Changing images: The end of legalized prostitution in Las Vegas

Sarah Hall Washburn
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds/1069

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA

UMI®
800-521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
The Thesis prepared by

Sarah Hall Washburn

Entitled

Changing Images: The End of Legalized Prostitution in Las Vegas

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts Degree

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
ABSTRACT

Changing Images: The End of Legalized Prostitution in Las Vegas

by

Sarah Hall Washburn

Dr. Hal Rothman, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of History
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Legalized prostitution in Las Vegas began with the town's founding in 1905 and lasted until World War II. By researching legalized prostitution in Las Vegas from an economic and social standpoint as opposed to just a moral perspective, a broader picture emerged to show the changes that occurred. These changes were not unique to Las Vegas, but accompanied many other frontier towns of the West. The slow changes that began with some restriction on prostitution from the founding of Las Vegas within Block 16 of the original townsite and evolved to include pressure from the federal government to eliminate prostitution. Pressure from the federal government accompanied changes in attitude among the population that had once viewed legalized prostitution as a "necessary evil," but realized that it had no place in a modern resort city that Las Vegas evolved into after World War II.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: THE &quot;LAST FRONTIER&quot; TOWN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 THE FEDERAL BUILDING</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 ORDINANCE 194</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 THE NUMBER TWO TOURIST ATTRACTION</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 THE COLORFUL CHARACTERS OF BLOCK 16</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6 WORLD WAR II AND THE MAY ACT</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7 THE FINAL DEMISE OF THE &quot;NECESSARY EVIL&quot;</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE "LAST FRONTIER TOWN"

Legalized prostitution began in Las Vegas in 1905 when the city was founded, and lasted until World War II. After the end of World War II, the citizens of Las Vegas citizens determined that it would be to the detriment of the city for legalized prostitution to resume. In Changing Images, I sought to find out why legalized prostitution existed in Las Vegas and why it was eventually outlawed in the city. Many former works on prostitution focused on its morality which tended to obscure the historical facts regarding prostitution in areas of the American West. Prostitutes were either perceived as fallen women tempted into prostitution by cruel men or just bad women. Prostitutes of the American West are usually portrayed as the soiled-doves with a heart of gold, and the most famous was probably Miss Kitty from the T.V. show "Gunsmoke." I instead chose to look at legalized prostitution as a fact in the history of Las Vegas and tried to refrain from making moral judgments. One of the reasons for doing this is that although many people have written
about prostitutes, they themselves have left very little behind about themselves.¹

While researching my thesis many continuing themes emerged. The first theme was that Las Vegas perceived itself, in the beginning, as the "last frontier town." It not only perceived itself as the "last frontier town," but was proud of this distinction. With gambling and legalized prostitution, the idea of the "last frontier town" worked for Las Vegas because many frontier towns had both gambling and legalized prostitution. Las Vegas followed an established pattern throughout the West, and more specifically, in Nevada. The Comstock Lode had marked the establishment of Virginia City's red-light district. Demographics in earlier frontier mining towns saw a plethora of men and a scarcity of women which led to the perceived need for prostitutes, not only for sex, but also female companionship. While Las Vegas was established as a railroad town, men still outnumbered women, and Las Vegas saw itself as the "last frontier town." It was not until after World War II that Las Vegas finally decided it had emerged into a modern resort destination.

The idea of a modern resort destination vs. the "last frontier town," helped to focus on the next theme, economics. While the last frontier town worked in earlier days to draw tourists to Las Vegas, a modern resort destination would draw them after the war. In early years, legalized prostitution

¹The term legal at this time in Las Vegas was used loosely. Prostitution was closer to being quasi-legal. It was not outlawed, therefore allowed to take place.
was known as the number two tourist attraction. Las Vegas's reputation of legalized prostitution helped to draw men with their money to the town. Las Vegas not only allowed prostitution, but also gambling, whether legal or not, and didn't seem to abide by the prohibition laws when they were passed. This idea of a frontier town that played by its own rules worked to draw in money, but Las Vegas would grow and after World War II became a modern resort destination in order to draw even more money. Within a modern resort city legalized prostitution was no longer seen as an asset. Basically, it was no longer more profitable to have legalized prostitution. Not only the draw of the tourists, but also the federal government had an influence over Las Vegas's economy.²

The federal government played a part throughout Las Vegas's attempts to regulate and finally outlaw prostitution, and was the next theme. The federal government has played a substantial role in the development of the West, so it was not surprising that it would have an influence over Las Vegas. The federal government first influenced Las Vegas's vice district when it sought to build the post office near Block 16. The city vowed to move the vice, which took place within the block, but never did. The government at that time did not seem too concerned. While building the Hoover Dam, the government deemed it better to establish its own city for

²My definition of tourism includes not only those coming to Las Vegas as a "destination" for only "recreational" enjoyment, but also those who were traveling through and manage to leave some of their money here even though Las Vegas was not their final destination; tourism as revenue.
the workers, Boulder City, but this only helped to spread vice out of Block 16 along the Boulder Highway because bootleggers were not to be allowed in Boulder City, and if you wouldn't allow liquor, you certainly weren't going to allow prostitutes. The federal government finally put its foot down when it established the gunnery school during the war. The government had passed the May Act which outlawed "prostitution within reasonable distance of military and/or naval establishments." The government's economic influence proved to be greater and more stable than legalized prostitution, and so Las Vegas followed the seductive path of the government's money, though not as swiftly as the government wanted.

Social conditions were also important to prostitution in Las Vegas and the next theme. Included in this theme was health. Health conditions did not prove to be of great concern until World War II, but would be one of the main reasons prostitution was finally outlawed. The army was concerned about venereal disease among its troops stationed in Las Vegas during World War II. Las Vegas actually did a fairly good job during the war at keeping the disease rate low, but it was difficult considering there was an influx of prostitutes to the area, especially when Reno closed its houses of prostitution. Las Vegas closed Block 16 and this proved to be of assistance, but the army found a greater problem emerged when servicemen came home to the United States from overseas and brought venereal disease with them.
Las Vegas finally determined that with the closing of Block 16 that V. D. rates had dropped among Las Vegas's citizens, including those still in high school. Las Vegas decided that by outlawing prostitution they had improved the health of its citizens.

The final theme became the length of time it took to regulate and finally outlaw prostitution. When I first began to research the paper I had the perception that legalized prostitution went along just fine until the federal government demanded that it be outlawed because they established the gunnery school just north of the city. What I came to realize was that attempts had been made previously to move or restrict Block 16, that not all citizens were pleased at having legalized prostitution in their city, and that no one in the local government really wanted to deal with the issue except in 1932 when Ordinance 194 was passed by the reform mayor Ernie Cragin and the city council, and when the government threatened to enforce the May Act during World War II. The slow attempt to restrict and finally outlaw prostitution was a theme throughout many western cities. As the cities demographics and economics changed so did the perception that had allowed legalized prostitution to flourish. Finally, prostitution became outlawed, as it did in Las Vegas, but in the early frontier West, prostitution was prevalent.

A broader understanding of why and how legalized prostitution emerged and flourished in the frontier towns of
the early West provides a clearer picture of the history of the West and specifically Las Vegas. Prostitution contributed not only to the comfort of many men, but the overall economy of a town. Prostitutes themselves tended to be far better paid, even some of the lowest ones, than the customers they served. Economically, legally, and morally, prostitution was accepted in the frontier era of the West.³

Prostitutes tended to congregate in the towns and mining camps of the early West. This correlated with the establishment of prostitution in Las Vegas, which started as a railroad town and basis for miners located throughout southern Nevada. Prostitutes were concentrated in a town area because that's where they found most of their customers. If they were located in a rural setting, there were not as many potential customers, equating to less money. These new towns tended to have a population that was overwhelmingly male, usually young males. The males were transient, but not as transient as the prostitutes who went wherever they could make the most money. Prostitutes also tended to work a circuit. The prostitute would go to a new town every so often, so their customers would not become tired of the same "product."

