapter in a dramatic, almost epic narrative: One man, seeking to build an oasis in the desert, creates in Las Vegas an almost-instantaneous gambler's paradise. While the man – notorious mobster Ben “Bugsy” Siegel – and the oasis – the still-standing Flamingo hotel and casino – were certainly important parts of Las Vegas history, this myth doesn't come close to telling the whole story. In fact, two other casinos (the El Rancho and Last Frontier) pre-dated the opening of the Flamingo (McCracken, 1997), and Siegel's involvement in the hotel, though significant, was cut short after less than one year by his untimely death (Johnson, 2000).

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It remains significant, however, that the myth exists, and that it is told and re-told with such frequency and vigor (Gragg, 2015). While the Bugsy myth – and the more widespread history of mobster casino-owners in early Las Vegas – has always been maintained in popular culture, lately there also seems to be a desire on the part of the city to preserve its unsavory roots, and even exploit them when possible.<sup>1</sup> Las Vegas has rarely tried to bury its “mobbed-up” past in the desert sand – a fate allegedly met by victims of the city’s more notorious figures.

In truth, many of Las Vegas’s early gambling resorts were initially conceived and built by forward-thinking businessmen, primarily from Los Angeles, not by men with ties to organized crime. These businessmen included Thomas Hull, a hotelier; R.E. Griffith, who owned a chain of movie theaters; and Guy McAfee, a former LA police sergeant (Lillisview, 2001; Schwartz, 2012b). However, it didn’t take long for significant players in organized crime families from the eastern United States – many of whom already ran extensive illegal gambling operations – to realize the opportunity that existed in Nevada, the only U.S. state where gambling was legal.

Once Siegel’s involvement in the Flamingo opened the floodgates to organized crime’s entry into the Las Vegas casino industry, the stream of “connected” casino owners and operators would flow practically unabated for nearly two decades. Their ties to large East Coast crime families gave mobsters the access to capital for building hotel-casinos in the scope of the Flamingo as well as the connections to enforce the private system of justice needed to protect their interests: Anyone caught stealing from or otherwise cheating the Desert Inn, Flamingo, Stardust, or any of the number of casinos with mob ties would face more serious repercussions from the casino ownership than from the actual law in Las Vegas (Denton & Morris, 2001).

History often portrays these early casino owners with organized crime connections stereotypically, painting them as ruthless, often violent, in pursuit of the financial profit that they settled in Las Vegas to reap. This one-sided portrayal, however, neglects to illuminate the fact that these men were often highly involved in community interests, whether through donations to nonprofit causes or even decisions to run for local political office. Before highlighting specific examples of how Las Vegas casino owners supported their communities, the following section defines and considers the concept of corporate social responsibility, the lens through which this examination of early Las Vegas casino owners is considered.

### **Corporate social responsibility and the business-society relationship**

Corporate social responsibility can be a useful framework when considering the appropriate interaction of business interests and the society in which they operate; in fact, Wood (1991) defines the term broadly as the belief “that business and society are interwoven rather than distinct entities; therefore, society has certain expectations for appropriate business behavior and outcomes” (p. 695). Attempts to quantify social responsibility often focus on multiple aspects of corporate behavior including community support, fair labor practices, environmental sustainability, transparent corporate governance, and producing an ethically responsible product.

Prior to the Corporate Gaming Act of 1969, casinos in Las Vegas were privately owned and run by a single person or, more often, a number of private investors. Although these casinos were not organized as corporations, we can consider these individual owners’ involvement in the Las Vegas community as a precursor to today’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts on behalf of MGM Resorts, Caesars Entertainment, and the corporations that operate casinos in Las Vegas and elsewhere. After all, according

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, The National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, also known as the Mob Museum, opened to much acclaim in Las Vegas in 2012. The museum, which is housed in the former federal courthouse building, has become a key part of the city’s destination marketing efforts.

to Wood (1991) and others, the concept of “social responsibility” is based on the relationship between business and society and can be applied to all business enterprises, whether publicly or privately held.

