

Erving Goffman's Las Vegas: From Jungle to Boardroom

David G. Schwartz

Sociologist Erving Goffman's presence in Las Vegas never yielded a definitive publication. Though it informed his work about action and interaction, his time in Las Vegas—both as a blackjack dealer and a player—remains one of the great what-ifs of gambling academia. This is regrettable, not only because the field would have benefited immeasurably from the analysis of a figure of Goffman's talent and repute, but because Goffman was in Las Vegas exactly as the city's casino business was undergoing its most significant shift, from small-scale, syndicate-owned ventures with links to former and current illegal enterprises elsewhere to massive, publicly-traded, mainstream-financed concerns.

Goffman began regular trips to Las Vegas in the late 1950s. By this time the coterie of former illegal gambling operators who did much to build the Las Vegas Strip had become established and relatively secure. Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris's muck-raking *The Green Felt Jungle* (1963), which ticked off the most salacious facts, rumors, and misrepresentations to be found, chronicled the peak of this cohort's power. Goffman had an intimate view of Las Vegas at the exact moment when the generation that built the Strip was at its mightiest.

Yet that command was short-lived. When Goffman contemplated an abortive continuation of his casino study in the mid-1970s, most of the names that had built the Las Vegas he first entered were gone or diminished. Moe Dalitz, with whom Goffman has been linked, sold his interests in the flagship Desert Inn to Howard Hughes in 1967; he would have licensing difficulties with his last project, the Sundance, in 1980. So Goffman, had he completed and published his work on Las Vegas, would have been able to provide a detailed, insider portrait of a business in the throes of its most historic shift.

Experiencing Las Vegas, Reno, and Lake Tahoe casinos first as a dealer and then as a card-counting blackjack player, Goffman would have seen not just how these gambling houses presented themselves in everyday life, but what went on behind the scenes—a look at not just the onstage drama but the equally-compelling backstage action.

Goffman did not complete his study of casinos because of a “crisis” that involved “evil.”¹ Travis Hirschi, who attended the seminar where Goffman spoke—somewhat elliptically, it seems—about his confrontation with evil in Las Vegas—was unable to say exactly what had turned Goffman against pursuing further research and publication. Subsequent researchers have been unable to shed any light on the about-face.² So Goffman's forays into Nevada casinos ended, with no direct material published on the experience, although, as Dmitri Shalin points out, his time in Las Vegas directly informed much of his later work on deviance, action, and interaction.³

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1 Dmitri Shalin, “Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene.” 28.

2 Shalin, 29.

3 Shalin, 29.

Paradise Diminished

When Goffman began visiting Las Vegas regularly, the city was in its own state of crisis. Before exploring that crisis, the underlying structure of the Las Vegas casino business, as it existed circa 1958, must be explored.

Nevada initially legalized “wide-open” gambling in 1869, with few oversights at the state level—licensing and fee collection was at the county level.⁴ This system was tolerable for the small-scale gambling operations of the time, and for the next forty years the legislature continually adjusted the parameters of regulation, raising the minimum age, adjusting license fees, changing permissible operating hours, and broadening the scope of games allowed. In 1909, however, the legislature put an end to this system, passing a law that made dealing or playing games punishable by as much as five years in prison.⁵

After a progressive loosening of the state’s gambling prohibitions (social card games quickly returned) the Nevada legislature in February 1931 re-legalized “wide-open gambling” in what historian Eric Moody has termed “purely a business proposition.”⁶ This begins the modern era of Nevada gaming, and the state’s casinos and regulatory apparatus date from this year.

At the time, Reno, not Las Vegas, was best situated to capitalize on the new possibilities of commercial gaming. Drawing on attention garnered by the July 4, 1931 Max Baer-Paulino Uzcudun heavyweight boxing bout, Reno publicized itself as a town where virtually any game of chance could be found. Soon, a series of gambling houses on Center Street competed for customers. These clubs—they were not “casinos” in the modern sense of the word—featured faro, craps, blackjack, and roulette, bingo (usually called tango), and slot machines.⁷ Reno gambling halls outdistanced their southern brethren in both number and volume of play.

Las Vegas, at the time, had a population of just over 5,100.⁸ Like its northern counterpart, it had a flourishing “vice” industry; saloons (which included gaming tables) and brothels operated as a matter of course in Block 16, bounded by First, Ogden, Second, and Stewart Streets, from the town’s 1905 inception. Although dwarfed by Reno and having struggled with development since its founding, city boosters were confident that just-under-construction Hoover Dam would bring the city to prominence.⁹ Indeed, construction workers and visitors to the massive engineering project provided the bulk of visitors to Las Vegas in those years.

Despite its boosters’ dreams, Las Vegas at the time had few facilities for hosting the visitors they sought. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, both the Union Pacific Railroad and a coalition of business interests attempted to attract a “first class hotel.”¹⁰ With a better class of accommodation, they believed, the city would attract more overnight visitors, who would in turn travel more frequently and patronize existing bars and shops—boosting the economy in general but specifically helping the railroad and Fremont Street businesses.

Those dreams began to reach fruition in 1938, when miner-turned-hotelier Thomas Hull began building the El Rancho Vegas. The hotel would open three years later, after Hull overcame more than one obstacle. Las Vegas finally got its first-class hotel, with one catch: it was not, strictly speaking, in Las Vegas.¹¹

4 David G. Schwartz. *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling. Casino Edition*. Las Vegas: Winchester Books, 2013. 198.