³Prostitution had its own class system. The highest class of prostitutes in the Western frontier town were those who worked in the high-class parlor houses. Next came those who worked in the brothels, and after that were the prostitutes who worked out of cribs, tiny shacks. Lowest of the prostitutes were the streetwalkers. Placement in the class system could be determined by age, experience, beauty and education.
Prostitution was a business, and in Las Vegas, as other parts of the West, it provided a good deal of money for some. It was also one of the few ways a woman could own her own business by becoming a madam and establishing her own brothel or parlor house. For the women who became prostitutes, it was the best paying job in the West, and one of the few options they had.\textsuperscript{4}

One of the most well established areas for legalized prostitution in the West was located in Virginia City, Nevada, which established a precedent that the rest of Nevada. Virginia City became the center of life in Nevada when the Comstock Lode was discovered. Mining brought men to Virginia City to work on the Comstock Lode and this, in turn brought women who overwhelmingly were prostitutes. Prostitution was not just an interesting sidelight in the history of Virginia City, but as Guy Louis Rocha found prostitution had played a major role in the state's boom and bust history of frontier mining. Prostitution granted an economic and social outlet for those men who worked on the Comstock Lode and many other business people who sought to profit from the Comstock in other ways.\textsuperscript{5}

Prostitution provided economic benefits for many in Virginia City: prostitutes, procurers, madams, and legitimate


businessmen who needed a place to invest. Prostitution provided an important outlet for businesswomen. Prostitution proved to be one of the few areas where a woman could participate in business. For women who were not married or suddenly found themselves without a means of support, prostitution may have not been their first choice, but it paid substantially better than the other choices: maid and washerwomen. Prostitution was not only important economically to Virginia City, but also socially.  

Prostitution in Virginia City was not solely seen as sexual commerce, it also provided an important social dynamic for the city. The number of men far outnumbered the women on the Comstock Lode and in early Virginia City. This made Virginia City fertile for prostitutes. Men were not only looking for sexual relations, but also companionship, which included talking and walking. Alfred Doten's journal, which noted early Virginia City social life, recounted that prostitutes played a predominant role. George Williams stated there were four reasons why prostitutes were such an important part of Virginia City life, "First, there were few women...Second, there was little for the miners to do...Third, many men visited houses of prostitution not only for sex but for female attention and entertainment." The final reason proves to be the most interesting and least

---

studied, "the danger of working and living in Virginia City drove men to prostitutes. Deep mining was extremely dangerous. Everyday there were injuries and horrible deaths in the mines." Williams may have been coming up with an excuse with his fourth reason, but psychologically for the miners and the prostitutes the Comstock Lode was a dangerous place to live. The fourth, and last reason, may have proved important for the Comstock Lode, but not Las Vegas. Railroad work, at the time, was dangerous, but not to the degree of deep mining.7

Las Vegas was established in 1905 as a railroad town, and one of the stops for the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad. Las Vegas proved an oasis in the desert for the railroad because of the natural springs located in the valley that provided water for the railroad. Stewart Ranch became the location of the new town. Stewart Ranch had been providing weary travelers and miners a resting place for two decades when Mrs. Stewart sold the ranch in 1902 to Montana Senator William Clark. Clark saw the potential for a railroad stop. Others saw the potential for growth and profit when lots for the new town site were auctioned on May 15, 1905.8

At the sale, the lots on Block 16 were the most sought after because they did not include liquor restrictions. Block 16 was located between First and Second Street and Ogden and Stewart Streets. It was the only location where liquor would be sold besides hotels, and, on auction day, Block 16 received the largest bid prices. Nevada had the tradition of where there had been liquor prostitution usually followed. The lot located in the corner of First and Ogden received the largest bid of any lot, $3600. It did not take long for temporary tents to go up and for Block 16 to begin its reputation as a red-light district.9

The early stages of Las Vegas's growth showed an acceptance for prostitution that went along with the view it had of itself as the "last frontier town." Gambling houses and brothels were part of the tourist draw. Local citizens wanted Las Vegas to resemble the mining frontier of earlier Nevada, but it had more stability since it was a railroad town. There were more males than females, but not the overwhelming ratio found on the Comstock Lode. There were approximately 1.7 males for every female, including children. Las Vegas also had a population that was young and single, but there were more families than a typical mining camp contained. Even without the demography of earlier frontier towns, Las Vegas held out that it was the "last frontier town." Along with the identity of being the "last frontier town,"

town" came the idea and establishment of legalized prostitution.¹⁰

According to the 1910 Census, it can be surmised that there were at least eight prostitutes. This may be deduced from the fact that they lived within Block 16, listed their occupations as none, and were boarders. They were not married to a head of a household or in any other way related to the head of the household nor were these women widows or minors. Their ages ranged from twenty-seven to thirty-nine. Five out of the eight were minorities, while the rest of the Las Vegas population was approximately 90% white. Four of the women were black and one was of Mexican origin. These women may have served the minority men who worked on or for the railroad, but also the larger white population. The black women probably hired themselves out to porters who worked on the railroad, and the Mexican woman probably to those Mexicans who worked for the railroad. This in no way implied that those were their only customers. It is difficult to deduce if these were the only prostitutes, but probably not. There had to be Caucasian and Asian women who indeed were prostitutes and may have lied to the census takers or were not counted.

The women who were not counted may have worked on a circuit, just as they did in the nineteenth century West.

The circuit included Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the towns in-between. Prostitutes may not have been counted because they may have been married or listed another occupation. There was not one listing of a prostitute for an occupation in the 1910 or 1920 census. Even though prostitution was legal, the prostitutes themselves may not have wanted everyone to know what they did for a living.\textsuperscript{11}

Las Vegas always catered to the out-of-towner, even from its inception. There were many gambling establishments in early Las Vegas including the Red Onion, the Gem, the Turf, the Favorite, the Double-O and the Arizona Club, probably the nicest of all the clubs. Next door to the clubs were the prostitutes. The Arizona Club, built by James O. McIntosh, began as a gambling and liquor spot, but evolved to house prostitutes on its second story. Some romanticized that the Arizona Club's prostitutes were "regarded as the 'niftiest house of joy on the Pacific Coast.'" Many men came to Las Vegas because it had legalized prostitution. Prostitution was a draw for Las Vegas, but the community would not remain a small railroad town forever. The building of what would eventually be called the Hoover Dam brought substantial change to Las Vegas and its economic and social way of life. Before the dam was built, the federal government attempted to influence the regulation of prostitution for another reason.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11}The Thirteenth Census of the United States; The Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Population.  
CHAPTER 2

THE FEDERAL BUILDING

Las Vegas undertook its first attempt at regulating prostitution in the winter of 1930. The federal government decided to build a new federal building near the "infamous" Block 16 and the city fathers promised to remove the vice district to another part of town. The terms for relocation proved to be more difficult than expected because of three different interests. The city commissioners even though they promised to move the district were not as motivated when they actually had to do it. Those who owned property in Block 16 agreed to move, but on their own terms. It seemed there were outside interests from Los Angeles who were set to move in and profit from the moving of the vice district. Those citizens who lived in the proposed area of the new vice district also protested the move.

Las Vegas, at this time, viewed itself as the "last frontier town" in a libertarian state. The federal government may tell them what to do, but that did not mean Las Vegas would do it. Prostitution may have been morally wrong, but a long-held view in Nevada was that it was better to regulate it than make it illegal, therefore having some control over the vice.
On January 29, 1930, the city commission of Las Vegas made its first attempt to find an agreement to move Block 16. The city commission devised an ordinance that moved Block 16 from the downtown area at First and Ogden streets to a forty acre tract near the Union Pacific stockyards, an area known as the Buol Addition. The ordinance would not be effective immediately. The ordinance went into effect when building construction began, in approximately 90 days. Included in the ordinance was the decision that "the district would be closed as soon as the government requests it." Discussion of the ordinance occurred that evening, and as the Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal predicted, it was lively.\(^{13}\)

Two groups in attendance at the city commission's review of the ordinance came from different walks of life, but sought the same goal. Both the property owners in the Buol Addition and owners of Block 16 wanted the city commission to slow down. Commissioner W. C. German agreed that the ordinance should not be approved hastily. Harry Blanding, who owned a home in the Buol Addition, stated that "Block 16's successor will stare my family in the face throughout [sic] the day and night." Blanding spent "10 years building up a home in that section." Blanding's concerns were shared by others from his neighborhood including C. Stay, Harry Anderson, J. L. Filbey and William Ellis.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\)The Buol Addition was located on block one of the original town site between the Union Pacific railroad tracks and the Salt Lake highway, approximately 100 feet from Clark avenue; Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, January 30, 1930, 1.

