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## Looking Deeper

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History professor Eugene Moehring's strong record of scholarship and his passion for Nevada history earned him UNLV's most prestigious research award.



## Looking Deeper

History professor Eugene Moehring is a respected scholar on urban history issues and the West. But the Harry Reid Silver State Research Award recipient says the students are still the most important part of the research equation.

STORY BY AFSHA BAWANY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERI KODEY

Eugene Moehring had the quintessential tourist experience on his first visit to Las Vegas in 1976.

He stayed at the Sands Hotel, lounged by the pool, gambled a bit, and took in Wayne Newton's show.

Given this classic introduction to Vegas, some might speculate that it was the glitz and glamour of the resort town that made him want to move here.

He smiles at the notion. Yes, he says, his stay was enjoyable, and Las Vegas was attractive – but not for the most obvious reasons.

Moehring was in Las Vegas for a job interview with UNLV's history department, and it was the city's rich potential as a research subject that sold him on taking the job.

"In many ways Las Vegas rivals

19th-century Manhattan, which I wrote about in my dissertation," says Moehring. "Like Manhattan, Las Vegas went from being a small town to a big city in 40 to 50 years. For an urban historian, it's a wonderful laboratory."

Moehring also knew Las Vegas was a relatively young city without a published history. Trying to teach western urban history to local students without comprehensive books detailing the town's past was both a challenge and an opportunity.

He saw the need to provide context for students and expanded his research of urban history to Nevada's past. He spent a decade researching and writing his first book on the history of the Las Vegas metropolitan area, and he didn't stop there.

Thirty-three years later, Moehring is the author of five books and an impressive number of journal articles about Las Vegas and other cities of

the West. It is this strong record of research, along with his passion for Nevada history, that led him to become the 2008 recipient of UNLV's prestigious Harry Reid Silver State Research Award.

Moehring joins a small, elite group of UNLV professors who have won the annual award, which was created in 2001 and named in honor of the U.S. senator who has been a strong supporter of the university. The award was designed to recognize research that is not only highly regarded but is also responsive to the needs of the community and state.

A committee composed of UNLV colleagues and a community representative selected Moehring, who is the second historian to receive the award. (The late Hal Rothman, also of the history department, received the award in 2004.) Moehring received a \$10,000 stipend, funded with private donations provided by the UNLV Foundation, with the award.

Initially, Moehring wasn't going to apply for the award but was urged to do so by his peers.

"Gene has dedicated much of his professional career to the benefit of Nevada, writing the histories that have enabled residents and non-residents alike to understand the political, economic, and cultural history of the state," says David Wrobel, professor and chair of the UNLV history department. "These contributions enhancing the regional and national understanding of our state, combined with his profound impact on Nevada's students, have made him a natural recipient of this award."

Moehring, who has served as the chair of the history department twice, teaches a full load of undergraduate and graduate-level courses. He was instrumental in establishing the department's emphases in public history and world history, and he developed courses in Nevada history at the survey level. He integrated much of his research on Las Vegas into his upper-division courses and advocated the creation of the history department's Ph.D. pro-

gram. He also recently authored the definitive history of UNLV for the institution's 50th anniversary.

Once a political science major who also considered a career in medicine, Moehring says he became interested in studying history because it provided the background necessary to understand the policies, theories, and principles he studied in political science.

"I wanted to know what happened," he says. "I wanted to understand why political leaders made the decisions they made and what the effects were. History provides those details."

Today, Moehring emphasizes this point to his students, noting that history continues to have a profound influence on public policy.

"It is vital for students to understand that the world today is deter-

mined by the past," Moehring says, adding that he still enjoys engaging students and encouraging them to think critically about the historical context that leads to policy decisions.

Moehring has guided the work of more than 70 master's and Ph.D. students through the years on wide-ranging subjects, including the life and times of the late U.S. District Court Judge Harry Claiborne; Nevada's home front during World War II; health care for Hoover Dam construction workers; and the Republican Party during the Civil War. He expects to direct more graduate students next semester.