Different visions of the role that corporate social responsibility should play, largely grounded in differing economic and ethical frameworks, have long competed for popularity and acceptance. Economist Milton Friedman, a proponent of deregulation and the free market, suggested corporations that engage in socially responsible efforts divert potential profits from shareholders and are therefore acting unethically (Friedman, 1970). A purely ethical perspective might suggest that corporations and other business actors, due to the relative power that their financial success affords them, are ethically responsible to less powerful entities, such as a local community, the company’s employees, and even the environment itself (Bivins, 2009). Recent attempts to find a middle ground between these two conflicting theoretical viewpoints have focused on the ability of CSR activities to increase financial profit by promoting purchase decisions by ethically minded consumers (Lewis, 2001; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Smith, 2003).

Although some contemporary examples of CSR evolve out of altruism – as was often the case with CSR’s predecessor, corporate philanthropy – modern corporations that engage in socially responsible actions usually do so with a strategic purpose. While some discussions of today’s corporations consider the idea of motive, in the case of Las Vegas’s early casino owners, this issue must remain hypothetical. However, as discussed below, these casino owners were less likely to be motivated by profit; their engagement with causes in the community was often intended for a different purpose.

### **From mobsters to community leaders**

Although it is hard to say so definitively, it makes sense to assume that the early citizens of Las Vegas did not expect the mob-connected casino owners that moved into the city in the 1950s and 1960s to become active, involved members of their community — but that was exactly what many of them did. Las Vegas offered a unique opportunity to those who left the East Coast’s notorious crime organizations in order to start a new life in the Nevada desert: Not only could these men transform instantaneously from criminals to businessmen running a legal enterprise, but their wives and families could also make a similar shift (Fischer, 2005). Their legitimacy established, these casino owners and operators were free to participate publicly in the community. Two such men who impacted Las Vegas’s growth and development as a community shared the same first name, but their differing experiences in the Las Vegas community – with a little less than a decade in between – demonstrate how quickly social norms adopted these men into public life.

Moe Sedway, an associate of the Genovese crime family, was involved with the early days of the Flamingo and appears in the pages of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* under a set of strangely disparate circumstances: As a hardworking fundraiser for nonprofit causes both local and national; as a candidate for Las Vegas City Commission; as one of three denied a bookmaking license by the tax commission, the predecessor to today’s Nevada Gaming Commission; and finally, upon his death in 1952 (Cantor: *Famed Comedian Speaks*, 1946; *Deny 3 Vegas Bookie License*, 1950; *Photo Outline*, 1946; *Raise Huge Sum*, 1946; *Sedway, Flamingo Hotel Associate Owner, Succumbs*, 1952; *Sedway Named*, 1946). Sedway never denied his connections to well-known mobsters such as Meyer Lansky and Frank Costello, although he claimed that those ties were well in his past when he came to work at the Flamingo (Moe Sedway, 2013). When Sedway and other Las Vegas casino owners were interviewed by the Kefauver Committee in 1950, the local papers “with no apparent inconsistency or embarrassment, [described] them both as ‘casino kingpins’ and ‘prominent local citizens’” (Denton & Morris, 2001).

Moe Sedway's legitimate candidacy for City Commission — he was supported by such civic stalwarts as the American Legion (Political Advertisement, 1947) — demonstrates just how much this community considered these casino owners as full citizens. Although his campaign for that position was unsuccessful, Sedway did serve as a county alderman (Moe Sedway, 2013). His involvement in the community likely helped pave the way for later casino owners to be similarly involved, regardless of their criminal past.

Moe Dalitz came to Las Vegas in the late 1940s as a partner in Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn. Dalitz's money, and that of the Midwest crime syndicate of which he was a part, helped prop up the financially questionable Desert Inn until it could open and begin to bring in profits (Green, 2002). Like Sedway, Dalitz was initially denied a gaming license due to his ties to organized crime (Gaming Licenses Denied, 1950); he ultimately received one on appeal. He went on to gain prominence in the Las Vegas community, not only as a casino owner but also as a philanthropist and community developer.

Dalitz's most notable contribution to Las Vegas was not philanthropic, but profitable: Along with several partners, he built the city's first mall as well as its successful Sunrise Hospital (Green, 2002). These investments in the growing city of Las Vegas helped establish Dalitz's reputation as a positive influence in the community while also building his personal wealth. Dalitz's philanthropic contributions were also noticeable and ranged from the aforementioned donation of land for the Guardian Angel Cathedral to his chairmanship of both United Jewish Appeal and Tent 39, an local branch of a national organization founded by entertainers to give back to children in their communities (Moe Dalitz Accepts Post, 1955; Moe Dalitz Will Head, 1960).