\(^{14}\)Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, January 31, 1930, 1.
Property owners from the Buol Addition found support from another constituency. Those who owned businesses in Block 16 also had concerns regarding the redistricting under discussion. One of the business owners' concerns pertained to the participation of a "Los Angeles syndicate" in the new district. Jack Irish and Agnes McLaughlin objected on the grounds that the city was granting a "concession to a Los Angeles syndicate, when local taxpayers who have pioneered the game in Las Vegas are ready and willing to go ahead themselves." McLaughlin went further stating, "the 'newcomers would take the cream' in all lines of endeavor, and insisting that local property owners be granted a preference" when determining who gets first choice in the new district. The commission listened to these arguments and decided to have a second reading at the commissioner's meeting in February.15

The property owners in the Buol Addition and the Block 16 owners wanted delay and the city commissioners were not necessarily rushing to pass the ordinance. Others knew their town well. An editorial in the Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal pushed the city commission to make a decision even though it was a difficult problem. The editorial did not offer an opinion on the decision but insisted that the city commission had to make a decision, "and it should be done at once." The commissioners demurred.16

15 Ibid.
The city commission decided to rescind the first reading of the ordinance to restrict Block 16 to the Buol Addition. This occurred on February 7, 1930 at the city commissioners' regular meeting. After the protests from differing groups regarding the new location of the restricted district, first proposed by a Los Angeles syndicate, the commission decided to start all over again.17

Those who currently had businesses located in Block 16 proposed to form a corporation and locate another area where the district could be located. In this way the owners of Block 16 businesses would be able to continue their business without the interference of those outside of Las Vegas from Los Angeles. The Block 16 owners attempt at moving prostitution to another area outside of the Buol Addition was welcomed by others who also protested the move of the district to the Buol Addition. The ordinance was tabled until a later date.18

The city commissioners finally decided to delay indefinitely the ordinance on the redistricting of Block 16. This may have been because of the pressure from the Block 16 owners and citizens in the Buol Addition, it is not clear. No one during this time questioned whether Block 16 was legal, it was just accepted. In March, Commissioner Lou Hansell brought forth a motion to postpone the redistricting question. It passed unanimously. The commissioners may have

---

18Ibid.
postponed the redistricting question, but it was not going away. 19

Albert E. Cahlan, in his editorial in the Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, stated that the delay over the construction of federal building was not a result of the redistricting issue. Cahlan instead insisted that it had to do with working out questions regarding specific deeds. There were also details between the railroad, Union Pacific, and the government which needed to be "ironed out." Cahlan reassured readers once these details were taken care of, the construction of the federal building would proceed. The details were in fact ironed out and title for the federal building was securely in the government's hand, but now the question regarding Block 16 arose again later that year. 20

Mayor J. Fred Hesse gave his assurance that the removal of the Block 16 district would be handled when it became necessary. Nevada's congressional representatives also assured those in Las Vegas and the government that pressure has been applied to hasten removal of the district. The district proved difficult to remove. 21

Albert E. Cahlan, in his editorial, sought to clear up things regarding the removal of the vice district. It had been rumored that the agreement between the government and Las Vegas was only verbal. Cahlan assured his readers that

19Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, March 18, 1930, 1.
20Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, April 24, 1930, 8; November 24, 1930, 1.
21Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, November 24, 1930, 1.
there was a written stipulation between the city and the
government, but that resolution was not formally ratified and
therefore not legally binding. Cahlan stated that even
though it was not legally binding it "most certainly carries
an undeniable moral obligation which cannot be dodged," and
the "district MUST be moved." It had now been a year and a
half since the discussion regarding removal of the district
had begun and it continued to be a slippery issue. 22

A little over two weeks after the Cahlan editorial,
another editorial appeared in the Review and Journal, this
one not as forceful. It reiterated that the city was under a
moral obligation and not a legal one to move Block 16 and the
government had "never called upon the city of Las Vegas to
make good these pledges." The building was not estimated to
be completed until November of 1932, 16 months later, so the
people of Las Vegas should calm themselves. Reiterating that
there was "no reason for hysteria!" The treasury department,
in charge of the soon to be built federal building, four days
later asked for the removal of Block 16. 23

Perry K. Heath, assistant secretary of the treasury for
the federal government, then, in a correspondence with Mayor
E. W. Cragin, requested the city act in removing the red-
light district to a location away from where the new post
office would be built. Cragin, once again, assured the
government and Las Vegas that the district would be moved.

22 Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, June 13, 1931, 8.
23 Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, July 2, 1931, 10.
Cragin stated, "My idea has been to find out just what the government expects of Las Vegas and then to take steps to cooperate to the fullest degree possible." One must assume that Cragin, and others, first, did not feel that the government was going to press the issue and second, prostitution would be moved instead of made illegal. This viewpoint was long standing in Las Vegas. Under the city charter, the city had the right to close the prostitution houses, but felt that they would reappear in another area to be determined by those who were in the business.24

The city board was to meet again on July 13, 1931 to discuss the removal of Block 16. Assistant Secretary Heath once again called upon the city to make good its pledge, given by then-Mayor J. F. Hesse in 1929, to remove the restricted district. The property owners of Block 16 also reiterated that they were not against removal of the district to another area just as long as they themselves could determine where the new district would be located instead of outside interests having first crack in the new district. The property owners of Block 16 presented a petition to the city commissioners on July 13, 1931 regarding the new district. The petition, with the names of the property and resort owners of Block 16, requested that they themselves be able to come up with their own solution and would move the district when called upon to do so. "They intended to band together, secure a location, and construct their own place, they

24Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, July 6, 1931, 1.
Another petition came from those in the west side who opposed removal of the district to their area, block one of the original town site. It again looked like Block 16 was on the move.25

The city board meeting regarding Block 16 and its removal proved to be heated. John Miller protested those who were protesting the move to block one of the original town site. Those on the west side, once again, protested the move of the district to block one. The board, once again, decided to defer until a later date. The only thing decided was that the district would be moved at some point and that Stewart Street would be paved with a sidewalk and better lit for the new federal building. Once again, the property owners of Block 16, including John Irish, H. E. Faxon, E. F. Noon, and others, agreed to move the district when called for. In the end, the brothels on Block 16 would not be moved for another ten years when America entered World War II.

City officials, in this case, did nothing to move the red-light district and the government did not push for its removal. The issue did not come up again until five years later, 1936, when Mrs. Fannie Ryan, State Senator Frank Ryan's wife, pushed the issue. Mrs. Ryan pleaded for abatement in regards to the legal responsibility the city had to remove Block 16 because of its proximity to the post office. Like Mrs. Ryan in 1936, there were those in 1931 who

felt that prostitution was not a necessary evil to be tolerated, but a vice that should be outlawed.
CHAPTER 3

ORDINANCE 194

Some citizens of Las Vegas used the controversy regarding the move of Block 16 to lead a drive to outlaw prostitution within Las Vegas. One of the catalysts for this move was the spread of vice to areas other than Block 16, especially residential neighborhoods. It was rumored that a "sporting house" was in operation in a local neighborhood and had become quite flagrant. In January of 1931, the city council undertook the task of reviewing and considering the Los Angeles vice code in regards to prostitution for Las Vegas.26

The Los Angeles vice code was one of the strictest in the United States at that time, though not always enforced. The code had established that any person or company renting a room to a couple who were not married would be held liable. The couple themselves were also liable. The couple only needed to be in the room together as grounds for investigation. The city council took the vice code under advisement.27

26 Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, January 27, 1931, 1.
27 Ibid.
The city commissioners, the mayor and the police commissioner all saw a need for the restriction of prostitution, but some felt the Los Angeles vice code went too far. City Commissioners Lou Hansell and Otis Smith opposed the vice ordinance outright as being too restrictive for Las Vegas. Mayor J. Fred Hesse and Police Commissioner Thomas were open to discussion. Thomas stated, "something should be done about the matter but admitted he did not subscribe to all the provisions of the proposed ordinance."

City Attorney F. A. Stevens pointed out that while some requested that prostitution once again be contained only within Block 16 that soon Block 16 would have to be moved when the federal government began building the new federal building.28

In October of 1932, the first reading of the new restrictive vice code was proposed. The ordinance was drawn up by City Attorney Stevens and clearly limited prostitution. Parts of the ordinance were as follows:

It shall be unlawful for any person upon a public street or in any rooming house, lodging house, hotel or other place in the city of Las Vegas, to solicit a person of the opposite sex to whom he or she is not married and further that it shall be unlawful for any person to resort to any rooming house, lodging house, hotel or other place in the city of Las Vegas for immoral purposes with a person to whom he or she is not married.