5 Schwartz 2013, 198-9.

6 Eric N. Moody. “Nevada’s Legalization of Casino Gambling in 1931: Purely a Business Proposition.” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*. Summer 1991. 80.

7 Schwartz 2013, 202-3.

8 “Timeline.” *Las Vegas Sun*. <http://lasvegassun.com/history/timeline/>

9 Schwartz 2013, 211.

10 David G. Schwartz. “The Columbus of Highway 91.” *Vegas Seven*. November 8, 2012.

11 Schwartz 2012.

Instead of building on Fremont Street, where he would have to compete with the businesses whose owners had originally lured him to Las Vegas, Hull chose to build his 63-room resort—which included a dinner theater and a gambling casino—on Highway 91, the chief road to Los Angeles, which even then was the main feeder market for Las Vegas’s fledgling tourist industry.

By building on Highway 91, Hull created a self-contained, insular resort—the perfect host for a casino, whose long-term financial health relies on guests staying until they have parted with much of their gambling budget and, at the very least, not taking their winnings elsewhere. The El Rancho Vegas set the pattern for Las Vegas Strip (as the roadway, by 1952, was called) casino resort design: a central building with the casino, lounge, theater, restaurants, and shopping surrounded by low-rise hotel wings. Everything from the swimming pool—which Hull sited in front of the casino, the better to attract tired drivers—to the ample landscaping to the plentiful food (the El Rancho Vegas offered the first Las Vegas casino buffet, the \$1 Chuck Wagon) was meant to, in the words of casino employee Guy Landis, make visitors “feel both welcome and excited” about visiting.¹² With all of the guests’ needs met on property, there was no need to visit elsewhere. Indeed, an early write-up in the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned a range of additional attractions that visitors to the El Rancho Vegas could sample, including skiing at Mount Charleston and “sight-seeing in the rip-roarin’ town of Las Vegas close by.”¹³ Las Vegas itself was almost incidental to the long-awaited first-class Las Vegas.

Casino resorts built along these lines followed the El Rancho Vegas: the Hotel Last Frontier in 1942, the Flamingo in 1946, the Thunderbird in 1948, and the Desert Inn in 1950. Like the El Rancho Vegas, they were self-contained, with the emphasis on both general vacation amenities and gambling. In 1952, the Sands and Sahara joined them.¹⁴

The Flamingo was not the first casino on the Strip, but it helped to set the model for casino financing and management for the next generation; this model was codified with the Desert Inn in 1950. The DI was a partnership between Wilbur Clark, who had conceived and started construction on the resort, and a group of investors led by Moe Dalitz, who financed its completion and operated it. Dalitz, born in 1899, was a member of the cohort of organized crime affiliates who came of age during Prohibition; he was himself a bootlegger of no small repute. As leader of the Cleveland’s Mayfield Road Gang, Dalitz was at the nexus of a web of several illegal enterprises, including casinos.¹⁵

Dalitz’s activities fit with his generation of organized lawbreakers. According to historian Mark Haller:

Leading bootleggers tended to be young, born between 1892 and 1900, and thus 20 to 28 years old when prohibition began. They had generally grown up in America’s urban slums. Prohibition arrived just as the first generation of Jews and Italian young people raised in America were reaching maturity. Data on leading bootleggers in major cities indicate that some 50 percent were of Jewish background, 25 percent of Italian background, and the rest were primarily Irish and Polish.¹⁶

12 George Stamos Jr. “El Rancho Vegas.” *Las Vegas Sun Magazine*, April 1, 1979.

13 Schwartz 2012.

14 “Timeline.” *Las Vegas Sun*. <http://lasvegassun.com/history/timeline/>

15 “Morris Barney Dalitz.” Nevada Online Encyclopedia. <http://onlinenevada.org/articles/morris-barney-dalitz>

16 Mark Haller. “The Changing Structure of American Gambling.” In Matthew G. Yeager, ed. *Illegal Enterprise: The Work of Historian Mark Haller*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2013. 139.

This group's ambition—and ruthlessness—would redefine American organized crime. In “The Changing Structure of American Gambling, Haller relates that, “when Prohibition ended in 1933, many bootleggers were still young men...yet with wealth and nationwide contacts that had grown out of their bootlegging enterprises...by the 1950s they were in their fifties and at the height of their careers.”¹⁷

It was at exactly this moment that Clark approach Dalitz and his associates (primarily erstwhile members of the Mayfield Road Gang) with his plea for funding. Now wealthy, powerful, and middle-aged, Dalitz and his compatriots were likely seeking stability and respectability—two things that, if they wished to continue to earn a livelihood from gambling, they could only achieve in Nevada.

Dalitz and those of his associates who appeared on paper as investors in and owners of the Desert Inn were relatively clean; some of them had convictions for gambling offenses, but in Nevada at that time, that was not a disqualification for a gaming license.¹⁸ While the state, if it did not always welcome, tolerated the presence of those convicted of illegal gambling, it drew the line when it came to those who had been found guilty of, or were even suspected of, complicity in broader criminality. Still, these figures had two things that casinos needed: capital, and a willingness to invest it in chancy gambling businesses.

Thus, a Meyer Lansky or Frank Costello would not have been found anywhere near the licensing paperwork of a Desert Inn, Flamingo, or Thunderbird. They were able to maintain hidden interests in Las Vegas casinos, however, by sponsoring front investors. In return for their capital and influence in marketing the casino via junkets, these men received a portion of casino win funneled away from legitimate channels: the skim.¹⁹

This system made almost everyone happy. The state got economic development, locals got jobs, casino operators got secure jobs and a growing place in a growing community, and the secret funders got another source of relatively easy income. And it worked brilliantly. The casinos built in the decade after the El Rancho Vegas's opening were profitable for all involved.