With its ties to Hollywood and the omnipresent role of celebrity in its casino showrooms, Las Vegas was a natural location for a local chapter, or "Tent," of the national Variety Club, a nonprofit organization that allowed entertainers to contribute to their communities. Las Vegas's Tent 39 raised funds for children's needs with the help of such names as Jack Benny, Sammy Davis, Jr., Carol Channing, and Ed Sullivan; a number of the fundraising events were held at casino showrooms (Variety Southern Nevada, 2013). While Moe Dalitz's contribution to this organization was significant in the 1950s and 1960s — he served as its chair starting in 1960 (Moe Dalitz Will Head, 1960) — the present-day incarnation of Tent 39 (which now calls itself "Variety Southern Nevada") makes no mention of Dalitz in its organizational history (Variety Southern Nevada, 2013).

### **Casino businesses step up**

In addition to individual efforts on the part of casino owners and operators, Las Vegas's early history contains several examples of joint efforts by several casinos to contribute to the community. Dalitz and the other casino owners in Las Vegas likely would have understood that the health of the community was important to the eventual success of their business interests. But whether or not these casino owners' community involvement was motivated by a traditional business motivation, their participation in these efforts certainly did promote the growth of Las Vegas as a community. The three examples that follow demonstrate that early casino-owners often engaged in community support regardless of whether it was profitable.

In the first example, casino owners made a decision that directly worked against their financial interests. When the state of Nevada legalized gambling in 1931, the city of Las Vegas's casinos opened their doors and, by many accounts, never closed them again, operating around the clock with few exceptions. That changed, however, in 1950, when a group of local pastors convinced the casino owners to close their establishments from noon to 3 pm so that the city's citizens could observe Good Friday services in the community churches (All of City, 1950; Vegas Given Publicity, 1950).

This observance of religious services was so unprecedented that it caused some logistic challenges for the casino managers:

A. B. Witcher, manager of the Boulder club which opened here in 1929, was looking today for a key to the place so he can close up tomorrow. He said he used to have a key but it has been lost for years, and he probably will have to nail up the door for the three hour closing period tomorrow. (All of City, 1950)

In the aftermath of the Good Friday observance, Las Vegas did receive some favorable press in a United Press International wire story that marked the casinos' closure. In reprinting the article, the local Las Vegas Review-Journal noted the "positive publicity" generated by the action — a welcome consequence, albeit likely unintended, of the Good Friday closure (Vegas Given Publicity, 1950).

All of Las Vegas's casinos frequently supported and participated in the city's annual "Helldorado Days," a community celebration that also promoted citywide tourism by adopting a popular frontier motif. Businessmen started Helldorado Days in 1934, and in its early years, the festival attracted Hoover Dam workers with its celebration of lawlessness and licentiousness. Once the dam construction was complete and the workers left town, city leaders modified the festival in order to encourage a more family-friendly, community-oriented event. The local chapter of the Elks, a civic organization, took ownership of Helldorado Days, and Las Vegas's businesses — its casinos prominent among them — became organizers and sponsors of its events (Elks Helldorado Days, 2013). A 1957 photo spread in the Review-Journal showed the sponsorship of Moe Dalitz and Desert Inn, along with representatives from the Horseshoe Club, Royal Nevada, El Rancho, Sands, Sahara, Golden Nugget, and Tropicana (Resorts Back Helldorado Celebration, 1957).

Even legendarily ruthless mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel was known to get into the philanthropic spirit, as is evidenced by a 1947 event at Siegel's Flamingo hotel that raised an impressive \$10,000 for a local writer's cancer treatment. A writer in the Las Vegas Review-Journal gives much credit to Siegel and in his write-up of the event also mentions "Benny" Binion, the founder and future owner of the Horseshoe Casino, who had quite a past running illegal gambling operations in his home state of Texas:

While the guys and cuties who provided the entertainment were great in combining their talents into a over-all production the like of which has never been ogled in Nevada, no small amount of credit should go to those responsible for the production including Ben Siegel of the Flamingo. . . . As we are passing out the orchids it might be well to mention a few of the citizenry who went into their pockets during the auction in purchasing the various and sundry articles offered. Among these were J. Kell Houssels, Mayor [illegible], Louis Wiener, [illegible], Sam Diamond, Ben Binion. . . . (Hoofers Go All Out, 1947)

The writer notes that in addition to the event being hosted by Siegel at the Flamingo, entertainers were "donated" by hotels including the Flamingo, Last Frontier, Nevada Biltmore, and El Rancho.