There were also penalties for those renting a room to persons who were not married. The ordinance's language seemed to prohibit all prostitution, but was only meant to outlaw prostitution outside of Block 16.\(^{29}\)

The *Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal* editorial on October 22, 1932, made clear that the ordinance might be very restrictive, but did not outlaw prostitution within Block 16. The editorial saw it as a move in the right direction to contain the spread of prostitution out of the Block 16 area and that the ordinance was "absolutely necessary." The spread of "party houses" needed to be contained. The editorial reiterated that "this is not a plea for a closed town. Rather for one properly districted in which home owners can be protected from invasion by the underworld." The "last frontier town" would begin to limit prostitution.\(^{30}\)

The restrictive new vice code, referred to as Ordinance 194, was approved unanimously on the second reading November 8, 1932 and went into effect on November 15, 1932. It was passed under reform Mayor E. W. Cragin's tenure. Ordinance 194 stated:

An ordinance prohibiting soliciting for sexual intercourse, occupying or renting rooms in any rooming house, hotel or other place in the City of Las Vegas for the purpose of sexual intercourse with a person to whom he or she is not married, and to require all keepers of hotels or lodging houses to keep a register of all persons occupying rooms in such hotel or lodging houses.

\(^{29}\)Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 20, 1932, 1.

\(^{30}\)Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 22, 1932, 6.
The Ordinance went on further to state that violation of the ordinance under Section 6 would result in a misdemeanor and a fine of $400. Ordinance 194 was an attempt to restrict prostitution to the area of Block 16 and was in fact utilized during its early years of passage.31

The first case of the new vice ordinance being applied took place at the end of November when two women and one man were arrested. Aline Teel and Martha Davis were arrested because they were found with a man, Frank Mattler, neither's husband, in a room in a local Fremont hotel. Aline Teel was freed because she was deemed innocent, but Davis and Mattler were both fined $50. There had been earlier incidences which resembled this one that led to the passage of the vice code.32

During the years of 1931 and 1932, while discussion of the restrictive vice code which became Ordinance 194 occurred, there were many incidents to reinforce Las Vegas's need for some sort of control over prostitution. In March of 1931, two local women were arrested for running a house of prostitution out of their home on Main Street near South Fifth. This "residence" was located well away from Block 16. It seemed that others who had come to Las Vegas to work in the prostitution trade could not find a location on Block 16,

31Las Vegas City Ordinance 194; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, November 16, 1932, 1.
so they went out into the community. Things became worse in 1932.33

In the spring of 1932, the police chief, Clay Williams, asked the city to close three businesses based on violation of city ordinances, federal laws and also health laws. Chief Williams continued the drive to try and restrain a situation which was out of hand. Two of the businesses Williams requested closed were located in Block 16, the Double O resort and Bill's Cafe. The third, Coney Island Cot House, was located at 207 South First Street. Since at this time Ordinance 194 was not in effect the chief argued that the Double O resort sold liquor continuously and, "male hangers-on are allowed to ply their trade in and out of the resort without...the proprietor suppressing them." The male hangers-on, referred to today as procurers or pimps, remained a problem. The selling of liquor was in violation of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would not be repealed until the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment to the Constitution in December 1933. Bill's Cafe was deemed unsanitary and in violation of numerous ordinances. The Coney Island Cot House had plenty of liquor for sale, some hidden under the floor, and also was in violation of selling liquor to minors. These were not the only "undesirable" spots. Other places were also raided.34

33Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, March 27, 1931, 6; Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, May 13, 1931, 10.
34Las Vegas Evening Review and Journal, April 4, 1932, 1; The Constitution of the United States.
The Blue Heaven resort became the target for police raids and an investigation. The police found that the Blue Heaven had been selling liquor while a minor was on the premises. Even though it was in violation of the Constitution to sell any sort of liquor, enforcement of the ban on liquor was only used rarely. A. E. Cahlan commented that Las Vegas "has always been liberally inclined, and has never taken the eighteenth amendment overly seriously." Of more concern to officials and citizens of Las Vegas was the fact that a minor was present. The minor actually worked at the Blue Heaven as a taxi-dancer. There were many threats made against businesses and business owners, but only a few convictions.35

The Montana Hotel was one place where charges were lobbied and convictions occurred. The Montana Hotel, located on South Main Street, where four women had been arrested on charges of prostitution. Two of the women, Mary Roberts and Virginia Martin, plead guilty to the charge. Mickey Dugan and L. Woods were found guilty. Roberts, Martin and Dugan all were fined $20, while Woods was fined $1. This only led more fuel to the fire for a restrictive ordinance regarding prostitution that became Ordinance 194 and with the building of Hoover Dam, prostitution only seemed to grow.36

Prostitution spread because of construction of what would eventually be called the Hoover Dam. There proved to be a problem with dam workers coming into Las Vegas and was another reason for the passage of Ordinance 194 to restrict prostitution in Las Vegas.

The dam workers lived in Boulder City, a dry and boring town compared to the "sporting life" one could find in Las Vegas. This led to problems when the men were paid and chose to come to Las Vegas for a little R and R. One such incident did not come on pay day but instead when some of the tunnel workers were let go for the day because the water was too high. They ventured into Las Vegas to settle some score they thought they had with some of the businesses on Block 16. The trouble spilled over to North First and Fremont Street. Several gang fights were reported by the police and there were near riot conditions, by the next day, February 11, 1932, everything was reported to be calm. This would not continue. 37

An incident between dam workers and male hangers-on occurred in March of 1932 when dam worker, James Curley, was beaten. The incident meant war between the two groups of men and the police readied themselves. The workmen had been complaining of ill-treatment by the women of Block 16 and the men who latched onto them prior to this incident and it was

all the dam workers needed to become incensed. Something needed to be done, and the city stepped in.38

Las Vegas city authorities decided that Block 16 needed to be cleaned up of the male hangers-on. New regulations banned all male hangers-on and prevented the prostitutes from loitering on the sidewalks, streets and alley-ways. The new regulations also provided that the women must live in Block 16. This provision prevented those who had not passed the city blood tests from taking up residence somewhere else and then going to Block 16 in search of customers. All the resorts were to be closed from 2 a. m. until daylight. By March 23, 1932, Police Chief Williams declared that Block 16 had men cleared of all the hangers-on. The hangers-on returned and in 1933 a loafing ordinance was passed to deal with them. Block 16 may have been cleaned up, but a new area of vice emerged that the city then had to address.39

The dam created traffic along the Boulder Highway. Some saw this as a perfect opportunity for a new area of vice. After Ordinance 194 became the law in Las Vegas, the Chamber of Commerce of Las Vegas took on the question of the new areas of unlicensed gaming, liquor sales, and dance halls that were in operation along the Boulder Highway. The majority felt the area needed to be cleaned up and as soon as possible. The sentiment behind the Chamber of Commerce

action probably stemmed from the fact that Hoover Dam was becoming a tourist attraction, not only among single males, but also families who were driving through the area. Las Vegas's transformation from frontier town was taking place and the eyes of the nation were upon it while the dam was being built. Most Las Vegans, at this time, were not ashamed of Block 16, but deemed it necessary to have prostitution contained in one area.\(^{40}\)

The controversy over the Boulder Highway landed one Las Vegas citizen in jail and the county sheriff, Joe Keate, having to explain himself. At a local meeting, long time Las Vegas resident, O. C. Stocker, accused Sheriff Keate of giving "protection to dives bootlegging establishments and places where intoxicating liquor was sold contrary to law." Keate arrested Stocker stating that Stocker had provoked an assault. The meeting went on regarding the situation along the highway with the chamber president, James H. Down, declaring there were two groups who wanted the highways extracurricular activities shut down. The legitimate business owner and the owners of the resorts in Block 16. The highway itself was supposed to be policed by the government Sheriff Keate informed the meeting. Keate had not been informed that the highway was no longer being patrolled by government employed police. Keate vowed to clean up the area except for those places which had been licensed by the

\(^{40}\)Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, November 11, 1932, 1.
county and that the county would have to revoke their license. There was no clear agreement made.  

The Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal blasted the city officials for their inactivity. The city did not want a closed town nor a wide open town but a regulated town. The editors at the Review-Journal felt that if city officials did not want to act then the local citizens would have to force it upon them. The paper issued this view as a way to force the issue of keeping crime to a minimum. The people of Clark County concurred, and regulation seemed to be on its way, but as in Las Vegas, things were said and then not acted upon. The controversy died down and with the completion of the dam in 1936, concern regarding Block 16 proved to be sporadic and the colorful characters who lived their life there continued on in Las Vegas without much interference.  