The very prosperity of these early casinos would nearly doom the town. By January of 1955, five new resorts on the Strip, one Downtown, and one on the Westside were under construction. This more-than-doubling of the town's resort industry in a single summer should have raised red flags, but each project pressed to open. And five of them did: the reborn New Frontier on April 4, the Royal Nevada on April 19, the Riviera on April 20, the Dunes on May 23, and the Moulin Rouge on May 24.²⁰

There were not enough visitors to fill the spaces at all of these new properties, and not enough gambling dollars to keep them solvent. The Dunes, New Frontier, and Royal Nevada each received new ownership or managers before the summer was out, and the Moulin Rouge closed.²¹ Conditions became heated enough at a May meeting of shareholders of the New Frontier—whose original owners had already surrendered four-fifths of their stake—that two principals exchanged punches before being separated by an accountant.²²

17 Haller, 139.

18 David G. Schwartz. “Just a Passing Glance: The Kefauver Committee in Las Vegas.” *Gaming Law Review and Economics*/ V. 19, N 7, 2015. 514.

19 David G. Schwartz. *Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 103-4.

20 David G. Schwartz. “The Long, Hot Summer of '55.” *Vegas Seven*. August 6, 2015.

21 Schwartz 2015.

22 “Las Vegas Hotel Pair Admit Trading Blows.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 22, 1955. 14.

Those troubles continued through the end of the year, at the Dunes and elsewhere. “The last few months,” reported the *Los Angeles Times*, “have been rough ones for some of the newer hotels on this gaming town’s fabled strip. There have been managerial reorganizations and transfusions of new money.”²³

At any time, financial difficulties at major hotels would have been a black eye for the young resort industry of Las Vegas. But coming just as the city was stepping onto a national stage triggered doubts: maybe the city wasn’t ready for the big time. Magazine Las Vegas columnist Carmen Tempereau wondered in late August whether the city had reached “the ultimate” in the growth of its tourist industry.²⁴ Perhaps fifteen resorts were too many. The atomic boomtown might be on the verge of bust.

Worse yet, the national media was picking up on the Strip’s troubles. Life magazine ran a June 20, 1955 cover story that featured dancers from the just-opened Moulin Rouge, with the worrying question “Las Vegas—Is Boom Overextended?” as its title. Needless to say, this kind of coverage did not engender much confidence—or increased investment—from outside the state.

Strip moguls responded to the disappointments of 1955 by seeking to broaden the base of visitors to Las Vegas. Casual weekenders from Los Angeles and serious gambling habitués had kept the coffers filled for the past decade and a half; a wider appeal, however, was needed for the city’s tourist industry to grow.

Business travel—focused around conventions—was a natural avenue for expansion. Some in Las Vegas had been pushing for a convention center since 1949; now, their arguments were suddenly more persuasive. The Chamber of Commerce, which had supported the concept of a convention center for years, became even more forceful in its advocacy.²⁵

Clark County Commissioner George Albright had been pushing for a convention center even before the summer of 1955; now, with considerably more wind in his sails, he received the state legislature’s approval to form a board that would manage the center and, more importantly, figure out how to pay for the new facility. It is of some interest that those most interested in building a convention center—Albright and the Chamber of Commerce—considered Spokane, Washington, which had just built a new convention center, their model.²⁶ There was no delusion that Las Vegas would rival major metropolises in appealing to the business market; instead, supporters hoped to give the resort industry a little more lift in the midweek.

The problem was financing: voters did not want divert funds from schools or roads to a convention facility. Motel owners did not want to contribute, since convention guests would mostly stay at the larger hotels on the Strip. Hotel owners, for their part, were willing to shoulder much of the expense, but refused to pay it all. Albright was able to finesse a deal that didn’t displease any group too much. The convention center would be built with publicly-backed bonds. Those bonds would be paid off with an additional 5 percent tax on gross hotel room revenues and a three percent tax on motel rooms revenues. Voters, satisfied that visitors, not residents, would ultimately pay for the convention center, approved the bond issue in March 1956. Construction began the following year.²⁷

23 “Plush Las Vegas Hotel Seeks Way to Stay Open. *Los Angeles Times*. December 21, 1955. 16.

24 Schwartz 2015.

25 Schwartz 2015.

26 Schwartz, 2015.

27 Schwartz, 2015.

When it opened in 1959, the domed convention center, on Paradise Road, accessible to all major resorts but directly contiguous to none, expanded the potential market for resort hotels, as did the convention facilities added to the resorts themselves. Voters not only approved the initial \$4.5 million bond; they authorized another \$1 million to finish the exhibit hall. The new center held its first event on March 29, an Easter Sunday sunrise service. The following week, Variety International held a convention, and from April 12 to 19, the center's first "showcase show," the World Congress of Flight, hosted 6,000 guests. With a 90,000 square foot exhibit hall, 17 smaller meeting rooms, and a 7,500-seat arena, the Convention Center was finally open.²⁸

The Strip resorts individually and collectively worked hard to attract convention groups. In November 1960, for example, the Convention Bureau reported to a meeting of hotel representatives that the American Society of Travel Agents had accepted an invitation to meet at the Convention Center in 1962 and that the National Association of Retail Druggists was close to committing to Las Vegas for 1963. Each of these required some coordination between the hotels to ensure that the groups had appropriate accommodations when they arrived.²⁹