This episode highlights the strange juxtaposition of criminal mobster and concerned citizen, so common in the city's early history, by including men like Siegel — who was given the nickname "Bugsy" because his ruthless killing made him seem like he was crazy (Johnson, 2002) — in a list of Las Vegas's philanthropists. That these men had an opportunity to transform, even in some small way, from wanted criminals and outcasts in their communities into civic leaders and philanthropists only highlights the fact that in its early days, Las Vegas truly was a place where anything was possible.

In an era that pre-dated the information age, the early days of Las Vegas's casino industry was filled with characters whose mob ties were often theorized, but usually not confirmed. Casino owners who eventually became civic leaders, such as Moe Dalitz,

often denied or downplayed any connection to organized crime, past or present. A display at the National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, opened in Las Vegas in 2012 and popularly known as the “Mob Museum,” refers to Dalitz in glowing terms:

Later in life Moe Dalitz was honored for his philanthropy and contributions to the growth of Las Vegas.

UNLV called him the “Grand Patron of the Arts” for his generosity. The mayor gave him the Trendsetter award for making Las Vegas the home of lavish, spectacular shows, and city leaders named him “Mr. Las Vegas.” Joan Rivers presented him with the Torch of Liberty from the Anti-Defamation League. Others referred to him as “the Godfather of Las Vegas.” (National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, 2013)

On his 80th birthday, Moe Dalitz was presented with the ceremonial key to the city. Regardless of the philanthropic accolades he received, however, Las Vegas history rarely mentions Moe Dalitz without a mention of his criminal past and the suspicions about possible continued connections to organized crime during his years as a civic leader in Las Vegas (Schwartz, 2012a; Smith, 1999).

1950’s Kefauver Committee hearings in Las Vegas did not tarnish the city’s reputation, as many had feared, by associating it with organized crime. Instead, they only highlighted the aspect of Las Vegas that made it so attractive to outsiders: That the city’s casinos were owned and run, even in appearance, by real live mobsters (Schwartz, 2003). This element of Las Vegas’s appeal and mystique would remain with the city throughout its growth, much of which happened long after the mob-connected owners had left the picture.

#### **After the mobsters: Corporations come to town**

Indeed, these early casino owners’ ties to organized crime allowed them to tap into vast reservoirs of capital for building new and bigger casinos – Dalitz himself financed several projects using funds from Jimmy Hoffa’s Teamsters Union, also reputed to be associated with the mob (Smith, 1999). However, in the 1960s, the landscape of Las Vegas changed considerably when reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes came to town and began buying casino properties, including Dalitz’s own Desert Inn. At the end of the decade, the Nevada State Legislature allowed purchase of casinos by corporate entities with multiple stockholders (Las Vegas Sun, 2012).

This new law hastened the end of the era of mob ownership in Las Vegas’s casinos, although some involvement by organized crime in the gambling industry continued throughout the next few decades. Ultimately, corporate-owned casinos had access to even more capital for improvements and expansions than the mob operations could ever dream of (Schwartz, 2003). It was this sort of corporate financing that helped fund the building of the Mirage, the first of the megaresorts, in 1989, and the increasingly larger and more lavish casinos that have emerged to line the Strip in the past 20+ years.

Las Vegas’s transition from mob town to industry town proved difficult for the community. Hughes, who owned as many as six Las Vegas casinos at one point (Michel, 2008), was never actively involved in community affairs, although his corporation later financed and developed much of the Las Vegas suburb of Summerlin (Villano, 2008). The earliest corporations to own Las Vegas casinos, chains like Holiday Inn and Hilton, had more of a national focus to their philanthropy. In 2001, local nonprofits made it clear that the casinos weren’t pulling their weight in supporting community causes (Gorman, 2001). To introduce his article on the topic, reporter Tom Gorman invoked the familiar face of casino philanthropy in Las Vegas: Moe Dalitz.