---

42Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, November 11, 1932, 6; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, August 10, 1933, 8.
CHAPTER 4

THE NUMBER TWO TOURIST ATTRACTION

The drive to do something about prostitution was explored sporadically throughout the mid to later 1930s. Las Vegas had established itself throughout the country as a place to visit, if only to see the Hoover Dam. Gambling had been legalized and divorces were easy to get. The number two tourist attraction no longer retained its importance economically, but if it remained within Block 16 and was not troublesome, most Las Vegans looked on it as a necessary evil to be tolerated.

During 1936, the question of abatement of the block was raised again by Mrs. Fannie Ryan. Another clean-up was under way by Sheriff Joe Keate when a sixteen-year-old, Elaine Martin, was arrested in Block 16. Not only was it an important impetus for the police to go through the block and make another attempt at keeping it under the city ordinances for the restricted district, but it also provided insight into why a young girl became a prostitute. Prostitutes were not known for their prolific writing, but a brief account of her life appeared in the Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal. Martin's tale was not unique. Martin had runaway from an "unhappy" home at fifteen and married a man who was twenty-
eight. Her husband then tried to force her into prostitution, but she refused. Martin then ran away from him to Las Vegas where she was suppose to meet with friends. This turned out not to be true, but when her money started to run out she went to work in the red-light district. Martin's tale provided a reason for some local citizens, including Fannie Ryan, to take another look at the restricted area.43

Mrs. Ryan pushed city officials to stand behind the pledge they had made to the government and proceed with abatement of the six prostitution houses located within Block 16. Ryan wrote a letter to the city, received by City Clerk Viola Burns, which stated not only had a promise not been fulfilled to the government by moving the area, but that the area was also a public nuisance. Continuing, Ryan went on to also point out that Block 16 was within four hundred yards of a church. A. E. Cahlan, in his editorial, reiterated that abatement might be welcome, but Nevada had always viewed prostitution as a necessary evil. More importantly, he pointed out that Fannie Ryan's actions were to remove what she saw as "a deterrent to the development of that section of the city." The "last frontier town" was growing and becoming more settled.44

As a frontier town grows and moves from the stage of being dominated primarily by young males and female

prostitutes to include more families, a more stable economic means for the town was established. Most frontier towns, especially in Nevada, had been established because of mining. Even though Las Vegas established itself as a railroad town as opposed to a mining town, it was still fairly new, only twenty-one years old in 1936 and the economic situation may have been more stable, but not always, especially during the depression. Las Vegas relied upon quickie divorces and legalized gambling to draw people to the desert. After the government had left and taken its federal dollars with them when construction of the dam was complete, the economic situation wasn't as clear as it would be during and after World War II. So prostitution served as just another draw to lure outsiders with their money.

Mrs. Ryan made another attempt at abatement of Block 16 in 1938. Ryan's campaign with the city officials renewed itself in April of 1938. She wanted to know what the city officials planned to do because the block directly affected her property's value located at Stewart and North First. Mayor H. P. Marbel informed Mrs. Ryan that the city, under existing laws, had gone as far as it could go. Mrs. Ryan's campaign, once again, sparked some followers to ask the city to do something.45

The city officials didn't do anything to remedy Mrs. Ryan's concerns, but the property owners of Block 16 decided to act before abatement became reality. The property owners,

45Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 26, 1938, 1.
led by Al Mattucci as their representative, had decided to build a twenty-four foot fence to enclose Block 16. The fence would enclose all of Block 16 with an opening on Ogden street and a police officer on duty twenty-four hours a day. Tourists would be required to wear some type of identification if they entered the block. The women of Block 16 had been ordered out of the bars and placed behind partitions, making it a men's only affair. According to Mattucci, this had caused approximately half of the women to leave Las Vegas. The fence was never constructed, but the women did stay behind the partitions until the summer heat got to be too much. As the Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal described in very colorful language:

Las Vegas' number two tourist attraction (gambling, of course, still ranking number one) blossomed forth in all of its semi-nude glory again last night when the girls of the famous Block 16 deserted their places behind the thin board partitions and took up their customary nightly vigil in the doorways and windows of the North First street resorts.

An assumed fix, once again, did not prove to be lasting when it came to prostitution, but there were other concerns.46

One of the questions regarding the prostitutes along Block 16 was their health. The question regarding the prostitutes health loosely veiled the deeper feeling of ostracism that began to take hold in Las Vegas in the late 1930s. In 1938, the Las Vegas Junior Chamber of Commerce

held a meeting to discuss "constructive" ideas. One of their topics, the prostitutes along Block 16, their health and the "liberties" the prostitutes took. Dr. Stanley L. Hardy attended the meeting to report that the only examination the girls received was their initial examination. Hardy stated that the prostitutes were "never cured and never safe." Stanley went on to state that no case had been reported of disease, presumably V. D., being transmitted through a swimming pool. Bob Woodruff, operator of the public Mermaid pool, vowed to keep his pool "free from such individuals." Stanley believed that the prostitutes "should be black-balled from all activity and not allowed the privileges of other citizens." The heat was on to do something about Block 16, and it would only intensify as time went on.47

Mayor John L. Russell agreed that something should be done about prostitution, but not necessarily in Block 16. Russell reassured the Junior Chamber of Commerce at a meeting in June of 1939 that the girls along Block 16 were examined by doctors and they in fact were not the problem, but the "bar-flies" did pose problems. Even the girls within Block 16 complained about these "scabs" and wanted protection from them. Former Municipal Court Judge, Frank McNamee, Jr., pointed out that prostitution was illegal within the city of Las Vegas, except the special exception for the Block 16 area, and any of these "bar-flies" could be brought up on charges. Mayor Russell continued the pressure on Block 16,

and whereas before there was a lot of talk and no action, 1939 proved to be a year of more action than talk, though not always successful.48

Mayor Russell set out to enforce the ordinances of Las Vegas. The motivations behind Russell's actions were not clear but Russell swore out complaints against all of the operators of resorts within Block 16 except one. The complaints were not for prostitution, but for violation of liquor ordinances. The group had been selling liquor without a license. Those included in the charges were Vera Magness of the Double O, Bessie Williams of the Arcade, Alice Mitchell of the Star, Kitty Walsh of the Jazz Club, Earl Noon of the Arizona Club, Jack Irish of the Pastime, and Babe Roan of the Honolulu Inn. The only resort not cited was the Red Front, and it was not clear why not.49

The accused were brought to Judge Gus Blad's court to determine the trial date on June 14, 1939. All of them plead not guilty and their trial dates were set. Magness, Williams, Mitchell, Walsh, and Noon stood trial June 21. Irish and Roan wanted an earlier date, so they stood trial June 16. John F. Cahlan attended the hearing for the Review-Journal and with his own colorful description gave an interpretation of the atmosphere that held in court:

Last night is "bosses" night in Judge Gus Blad's municipal court, and all but one

48The bar-flies were women who were not licensed by the city and should be thought of as a free-lance prostitute. Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, June 8, 1939, 1.
49Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, June 14, 1939, 1.
of the madams and masters of the
playhouses on Las Vegas' Block 16 are
present, and so is John Russell, mayor of
the town.