At the same time, other groups were on the fence: the American Bottlers of Carbonated Beverages had received an invitation to hold their 1965 or 1967 meeting in Las Vegas, but no response had yet been received. "If any hotel representatives," the meeting minutes recorded, "know any of the members of the board, they are urged to work on them."³⁰ Likewise, after noting that 1961 was shaping up to be an "off" year, Convention Bureau promotional director Desmond Kelly "suggested [the hotels] take the initiative to hard sell some meetings that may possibly be developed for the Fall of 1961. He further suggested that [the hotels and convention bureau] 'blitz' Washington, D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco."³¹

That hotel salespeople were tasked to pursue American Association of Junior Colleges speaks volumes about just how seriously Las Vegas resort operators took business travel, and just how shaken the city had been by the 1955 bust.³² So, when Erving Goffman came to town in the late 1950s, he was entering a city already in transition: gambling alone would not keep the economy humming. It would take new investments and more strenuous marketing to attract the kinds of visitors who could help the city not just survive, but grow. The futuristic, then-under-construction, convention center must have been a physical sign of just how much anxiety Las Vegans had about what had worked in the past.

Paradise Under Attack

As the convention strategy was first appearing to reap dividends, Las Vegas found itself with a new set of goodwill ambassadors. Frank Sinatra had appeared in the city's showrooms for a decade by this point, first at the Desert Inn but, since 1953, at the Sands. It was there, in 1960, that the Rat Pack coalesced around Old Blue Eyes. Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr., were the most prominent members of the group, which was rounded out by Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford. The group most famously filmed Ocean's Eleven while performing—and carousing—at the Sands. This same year, Erving Goffman began training to be a dealer. With the increased national profile of Las Vegas, a study of gambling may have been particularly timely for the sociologist. In any event, the Rat Pack helped establish the image of Las Vegas as a perpetually cool, non-stop party, enhancing its appeal as both a leisure and business destination.

28 Tom Parkinson. "Las Vegas Convention Hall In Limelight for Opening." *The Billboard*. April 6, 1959. 103.,

29 Meeting Minutes, November 25, 1960. Las Vegas Convention Bureau. In Sands Hotel Collection, Box 45, Folder 9. UNLV Special Collections.

30 Meeting Minutes.

31 Meeting Minutes.

32 Schwartz 2003, 98.

Just as the Rat Pack and conventions appeared to rescue Las Vegas from its own ambitions, another threat re-appeared. The federal government, which had remained mostly distant from Las Vegas since the dangerous days of the Kefauver Committee (1950-1), suddenly reinserted itself into the city. The election of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States, and his subsequent selection of his brother Robert as Attorney General, prompted the new focus.

When Kennedy became Attorney General, he had an antipathy for organized crime in general and International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa in particular. He'd picked up both while working as chief counsel for the Senate Permanent Committee on Investigations, better known as the McClellan Committee, after its then-chair, John McClellan, an Arkansas Democrat.³³ Kennedy clashed with Hoffa on an intensely personal level, his animosity for the labor leader no doubt stoked by the fact that Kennedy had cleared Hoffa's way to power by sending his predecessor as Teamsters leader, Dave Beck, to prison. Upon taking office, Kennedy created a "get Hoffa squad," consisting of 16 attorneys, 30 FBI agents, and support staff.³⁴

The Hoffa investigation, before too long, led the Justice Department to Las Vegas, where the Teamsters Union had loaned money for the expansion of several resorts. Because of the Hoffa connection and rumored links to other organized crime figures, Kennedy deduced that what he termed, "Nevada's so-called legal gambling" was little more than a front for massive skimming to organized crime figures.³⁵

To combat this hidden funding of what Kennedy was sure was a vast, malevolent criminal empire, the Justice Department created another special squad, this one dedicated to ferreting out links between Las Vegas casinos and the mob. Governor Grant Sawyer was able to forestall a putative May 1961 raid that would have closed several of Nevada's biggest casinos. In return for the raid's cancellation, Sawyer pledged the help of Nevada in the ongoing federal skimming investigation.³⁶

Kennedy then dispatched a massive team of FBI, IRS, Immigration, Narcotics, and Labor agents to Las Vegas, intent on finding some evidence of wrongdoing. The FBI, in 1963, commenced the wiretapping of several casino managers—wiretapping that, under Nevada law, was illegal. Neither the investigations nor the wiretappings (which were all ultimately thrown out of court) yielded much success, but in the early 1960s, casino operators did not know that.³⁷ They only knew that the federal government was intent on "getting" them. Any outsider might be suspect.

It was into this morass that Goffman conducted most of his research as a dealer. Clearly, this was not a time to expect Las Vegas casino managers to be particularly open to scrutiny, even of the strictly academic variety.

Indeed, the investigations of Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, published as *The Green Felt Jungle* in late 1963, after Goffman had concluded his work as a dealer in Las Vegas, provided a great deal of unwelcome scrutiny and may have made it that much harder for a critical outsider to establish himself in a casino.

33 "Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations Historical Background." U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/investigations/media/permanent-subcommittee-on-investigations-historical-background>

34 David G. Schwartz. *Cutting the Wire: Gambling Prohibition and the Internet*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005. 82-4. 35 Schwartz 2005, 110.