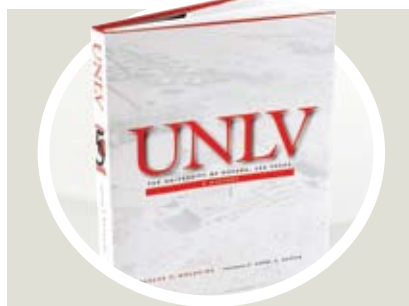
### Focus on Las Vegas

In his first scholarly book on Las Vegas, Moehring discussed the city's history from the construction of Hoover Dam to the building of the MGM Grand Hotel, now known as Ballys. The growth of Las Vegas in the 1980s prompted Moehring to update the book in 1995 and again in 2000. He says the goal of the book, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-1970* (University Press, 1989), was to spawn additional research on the city and generate interest in the state.

It seems to have worked. Hundreds of journal articles, magazine pieces, and books devoted to the history of Las Vegas are now on the market, many of which are housed in the UNLV Lied Library special collections department. (The department is also home to millions of documents and manuscripts, in addition to 1,500 oral histories related to the Southern Nevada region.)

Moehring, an active member in professional and community organizations, has become one of the best-known authorities on Las Vegas history. He has served as a consulting historian to Clark County and the cities of Las Vegas and Henderson, and he has been appointed by several mayors and governors to serve on a variety of committees and boards dealing with community issues.

Though a native New Yorker – Moehring holds a bachelor's and mas-



### BOOKS BY EUGENE MOEHRING

*Public Works and the Patterns of Urban Real Estate Growth in Manhattan, 1835-1894* (New York: Arno Press, 1981)

*Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-1970* (University Press, 1989, updated in 1995 and 2000)

*Urbanism and Empire in the Far West, 1840-1890* (University of Nevada Press, 2004)

*Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, co-authored with Michael S. Green (University of Nevada Press 2005)

*UNLV: The University of Nevada, Las Vegas: A History* (University of Nevada Press 2007)

Moehring met his wife, library technician Christine Wiatrowski, while conducting research in UNLV's Lied Library.



AARON MAYES

ter's degree in history from Queens College and a Ph.D. from The City University of New York – he now considers Las Vegas home. He and his wife, Christine Wiatrowski, a library technician whom he met while conducting research in the Lied Library, enjoy Las Vegas dining and the natural beauty of Nevada, including Red Rock Canyon and Lake Tahoe.

While he embraces the transformation of Southern Nevada in the last few decades, Moehring recalls with nostalgia the Las Vegas that once was: a small town with low-rise casinos and a young university with only a Safeway grocery store nearby. The changes have provided him with ample opportunity for study.

"For an urban historian, to see the growth of Las Vegas in the last 33 years has been very exciting," Moehring says. "Creating public memory is crucial to building a sense of community, as is placing current-day problems in historical context."

To illustrate this point, he notes that it is necessary to reflect on past trends to understand the city's current economic downturn. Despite these

tough times, Moehring says, he has faith that Las Vegas-style ingenuity will help the town thrive again.

"I think that becoming the fastest growing city in the United States between 1986 and 2006 was an enormous achievement for a city that has no river, no ocean, no mines, and no major agriculture," Moehring says. "Developing the economy in innovative ways is really an amazing achievement for a desert city like Las Vegas."

#### Back to the Future

After spending more than 30 years conducting research on the community and state, Moehring says he can still find plenty of history to uncover. He is interested in researching the relationship between the railroad industry and the development of cities, and there are, of course, a few key figures in Las Vegas history he would like to interview as well.

"I'd love to speak with Sheldon Adelson, Steve Wynn, and Kirk Kerkorian," Moehring says. "I would like to do a book about the major resort makers in Las Vegas and how and why they built their properties."

As for his reaction to winning perhaps the most prestigious research award on campus, Moehring – who donated his award stipend to charity before he even received the check – says that he is pleased that his academic reputation might bring attention to UNLV.

"Publications that are well received within the scholarly community have allowed me to achieve a national reputation in my field, which eventually enhances the prestige of my department and of UNLV," he says.

He notes that one of the critically important goals of conducting research as a faculty member is sharing the most enlightening information possible with students. This perspective isn't surprising coming from someone like Moehring, who maintains that teaching is still his greatest joy.

"My goal is to make history interesting to my students, to guide them in identifying research topics of their own, and to help them think critically about important policy issues affecting our city, state, and nation," he says. "This is what I love most about my job."