By Cahlan's description, it almost seemed a carnival event
and not to be taken too seriously. Cahlan also found it
somewhat ironic that a week prior to the "bosses" being
arrested on liquor violations that Mayor Russell had informed
the Junior Chamber of Commerce that the Block 16 girls needed
protection from the "bar-flies" who had been plying their
trade there. Cahlan doesn't seemed outraged by the fact that
prostitution was legal, it was just part of Las Vegas and
that feeling continued to be felt by many.50

Jack Irish and Babe Roan came up for trial on June 16,
1939. The case was presided over by George Marshall because
Judge Blad was attending a conference in Carson City. Irish
and Roan were released because no record of the complaint
sworn by Mayor Russell had been recorded. Five days later
Noon, Walsh, Magness, Williams, and Mitchell were also
released. Mayor Russell may have been handed a set back, but
he was not through trying to clean-up Block 16, especially if
they violated any ordinances.51

Mayor Russell became embroiled in a battle at a city
commissioners meeting when it was decided to change the
police commissioners. Assigned to be the new police
commissioner was Commissioner Al Corradetti. Mayor Russell

51Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, June 17, 1939, 1; Las Vegas Evening

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
went after him, drilling him regarding certain areas of enforcement, including Block 16. Mayor Russell drilled Corradetti because he had been a prior police commissioner and Russell felt that Corradetti had not enforced all the ordinances. Russell wanted to ensure, as pertaining specifically to Block 16, that Corradetti would enforce the liquor ordinance and revoke the license of those in violation and deal with the "bar-flies." Commissioner Corradetti reassured Mayor Russell that he would in fact uphold the ordinances and deal with the "bar-flies." With the new mayor things were getting tougher along Block 16 and the fear of disease and the spread of prostitution became an issue in the next year.52

The city commissioners decided, in May of 1940, that they would no longer require the prostitutes of Block 16 to receive their medical examination from the city health officer, Dr. York. The city commissioners deemed it appropriate for the girls to receive their examinations from a doctor of their choice. The commissioners felt the health officer had a monopoly over who would pass the examinations and who would not. Mayor Russell was not informed of their move and vowed to explore the matter further.53

District Attorney Roland Wiley stepped into the fray to inform the city commissioners that a grand jury had already conducted an investigation. The grand jury determined that

---

52 Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, August 5, 1939, 1.
it remained crucial that only one doctor be responsible for the examinations. Roland felt that this should be the city health officer and if he was not qualified, than someone else should be appointed. Roland also pointed out that one of the reasons the "sanitary" conditions were poor on this matter was that prostitution was not contained within Block 16. Conditions elsewhere needed to be cleaned up and Roland called for all prostitutes to be examined by December 1. If the examination did not take place then Roland would be forced to close the houses where the prostitutes plied their trade. 54

The follow-up regarding the Block 16 examinations brought forth more bureaucracy in the form of a committee to examine the matter further. Dr. C. W. Woodbury, a member of the state board of health, reported that the matter needed to be looked into further because no one cared about the girls needing the examination, only how much money could be made off them. Dr. Woodbury urged the commissioners and mayor to come up with a plan to make sure the girls were thoroughly examined and not milked for every cent they had. It was decided upon that Dr. York, Dr. Woodbury and Dr. Slavin would examine the matter further and find a way for Block 16 to be regulated and report back to the city commissioners. Soon the federal government would step in and not ask for regulation, but instead abatement of all prostitution in

54 Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, November 27, 1940, 3.
Las Vegas. The colorful characters who had helped to define the city became a detriment to the city in the next decade.\textsuperscript{55}
Prior to 1940, Block 16 had been one of the things that made Las Vegas unique. Las Vegas was a new town, the "last frontier town," and proud of it. The men and women who worked and lived along Block 16 added to the eccentricity that was Las Vegas. Elaine Martin, the underage prostitute, James Curley, dam worker and brawler, along with madams and proprietors who together added to the wantonness one would suspect in such an area. Looking back at the thirties, the ability to understand why some wanted the area regulated or completely abated becomes clearer.

Murder was part of life in Block 16. On September 8, 1932, Bob Burke, an organized crime figure, was killed by William Pechurt, proprietor at the time of the Double O resort. Evidently, Pechurt and Burke had gotten into a scuffle which resulted in the killing of Burke. Pechurt claimed all along that it had been an accidental shooting and the court found in his favor. The Review-Journal commented that with Pechurt's release on lack of evidence, "it was a great day for the 'block.'" Even those who had consoled Burke's wife, Violet Burke, after his death, celebrated at the news of Pechurt's release. Perchart, a local, had not
been convicted of the death of a man who the world was perhaps better off without. This was one of numerous incidence that help to reveal life along Block 16 as it truly happened.56

Another interesting event occurred that reflected on Las Vegas's attitude towards its unique district, later that year. Mrs. A. S. Bender was found guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a minor; Bender herself was only twenty-two. After Judge Ryan requested that she recite the Lord's Prayer, as this may lessen her sentence, he did not give her the maximum, six months in jail and $500 fine, but instead only 30 days and $50 fine. Judge Ryan felt this was sufficient in protecting the children, but if not, he would continue to raise sentences when children were involved. Prostitution may have been tolerated in Las Vegas, but not when it involved children.57

There were many other days that revealed the more typical occurrences within the Block. In June of 1933, Gene Elders and Garnet Murray, Block 16 girls, were both found guilty of disorderly conduct. In July of that same year, "Blue" Lattimore tried to knife "Snorty" Creighton to death at the Dees apartments on Block 16. In April of 1934, Las Vegas's racism reared its ugly head when three African-American women were charged with vagrancy along Block 16. Las Vegas was known as the Mississippi of the West, so this

57Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, December 12, 1932, 1.
incident should not be taken as unusual in the history of Las Vegas. Frank McNamee vowed, "we've rid the city of the colored bootleggers and now we're going to start in on you girls." The city later that year decided not to rid the city of the "colored" girls but instead to establish a "colored annex" to the Block 16 district when it issued a liquor license to W. H. Garrett. The block would continue to please all of those who wished to partake and provide a lively description for those just reading about the sordid details in their newspapers.58

Life continued to be colorful on the Block with the usual seedy details of fights and raids and underage girls. Another suicide, maybe murder, captured the public's attention in 1935. The account of Vera Curtis's death reads like a soap opera. Curtis and her lover, Ben Chaplin who leased the Honolulu Inn, had been together about three or four years. Chaplin had decided he wanted to leave Block 16 and open a tourist camp in Colorado and asked Curtis to come, Curtis refused. After both had been drinking, Curtis threatened to kill Chaplin and he told her to go ahead, but instead Chaplin said she shot herself. The police believed his story based on the fact that Curtis's gunshot wound was located in her mouth. The Review-Journal managed to capture the seen for its readers in all its gory detail recounting that the room where the murder took place was in "shambles

58Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, June 28, 1933, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, July 8, 1933, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 27, 1934, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 9, 1934, 5.
with blood splattered all over the walls and the floor, furniture broken up and clothes from the closets strewn from one end of the room to the other." The police must have decided upon suicide because there was no further account of the incident. Incidents, such as this one, pushed some people in Las Vegas to finally say enough is enough and in the 1940s, it would be enough, but because the federal government said so.\(^5^9\)

CHAPTER 6

WORLD WAR II AND THE MAY ACT

The decade of the 1940s brought about a radical change on Block 16, this change led to its final dissolution. Included in Block 16's demise were local citizens, the federal government, the concern for the health of American troops during World War II and money. During World War II, Las Vegas experienced the draw of regional tourism. Many tourists in the West, especially southern California, because of gas rations could not venture far from home for a vacation; Las Vegas was the perfect destination. After World War II, tourism would explode, especially with the expansion of casinos to include the "carpet" joints, including the Flamingo, Sands and Dunes. The federal government also demanded an end to prostitution during the war and with continued federal presence and dollars after the war, Nellis Air Force Base and nuclear testing, Las Vegas was heavily influenced by the government, especially its money. Economically, Las Vegas no longer needed its number two tourist attraction. Culturally, it had grown into a modern city, no longer the "last frontier town." The year 1941 brought the beginning of the end.
J. R. Lewis provided the first shot in the final war to abate prostitution in Las Vegas. Lewis, a local attorney, filed a notice on the county commissioners stating that Block 16 was a nuisance and in violation of 9051 of Nevada Compiled Law of 1929. Lewis wrote that houses of prostitution located on Block 16 proved "injurious to health, was indecent and offensive to the senses and obstructs the free use of property so as to interfere with the comfortable enjoyment of life and property in said block." As the Review-Journal put it, the death knell of Block 16 rang loudly.\

Lewis had pointed out that the operators of Block 16 had no legal ground to stand on. In fact, the houses had been allowed to run through tolerance. The Review-Journal referred to the houses as a "western holdover from the days when Las Vegas was young and virile." This was the first attempt in Nevada to close a bawdy house, but some felt that Las Vegas could have legal houses of prostitution. The city charter, amended in 1937, may have given Las Vegas the right to license houses of prostitution. Many felt that the amendments did not provide for licensing, but by then, everyone was choosing a side.\

A preliminary injunction was issued by Judge George E. Marshall to prevent a temporary hold on abatement of the prostitution houses in Block 16. The injunction motion had been filed by Harold M. Morse, attorney for property owners