36 David G. Schwartz. "JFK in Las Vegas." *Vegas Seven*. July 2, 2013.

37 "JFK in Las Vegas"

There are interesting parallels between Goffman's consideration of Las Vegas and those of Reid and Demaris. In a December 13, 1960, letter to Everett Hughes, Goffman described Las Vegas as "the city of non-homes."³⁸ This is a curious way to define Las Vegas, to say the least. As a semi-resident of Las Vegas, he could not have been ignorant of the city's 140,000 inhabitants,³⁹ each of whom must have had someplace to call home. Yet Goffman's view of the city, as an otherworld non-city, was not a controversial one. Indeed, three years later, the two crime writers would weave a bestseller out of much the same cloth.

In the first chapter of their opus, Reid and Demaris wrote that Las Vegas was "a city in statistics only" whose entire population was "devoted to fleecing tourists."⁴⁰ Las Vegas was a "grotesque Disneyland," with "an accumulation of shopping centers, tract houses, garish casinos downtown on Fremont Street (known as Glitter Gulch), and sprawling hotel-casinos along the Strip, where the architecture follow two popular styles: "Ranch Roccoco" or "Miami Baroque."⁴¹

For Reid and Demaris, as for Goffman, Las Vegas was above all a place defined by action. Their book's introductory chapter was titled, "Where's the Action," and references to action abound. "There are no clocks on the walls to point out to the time, no windows or doors. . . . There is only the cacophony of the *action* which imbues the gambler with eternal life."⁴² Action in Las Vegas was everything: "Status in the jungle is determined by the size of a player's bankroll. . . there are only three things a visitor can do in Las Vegas, and two of them are drinking and gambling. . . unless you are addicted to gambling, drinking, or fornication, the Las Vegas action soon becomes a bore."⁴³ Action in the Fremont Street casinos was "fast and dedicated."⁴⁴ Without action, according to Reid and Demaris, a visitor became a nonperson: "The go-brokes instantly become lepers. There is no place for them in Las Vegas."⁴⁵ Action was the only measure of existence in Las Vegas.

Reid and Demaris's definition of action was narrower than that of Goffman, who wrote in "Where the Action Is" that the term encompassed "activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake."⁴⁶ Goffman was frank about the origin of the term. "It is, of course, in the gambling world that the term action had its beginning, and gambling is the prototype of action," he wrote, and in the ensuing paragraph went on to identify 14 different uses of the term, each in the context of dealing and playing in Las Vegas casinos.⁴⁷

38 Quoted in Dmitri Shalin, "Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene." 13.

39 Census Scope, http://www.censusscope.org/us/m4120/chart_popl.html

40 Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris. *The Green Felt Jungle*. New York: Trident Press, 1963. 1.

41 Reid and Demaris, 1-2.

42 Reid and Demaris, 2. The authors did not explain how players could gain entrance to a room without doors.

43 Reid and Demaris, 2-3.

44 Reid and Demaris, 4.

45 Reid and Demaris, 3.

46 Erving Goffman. "Where the Action Is." In James F. Cosgrave, editor, *The Sociology of Risk and Gambling Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 246.

47 Goffman 2006, 247.

Yet where Goffman in his published writing was neutral, or even somewhat appreciative, of action in both its abstract and concrete forms, Reid and Demaris felt that such a focus distorted morals beyond hope. “There is only one true god,” they wrote of Las Vegas, “money. In Las Vegas, money is at the root of all evil, legal or illegal.”⁴⁸ This maleficence was all-encroaching: “Today there is nothing sacred in Nevada, nothing immune from political corruption. Everything is for sale—from the life-giving force of water to the personal freedoms and human rights guaranteed to every American citizen under the constitution.”⁴⁹ While Goffman, who though an observer was very much a participant in the gambling culture of Las Vegas, might not have been quite so strident in his denunciations, it is easy to see how both the sociologist and the muckrakers were describing the same city, albeit through drastically different lenses.

The Green Felt Jungle struck a nerve in Las Vegas. Civic boosters were outraged at the scandal heaped on their fair town. And the casino bosses were not just upset, but concerned. “They were furious,” then-Sands floorman Ed Walters said of the upper echelon’s reaction to the book’s publication. “They just couldn’t believe it.” It wasn’t the insinuations of corruption that so worried them—that was yesterday’s news—but the disclosure, in the book’s appendix, of the registered shareholders of Las Vegas casinos.⁵⁰

Publicizing the names of these owners, those concerned felt, might lead to overzealous government officials investigating their sources of funds. Most of them were fronts for hidden investors. Allegations of mob influence were one thing; it actually gave the city a sheen of perverse hoodlum glamour—but nosing into casino finances, that was another entirely. Reid and Demaris had belabored the point that in Las Vegas there were no taboos; this, however, was one. To draw attention to where the money came from could only lead to investigations into where it went, which could ruin everything.

Worse yet, *The Green Felt Jungle* sold like hotcakes: 23 weeks on *The New York Times* best-seller list in 1964, followed by several fast-selling paperback editions.⁵¹ But the call for action against Las Vegas failed, as the city’s tourism grew in the years after the book’s publication. In late 1963 and 1964 *The Green Felt Jungle* might have seemed like a threat to Las Vegas, but ultimately it didn’t hurt the city where it counted—in the wallet. For a city where, as Reid and Demaris bemoaned, money was everything, this was, perhaps, vindication enough.

Of course, the public response to the book might have convinced casino managers and owners that independent, third-party scholarly research into Las Vegas gambling was not something they wanted to see more of. Goffman was frank about his difficulties in being hired as a dealer—his potential employers weren’t concerned that he’d cheat or steal, but that he would open their business to independent analysis.⁵² The success of *The Green Felt Jungle* could not have made Goffman’s presence in Las Vegas—as either a dealer or a player—any easier.