When it came to charity, this town used to be a soft touch.

Mobster Morris “Moe” B. Dalitz, who chaired the local United

Way campaign back in the early 1970s, once showed up on the last day of a fund-raising drive with a bag of cash to help put the charity over the top. (¶ 1-2)

In contrast to the landscape of 2001 portrayed in Gorman's article, today's gaming corporations have enacted far more sophisticated and strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. MGM Resorts oversees programs of employee giving, employee volunteering, and corporate charitable giving; the Caesars Foundation supports advocacy and services for the elderly, environmental sustainability, and local communities in which its 53 casinos are located (Caesars Foundation, 2013; MGM Resorts Foundation, 2013). Although their philanthropic giving declined considerably in the wake of 2008's economic downturn, the casino corporations in today's Las Vegas are clearly contributing to their community, even if they might not be doing so at the rate that some nonprofits would like (Strauss, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

However well-intentioned the contemporary efforts at corporate social responsibility in today's Las Vegas may be, it seems likely that they exist primarily as a compromise to Friedman's concerns about CSR: They rely on the premise that the strategic use of corporate social responsibility can ultimately provide financial gain, thus justifying the corporation's efforts. A discussion of the motivations behind these corporations' socially responsible actions may be, ultimately, academic. After all, Wood's (1991) definition of CSR doesn't even consider motivation, and uncovering what motivates the actions of a large corporation may not even be possible.

It does seem likely, however, that the early incarnations of social responsibility by the owners of Las Vegas casinos had little to do with profit or the contemporary return-on-investment justification of CSR. Moe Dalitz's decision to donate land for the Guardian Angel Cathedral, Ben Siegel's sponsorship of the Flamingo fundraiser for a writer's cancer treatment, and Moe Sedway's efforts to raise money for Jewish people in the wake of World War II seem to be motivated more by human empathy than by the ultimate promise of financial benefit.

Schwartz (2003) describes how Las Vegas's growth in its early years was fueled, ironically, by American mores against gambling and governmental efforts to limit the practice – in every state but Nevada. Crackdowns on illegal gambling operations elsewhere – the likes of which were run, at one point, by men like Moe Dalitz and Ben Binion – allowed Las Vegas to flourish as an “oasis” in the desert for open-minded Americans who were interested in gambling and wanted a legal option to be available, albeit not in their backyard (p. 74).

Las Vegas was originally intended to serve as a different kind of oasis – its lush turn of the (nineteenth) century landscape earned the city its name (“The Meadows”) and spurred interest in settling the area, originally from Mormon missionaries and later because of its proximity to the Union Pacific railroad stop (Moehring & Green, 2005). But the Las Vegas we know now as “Sin City” was never intended to be a place where people would live. It was a place where women seeking a quick divorce, or men seeking excitement and a respite from their ordinary suburban lives, would visit for a few days or a few weeks, and leave.

As the gambling-tourism complex grew, and the casinos became larger and more numerous, it was inevitable that Las Vegas would become an American city much like any other, with needs for community support and civic engagement. After all, someone had to deal blackjack, valet park cars, wait tables in the showrooms, and clean the hotel rooms, and those people would need schools for their children, stores at which they could shop for groceries, and mechanics to fix their cars when they broke down.

Into this void stepped some rather unlikely characters – men like Moe Sedway,

brought to testify before Estes Kefauver's Senate Committee to Investigate Organized Crime, and Moe Dalitz, who bootlegged liquor during Prohibition and ran illegal casinos in Michigan, Ohio, and Kentucky. During their time as Las Vegas casino owners, these men helped develop the community, supported nonprofit causes, and played a crucial role into helping Las Vegas grow into a modern American city. Although their true motivations are lost to history, it's likely that they didn't engage with their community for financial gain – certainly not on the part of their casino interests. However, it may not even be of any consequence why they engaged in this early form of corporate social responsibility. What remains, ultimately, is an unlikely outcome: These men had become respected members of their community, something that would have seemed inconceivable in their pre-Las Vegas lives.

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