48 Reid and Demaris, 5.

49 Reid and Demaris, 171.

50 David G. Schwartz. “The Book That Tried to End Las Vegas.” *Vegas Seven*. September 4, 2013.

51 Schwartz 2013.

52 Shalin, 24.

Indeed, Las Vegas casinos did not receive their first in-depth scholarly or professional analysis until the next decade. Bill Friedman's *Casino Management* was first published in 1974. This was not an expose; it was a guide to running a casino written by a casino manager and casino management professor.⁵³ The book's chapter titles are a plain enough guide to its contents. They include: "Casino Personnel," "Casino Financial Structure," "Credit Verification," "Credit Collection," "Hosting Procedures and Comp Policies," "Hotel Room Sales," "Advertising, Publicity, and Promotions," and "Casino Revenue and Expenses," with entire sections on casino accounting procedures and government regulation.⁵⁴

Unlike Goffman's explorations of casinos, which seem to have been conducted, if not clandestinely, certainly without the active participation of those in the industry, Friedman wrote as an insider. In his acknowledgments he reported having interviewed more than 300 people "involved with the operation and control of the Nevada gaming industry."⁵⁵ Those thanked by name (a much shorter list) included regulators like Shannon Bybee, Dennis Gomes, and Gaming Control Board chairman Phil Hannifin, as well as casino executives Leo Lewis, John Romero, Carl Thomas, and Julie Weintraub.⁵⁶ In a personally-inscribed copy for former Nevada Lieutenant Governor Cliff Jones, possibly the industry's quintessential insider, Friedman thanked Jones for the "hours he spent sharing [his] knowledge about the gaming industry," noting that "the basic ideas" of his first chapter were "all yours."⁵⁷ Unlike Goffman, Friedman had no lack of buy-in from those who defined the casino industry in Nevada.

Indeed, by this point casino managers and owners not only tolerated the study of gambling; they actively encouraged it, which no doubt played a factor in the insiders' openness with Friedman. In 1966, the Nevada Resort Association, the gaming industry's primary lobbying organization, financed the creation of a school of hotel management at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Leo Lewis, one of Friedman's informants, was a key member of the group that recruited the school's faculty and leadership.⁵⁸ Friedman himself was an early instructor in this program. If academic study could lead to better management, the industry had no issue with it; quite the reverse.

53 "Section 1: About the Author." <http://www.billfriedmanauthor.com/author-and-research/>

54 Bill Friedman. *Casino Management*. Secaucus: Lyle Stuart, Inc, 1974. 5-9.

55 Friedman, 11.

56 Friedman, 11.

57 Author's note in personal copy of book, dated June 14, 1974.

58 "Jerry Vallen." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/jerry-vallen>

Four years later, a University of California, Berkeley professor published an even more probing exploration of Nevada gaming. Jerome Skolnick's *House of Cards: Legalization and Control of Casino Gambling* was, like Friedman's *Casino Management*, made possible only with the cooperation of numerous industry insiders. The book's dust jacket succinctly explains the nature of Skolnick's research and the buy-in he received from the gaming establishment:

Over a period of three years, Jerome H. Skolnick spent as many as fourteen hours a day studying Nevada's casino industry—its culture, scams, folklore, machinations, connections, and control mechanisms. As a noted law professor and sociologist, his access was unique. He received the cooperation of the Las Vegas police, gaming control authorities, casino owners and management, who spoke honestly and openly with him.

Skolnick was drawn to the intricate problems and dilemmas involved in this "pariah" industry. He zeroed in on two essential questions: How does an owner, or a government agency, control an industry that has so much money flowing through it? And, how do you legitimize, capitalize, and control an industry that much of American society feels is essentially a "vice?"⁵⁹

This ambitious research plan contains much of what Goffman likely would have studied—minus, of course, Goffman's key participant observations. Unlike Friedman's *Casino Management*, this was not a book that, at first blush, was beneficial at all to the gaming industry. Skolnick's thesis, that "the control of legal casino gambling is an uncertain, even precarious enterprise," was not one that, presumably, would be greeted rapturously on the Strip.⁶⁰

Yet Skolnick, whose 1970 co-edited work, *Crisis in American Institutions*, would have alerted anyone in the industry that he was not writing a puff piece, got access that matched and, given the more intense nature of his study, eclipsed that of Friedman. Among the regulators Skolnick thanked were Bybee, Gomes, Hannifin, and Leo Lewis was the first casino executive he singled out. Skolnick also thanked Morris Shenker, the Teamster-linked attorney who was an owner of the Dunes casino, and William Weinberger, a longtime Caesars Palace executive. But he reserved special praise for Steve Wynn, who he said was "especially" helpful in providing access to casinos and contributing to Skolnick's understanding of them.⁶¹

So Goffman, if he was put off continuing his casino study because of pressure from casino insiders, may have only been slightly premature; within fifteen years solid members of Nevada's gaming establishment would be assisting an author whose approach was, potentially, far more dangerous to the status quo than Goffman's investigations into action and interaction. Had he followed up on his initial foray into gambling, Goffman might have had Skolnick's role as the path-breaking sociologist studying Nevada gaming. At the very least, had Goffman delivered on the "Study of Casino Gambling" funded by the Guggenheim Foundation in 1976,⁶² he would have found few obstacles in conducting a probing exploration of Las Vegas casinos, and likely would have gotten assistance from the same quarters as Friedman and Skolnick. Perhaps, given his history as a dealer, he would have received even more candid access.

59 Jerome H. Skolnick. *House of Cards: Legalization and Control of Casino Gambling*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. 1978. Dust jacket.

60 Skolnick, 12.

61 Skolnick, v.

62 Shalin, 3.

In any event, the Vegas old guard that appeared so menacing in *The Green Felt Jungle* was already on its way out, even when Goffman was first discouraged from writing about casinos. The cohort that really established the Strip as a vacation and gambling juggernaut—those ambitious former bootleggers like Moe Dalitz—were by 1960 on the cusp of leaving their leadership positions, either through retirement or death. Symbolic, perhaps, of the transition is the March 22, 1967 purchase of Dalitz’s Desert Inn by Howard Hughes.

The eccentric billionaire, whose personal quirks were not yet known to the public, offered a new legitimacy to the Strip tourist industry. If one of the world’s wealthiest men was willing to invest \$300 million in Nevada’s biggest industry—that was the kind of good press a thousand business conventions couldn’t deliver.⁶³ After buying the Desert Inn, Hughes snapped up the Sands, Frontier, Castaways, Silver Slipper, and under-construction Landmark, which he opened in July 1969.⁶⁴

Hughes bought up many of the hotels at which the bootleggers had held sway. Structural changes in the industry, forced again by past success, led to the crowding out of those who remained. Simply put, the capital requirements for building new resorts, which, thanks to the midweek baseline of convention bookings, were breaking the thousand-room mark, were beyond the reach of even the wealthiest underworld figure. The pleasure palaces of the 1950s had cost approximately \$5 million each. Caesars Palace, which opened in 1966 thanks to the munificence of Jimmy Hoffa (a \$10 million Teamster loan started construction) was dangerously underfinanced. The end of what historian Hal Rothman dubbed “shoebox capital” was near.⁶⁵ To build hotels on the scale of what Las Vegas could now handle, operators would have to look to new sources of capital, and thus find new masters: Wall Street.

Paradise Reimagined

Goffman’s peak years in Las Vegas came just as the Las Vegas casino business was changing. Even as the investments in convention facilities were beginning to yield their first fruits, the nature of the industry was changing in such a way that those who had planted the seeds did not, in the end, get to partake of the bounty.

In 1967, Kirk Kerkorian announced plans to build the world’s largest hotel, the 1,500-room International, next to the Las Vegas Convention Center. Building the \$50 million resort would have been inconceivable, even with generous Teamster loans. Luckily, in that year the Nevada Legislature started amending the state’s gaming laws to permit ownership by publicly-traded corporations. Under the welter of regulations that had been established since 1931, all owners in Nevada casinos, no matter how small their share, had to be investigated and approved by the Gaming Commission. This requirement made publicly-traded corporations, whose ownership, traded over the counter, shifted daily, impossible. The Del Webb company, which purchased controlling interests in two Las Vegas casinos in 1961, skirted this requirement by establishing a series of subsidiaries to conduct gaming, but largescale investment demanded a more straightforward solution.⁶⁶

The Corporate Gaming Acts, passed in 1967 and 1969, paved the way for full-fledged corporate ownership of casinos by establishing procedures that eliminated the necessity for all investors to be cleared by the Gaming Commission. Shareholders with more than a 10 percent interest and key managers and employees were still subject to licensure, but publicly-traded companies were now free to buy into the industry.⁶⁷

63 Schwartz 2003, 149.

64 Schwartz 2003, 152.

65 Hal Rothman. *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 15.

66 Schwartz 2003, 105.

67 Schwartz 2003, 160.

Kerkorian, for example, was able to fund construction of the massive International through a stock sale. And, after financial reverses forced Kerkorian to seek additional outside funds, Hilton Hotels first invested with and then bought him out, taking control of the International and Flamingo in 1971. Lum's a Florida-based corporation, bought Caesars Palace in 1969.⁶⁸ Existing operators, from Harrah's in the north to Showboat in the south, went public themselves, using money made from stock sales for expansion.

The changes in ownership structure would quickly manifest on the casino floor. Whereas in previous days the casino manager had exercised the ultimate authority in the resort, by the early 1970s "modern" Strip casinos were creating a new office—that of property president—to run herd on the casino and other departments, both coordinating overall performance and ensuring that corporate dictates were adhered to.⁶⁹ At the same time, new corporate sensibilities demanded new skills from dealers—chiefly friendliness to customers—and spelled the end for the raucous coterie of former illegal dealers among whom Goffman learned the games.

Even in the limited slice of Goffman's experiences that saw the light of publication, there is evidence of the presence of this old school of dealers. In "Where the Action Is," Goffman wrote of "special dealers" employed to "remove the uncertainty a pit boss can feel when a big bettor begins to play seriously."⁷⁰ Although Goffman didn't come out and say that these dealers were cheating on behalf of the house, he spoke of these "mechanics" (a dealer slang term for a skilled cheating technician) having contempt "not only for *non*-dealers but also for *mere* dealers."⁷¹ These "special" dealers picked up tricks not taught in the six-week dealing courses offered in Las Vegas, and these dark arts, while beneficial to the bottom line, were not the kind of procedures to be enunciated in training materials. Goffman is speaking of a decidedly "wild west" Las Vegas, where the dealer's skill was matched against the player's. Needless to say, this was one avenue of profit maximization that the new corporate ownership did not pursue: should this kind of prestidigitation come to light, it might jeopardize their multi-million dollar investments, as it could trigger repercussions with both state regulators and the Securities and Exchange Commission. Writing possibly ten and certainly twenty years later, Goffman would not have described these characters.

Further, in a clarifying footnote, Goffman described dealers currently active in Las Vegas citing "with reverence" New York card mechanics who "worked next door to the hang-out of the Murder Incorporated mob, and daily 'dealt down' to customers likely to be demonstrably intolerant of dealers caught cheating them."⁷² The original Murder, Incorporated developed in the early 1930s as the "enforcement arm" of the national criminal syndicate. Reportedly responsible for more than 400 gangland murders, the troupe disintegrated in 1940 after henchman Abe Reles, arrested on a variety of charges, testified about the group's operation and influence.⁷³ Although other underworld groups arose to fulfill the original's mandate, some of which may have gone by variants of "Murder, Incorporated," the best-known organization with that notorious name had been defunct for more than two decades when Goffman began dealing in Las Vegas. Any dealers who had plied their trade to that gang of volatile gunmen were, by 1960, well past the midpoints of their careers.

68 Schwartz 2003, 162.

69 Friedman, 27.

70 Goffman 2006, 245.

71 Goffman 2006, 245.

72 Goffman 2006, 253.

73 Carl Sifakis. *The Mafia Encyclopedia*. New York: Facts on File, 1987. 231-2.

From these references, it can be inferred that a large-enough contingent of Goffman's fellow dealers had broken into the business in the illegal joints that dominated casino-style gambling outside of Nevada. Quite possible this was not a majority of dealers, but there were enough of them—and they were sufficiently influential—that their experiences became part of the culture and institutional memory of the gaming pits. It is likely that most dealers were, like Goffman, simply men looking for a job.⁷⁴

Had he conducted a thorough study of casinos in the early 1960s, Goffman would have been able to capture the final moments of an ending era. Just like Reid and Demaris summed up the twilight of the mob with *The Green Felt Jungle*, a Goffman analysis of playing and dealing in Las Vegas would have provided a snapshot of daily work and play that would have greatly enhanced the scholarly understanding of “old” Las Vegas.

By the time of the proposed 1976 study, conditions at street level had already changed from those when Goffman first broke in. Corporations were ascendant; the larger scale of casino operations was forcing changes on management, human resources, and dealer policies, first along the Strip and then Downtown.

The year that Goffman applied for the Guggenheim might be the watershed in the mainstreaming of Nevada casinos—not so much for anything that happened in the Silver State itself, but for a national study that largely vindicated the gaming industry and a referendum in another state.

The Commission on the Review of the National Policy on Gambling, which met from 1974 to 1976, studied all of American gambling, legal and illegal, and took a special interest in Las Vegas. The Commission declared that the mob's influence in Las Vegas, while once significant, had shrunk in the past decade to the point that it was currently “negligible.” Good accounting and strong regulation had swept away the last vestiges of mob skimming. Casino regulation was effective at safeguarding the public interest. This was no longer the pariah industry of the Kefauver days or even the dodgy one that Goffman undertook to infiltrate in 1960. Casinos had achieved legitimacy.⁷⁵

That fall, casinos received an added measure of support when New Jersey voters approved their legalization in Atlantic City. Hoping to recapture the casino magic that had propelled the Nevada economy forward for the previous thirty years, voters decided that casinos, far from being urban blights, could instead trigger urban redevelopment.⁷⁶ Had he chosen to follow through with his proposed casino study in 1976, Goffman would not have had to travel to Las Vegas; the “field” for him was soon to be as close as Atlantic City, a 60-mile drive from his office at the University of Pennsylvania.

Conclusion

When Erving Goffman first became entranced by Las Vegas gambling in the late 1950s, the city was in a period of transition. The first boom of the tourist industry, predicated on the sudden popularity of gambling and vacationing within resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, had come to an end. Hotel owners and local businesspeople had already found the key to the next boom, business travelers drawn by conventions, but had yet to turn that key. Had he driven down Paradise Road, in fact, Goffman would have seen the embodiment of the hoped-for New Vegas, the space-age Convention Center, under construction.

74 Women would not be accepted as dealers in Las Vegas for another 10 years, though they had long dealt in Reno.

75 Commission on the Review of the National Policy towards Gambling. Final Report: Gambling in America. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976. 78.

76 Schwartz 2003. 178.

By the time that he decided to train as a dealer, Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack were securing the image of Las Vegas as a perpetual party—an appealing site of study for a sociologist interested in roles and interaction. Yet this was not the best time, perhaps, to focus on Las Vegas: a blistering federal investigation, begun in 1961, may have made managers chary of any outside investigators, even those of a scholarly bent. In this atmosphere, it is not entirely surprising that Goffman did not consummate his participant observer study of gambling.

Yet Las Vegas was already changing; the aging out of the cohort of former bootleggers that had, in the 1950s, established the Strip as a national vacation and gambling destination, combined with the expansion of the industry made possible by the late-1950s turn to conventions to drive midweek occupancy, led to the advent of mainstream finance and corporate control of the Strip. By the 1976, when Goffman proposed but did not conduct a study of casinos, the turn away from organized crime affiliates was nearly complete.

Goffman, then, was interested in Las Vegas during what may be its most profound period of transformation. That his studies of and thoughts on gambling and Las Vegas did not yield a monograph of their own is a loss to the fields of both sociology and history. While the contemporary insights into American gambling behavior that such a study would have supplied would have illuminated the understanding of gambling action, his capture of a snapshot of a vanishing order in Las Vegas would have contributed inestimably to the historical record. For more reasons than he could have imagined, Goffman's unrealized study of Las Vegas represents a tremendous missed opportunity to document a city in transition.