---

60Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 10, 1941, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 14, 1941, 1.
61Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 14, 1941, 1.
along the Block, and named as defendants Clark County Commissioners Ira Earl, Rodney Colton and Earl Davidson along with District Attorney Roland Wiley and Deputy District Attorney V. Gray Gubler. The injunction stated that "none of the county officers 'had or has the power, jurisdiction or authority to abate the alleged nuisance of Block 16!" The Block 16 property owners were seeking a permanent injunction so that the county officials would stay out of their affairs along the block. The temporary injunction brought a temporary peace.62

J. R. Lewis was back in July to have his demands heard. Lewis wanted the houses closed and the owners of Block 16 arrested. Lewis appeared before Justice of the Peace Mahlon Brown with complaints and warrants for the arrests. Lewis had recently purchased the Arizona Club building located within the Block and charged that there were seven houses of ill fame and all were in violation of Section 10193 of Nevada compiled law. Section 10193 does not permit a house of prostitution within 400 yards of a church. According to Lewis, an Episcopal church and the Zion Methodist church were both located within 400 yards. Lewis went on to state that "these actions are for the punishment of crimes which are being committed. Each day these establishments are allowed to run constitutes a separate offense." A. E. Cahlan, in his article in the Review-Journal, agreed with Lewis stating that the location of the houses of ill-fame within 400 yards of a

62Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 17, 1941, 1.
church were contrary to current laws. Lewis's argument seemed to be a strong one as the issue of abatement proceeded further.63

Judge W. D. Hatton ruled that the abatement proceedings should go forward. Hatton stated that he felt the general law superseded any city ordinances where there was conflict and that by granting a city charter this did not "take away the power of the general law." Both Judge Hatton and the Review-Journal agreed that prostitution had been born in Block 16 when Las Vegas was first founded and a small town. Hatton stated that since the small town had become a city the block was now a public nuisance because of its location on First Street close to Main in the downtown area. A Review-Journal editorial went further to state that Las Vegas needed not to dodge the issue but address it. It seemed Las Vegas had been dodging the issue for ten years.64

The proprietors along Block 16 fought back. Jack Irish sold his building, the Pastime, to J. R. Lewis and Edwin J. Miller of Los Angeles. Laura Burns, a.k.a. Babe Roan, and Bessie Williams then filed suit against, Lewis, Miller, Irish and Dionisia Irish. Burns and Williams rented the Pastime building from Irish and alleged they were in lawful possession of the building. Lewis and Miller had a restraining order placed upon them and they were in fact

---

64 Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, July 30, 1941, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, August 1, 1941.
running a peaceable establishment and that it was Lewis and Miller who threatened violence. The outcome would have to await further decisions by the city, the county and the law.65

By order of the city commission Block 16 was ordered closed, almost. Mayor Howell C. Garrison informed the city that the city commissioners had ordered Block 16 closed because of J. R. Lewis's complaint stating that the Block was not only in violation of Nevada compiled law, but also Ordinance 194 of the city statues. Judge George Marshall stated that if the city did close the houses of prostitution this violated the restraining order against such action and would be in contempt of court. Mayor Garrison then went on to state that if city officials did not close the houses they would not be upholding the laws and could be removed from office. Mayor Garrison did not believe closing the "resorts" benefited the city. "Closing of the Block 16 will bring about an undesirable situation in Las Vegas. Were it within my legal power to do so I would not approve the closing order," Garrison stated. He saw the spread of illegal, uncontrolled vice, if Block 16 was abated but the city needed to act in some way.66

The city commission decided, at its board meeting in October of 1941, action had to be taken to clean up Las Vegas. Not only would Ordinance 194 be enforced, but there would be rigid control of gaming and liquor licenses also.

65Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 9, 1941, 3.
66Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 11, 1941, 3.
The city commissioners discussed a plan to completely reorganize the police department and their first causality became Frank Wait, the chief of police. Wait had been replaced by Dave Mackey, the former chief. The board decided to oust Wait because he had failed to follow instructions by the board to close the houses of prostitution, but in Wait's defense he stated he had not wanted to violate the restraining order and then been held in contempt of court. The board basically said that was no excuse. Another interesting point became the reassurance by Mayor Garrison that vice would not spread throughout the city, as he had early stated he feared, and that Ordinance 194 would be enforced in the whole city "even if it takes every dollar in the police department budget." Garrison saw where things were headed, legal prostitution would no longer be tolerated in Las Vegas.

The Block 16 owners argued that if prostitution wasn't going to be tolerated in the city, it also needed to be stamped out near the city. The block owners were referring to the Meadows Club located just outside of Las Vegas which would soon open in later 1941 as a resort with prostitution. The Meadows Club had previously been run by the Corneiro brothers in the 1930s. The block owners sited that the city had jurisdiction over the area one mile outside of Las Vegas where the Meadows Club was located. The block 16 owners therefore argued Ordinance 194 needed to be enforced at the

---

67Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 17, 1941, 1.
Meadows. City attorney Paul Ralli stated that the city had jurisdiction over the city and a one mile radius, but Ordinance 194 prohibited prostitution only within the city of Las Vegas not the one mile radius. Ralli went further to make it known that city officials were looking into drafting an ordinance to regulate prostitution within one mile of the city. The Meadows would have closed just as it opened.68

A temporary restraining order was sought to close the Meadows. The order was sought by the operators of Block 16 and was issued by county sheriff, M. W. Ward. The order temporarily stopped the Meadows Amusement Company from operating a house of ill-fame at the Meadows. The city commissioners concurred that control of prostitution in a one mile radius of the city was within their power, but did not seek to close the Meadows, as the restraining order did, but instead regulate it. The commissioners determined the area of prostitution needed a fence around it and a police guard stationed at the entrance 24 hours a day, not a new idea, but a compromise. The city commissioners also were contemplating the idea of another restricted district in another place besides Block 16.69

The idea of a new area of prostitution gained steam at the meeting of the taxpayer's association in late November, 1941. City commissioner A. P. Rubidoux, along with others,

---

69Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, October 25, 1941, 1; Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, November 7, 1941, 3.
felt that prostitution was still running wild on Block 16 and out at the Meadows and something needed to be done. The group went on record stating the city commissioners "look into the feasibility of selling a plot of city-owned land, northeast of the city on the old airport grounds for use in the operation of such houses." The city commissioners were on a new course against Block 16.70

The city commissioners found that they in fact could enforce Ordinance 194, abating prostitution. The restraining order had been issued against county officials and not city officials, therefore the city officials moved to abate Block 16.71

Police Commissioner M. C. Tinch and Police Chief Dave Mackey conducted a raid on Block 16 December 1, 1941. Twenty-two alleged prostitutes were arrested including, Babe Roan. Tinch said the raid was conducted because there had been many complaints issued and the prostitutes, after being notified of the complaints, had ignored them. Tinch stated, "The place is shut down and is going to stay shut down," but things were never that simple in the history of Block 16.72

Twenty-one of the twenty-two prostitutes arrested in the police raid on December 1, had their charges dropped. The other woman, Margaret Foster, had already pled guilty. City attorney Paul Ralli decided to drop the charges because the raid had been conducted not because of evidence, but because

70 *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, November 25, 1941, 1.
71 Ibid.
of rumors. Chief of Police Dave Mackey, the principal
witness, stated "the complaints were sworn out on
'information and belief' based on 'what was published in the
newspapers and what was said at public meetings.'" Still,
the city commissioners wanted some type of abatement of
prostitution within Las Vegas.73

The city commissioners passed an ordinance restricting
prostitution to only the Meadows area. The ordinance passed
3-2 with Commissioners M. C. Tinch, A. P. Rubidoux and Pat
Clark voting for the ordinance and Mayor Howell Garrison and
City Commissioner Arthur Smith, Sr. opposed. The ordinance
passed over protests of those living in the Meadows area who
felt their property values would decline and their children
subjected to an immoral presence. The ordinance passed
because of the pressure placed upon the commissioners to do
something about Block 16. The commissioners provided for a
fence at least eight feet high and a police officer, but the
Meadows would not abate Block 16.74

The city commissioners found Block 16 still operating,
so they took a new course. Instead of trying to regulate the
houses, the board of commissioners rejected applications for
beer and slot machines in Block 16 resorts. Observers
pointed out "that without beer licenses and slot machine
permits, the establishments can hardly run," but things were
running fine at the Meadows.75

74Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, December 17, 1941, 3.
The city commissioners threw the question of the Meadows back to the county. It was rumored this occurred after the Army had requested all houses of prostitution closed. The city commissioners denied that this was the case, but they certainly had no problem handing their jurisdiction back to the county where Sheriff Ward stated, "If the Meadows has been operating in violation of the Army's order they won't be after tonight." This was just the beginning of the effort to close down prostitution because the Army had requested it. The prostitutes had realized that a tremendous number of mostly young males would be coming to Las Vegas with the opening of the gunnery school, and that meant opportunity for them and headaches for the city commissioners, mayor and police.76

The opening of the Las Vegas Air Gunnery School led the federal government and military officials to take a closer look at the local area's prostitution and the effect it may have on military personnel. The federal government did not like what it saw and threatened enforcement of the May Act. The May Act had been passed by Congress and prohibited "prostitution within such reasonable distance of military and/or naval establishments as the Secretaries of War and/or Navy shall determine to be needful to the efficiency, health, and welfare of the Army and/or Navy." The May Act had been passed on July 12, 1941 and remained in effect until May 15, 1945. The threats by the government grew louder and Las

Vegas needed to heed its warnings more seriously than they had in the past.\textsuperscript{77}

The Federal Security Agency, in the early spring of 1942, sent an agent, Jane Christensen, to Las Vegas to check the situation regarding prostitution. Christensen did not like what she saw. Christensen noted that "prostitution is rampant in this area. One resort supposed to be closed is running wide open with chamber maids offering extraordinary services." Christensen went on to incorporate local areas outside of Las Vegas including the new magnesium plant opened for the war. Christensen stated, "Many of the clubs and bars around the outskirts of town, along the highway, and in the new towns near the magnesium plant are merely houses of prostitution." City officials agreed to work with the government. If the city officials did not cooperate, the war department would step in and take over enforcement and prosecution of prostitutes and proprietors in federal court. Las Vegas, also, did not want to be the first city where the May Act was invoked, but Las Vegas needed to do something.\textsuperscript{78}

The government, represented by Edwin James Cooley, regional supervisor of the social protection division, office of defense, health and welfare services, federal security agency, reiterated Christensen's remarks that something needed to be done. Cooley remarked that Las Vegas officials had not really made any move to cooperate in clearing the

\textsuperscript{77}\textit{Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal}, May 26, 1942, 3.
\textsuperscript{78}\textit{Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal}, March 19, 1942, 1.
city of prostitution. Cooley made it clear that it was up to
the city itself whether or not the May Act would be enforced.
"The cleaning up of prostitution in that area [Las Vegas],
will determine the final outcome of whether the May act will
be invoked in the 'last frontier town.'" The only move city
officials had made so far was the transferring of
jurisdiction over vice within the one mile radius around the
town from Las Vegas over to the county. The city would
finally make a move in an effort to clean up Las Vegas in
April.79

April 6, 1942 saw the beginning of the effort to rid Las
Vegas of prostitution. The city commissioners and the city
judge agreed that heavy fines would be levied against women
brought into court on prostitution charges. If a woman was
arrested a second time, she would face jail time. Strict
enforcement was also taking place outside the city.80

Sheriff M. E. Ward vowed that the Meadows would remain
closed. Ward had conducted a raid earlier in the week and
arrested eleven women for prostitution and charged them with
vagrancy. Ward stated, "Not only is the Meadows to remain
closed, but trailers in the vicinity of the Meadows, or any
other 'road house,' which are occupied by 'known prostitutes'
must be cleared out." The sheriff, like the city officials,
wanted to cooperate with the federal government and had made

80Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, April 7, 1942, 3.
moves towards that end. The government wanted them to go even further.\textsuperscript{81}

The federal government felt that Las Vegas officials were not doing enough to stamp out prostitution based on reports by its officials. Colonel Martinus Stenseth of the Las Vegas Army Gunnery School requested again "that conditions of prostitution in Las Vegas and within a radius of 50 miles thereof be definitely, effectively and wholly stopped and removed at once." Alan Croft Blanchard of the Federal Security Agency met with city and county officials to inform them of Colonel Stenseth's request and to inform them the May Act would be enforced if further steps were not taken to curb prostitution which the government felt was adversely effecting the health and well being of its military personnel. Las Vegas officials took Blanchard's comments seriously, knowing the May Act had now been invoked in Tennessee. Some in the city questioned how much Las Vegas could do about prostitution because they deemed it was not illegal according to Nevada law.\textsuperscript{82}

District Attorney Roland H. Wiley proved to be one of those who felt prostitution was not illegal under Nevada statues. Wiley agreed that something needed to be done about prostitution and to comply with the government's requests, therefore he suggested using the pandering, soliciting and vagrancy laws. Wiley stated that Las Vegas law enforcement

\textsuperscript{81}\textit{Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal}, May 19, 1942, 1.
\textsuperscript{82}\textit{Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal}, May 20, 1942, 1.
needed to suppress prostitution but, "under the laws passed by the Nevada legislature, and our powers in this respect are limited and prescribed by those laws." Wiley bound himself to the letter of the law, other city officials took a broader view of the law and their rights so that they could comply with the federal government.\textsuperscript{83}

The city commissioners warned the proprietors of establishments where prostitution occurred that they had one last chance to comply with the government. If the proprietors did not choose to halt prostitution on their own then the city would be forced to revoke their licenses. The city commissioners, backed by Joe Snyder, an employee at the Slot Machine, felt that the proprietors had to know that prostitution occurred in their place of business and it would not occur, if they didn't let it. Snyder stated, "Let's stop kidding ourselves and anybody else. Any experienced hotel man or bartender knows that prostitutes won't operate in these establishments unless somebody in the place is cut in." The city commissioners reminded the resort owners that either the local establishment could deal with the problem or the government would invoke the May Act and then the local owners would have to deal with the government. The various owners pledged to cooperate. The city fathers finally took a stand in the following two weeks.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{84}\textit{Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal}, May 26, 1942, 1.
The beginning of June, 1942 saw the city commissioners pass a new ordinance prohibiting prostitution in Las Vegas, including a one mile radius around the city. City Attorney Paul Ralli stated, "that once this ordinance goes into effect, the city can close up every place where there is prostitution in one day." Las Vegas finally seemed in compliance with the government's wishes and did not have to fear the May Act.85

The city of Las Vegas maintained its reputation as a haven for prostitutes though, and this would remain a problem throughout the war. Prostitutes would continue to flock to Las Vegas because of the number of enlisted men stationed there. The enlisted men provided the prostitutes with a good source of income. Continued prostitution meant a continued drive against it and venereal disease, even though not everyone's heart was in it. Many felt prostitution should remain legal in order to have some form of regulation as to where it occurred and the health checks for the women involved even though this countered the federal government's demands. Police Commissioner Pat Clark was one who was determined to keep prostitution out of Las Vegas because it was illegal and the government wanted it that way.

Police Commissioner Clark, in an ongoing effort, reinforced his stance that prostitution would be stopped wherever it occurred. In late December 1942, it had come to the attention of Police Commissioner Clark that prostitution

was still a problem in many areas of Las Vegas and he began a new drive to eliminate it. Those who were involved with the illegal vice found many ways to hide their activities, so enforcement of the law was not always easy.\(^6\)

There was money to be made and the prostitutes found many who were willing to participate. One way the prostitutes maintained their business was through the use of taxicabs. During the war taxicabs were given unlimited supplies of gasoline and tires because they were deemed to be engaged in necessary transportation. Taxicab drivers procured clients for prostitutes and drove the clients or prostitutes to the location where their business transaction took place. Many were appalled at the use of raw materials important to the war effort being used for an illicit purpose. The *Review-Journal* stated, "There is nothing consistent in the picture of patriotic Americans denying themselves these commodities while prostitutes are well-provided." Police Commissioner Clark continued his drive against the prostitutes, not only those using taxicabs, but also auto-courts, motels and rooming houses. Police Commissioner Clark wanted to halt prostitution and the spread of venereal disease, and it seemed he was making headway.\(^7\)

The federal government, in April 1943, praised Clark County Sheriff Glen Jones for the reduction in the number of cases of venereal diseases. The recognition came from Eliot

---

\(^7\) *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, January 20, 1943, 10.
Ness, director of social protection for the office of defense health and welfare services. Ness wrote that, "The Army and Navy venereal disease rate has been reduced and substantial protection has been afforded war industrial workers and potential selectees as a result of your activities." Ness concluded that, "The government is, deeply grateful to you, Sheriff Jones ... through your efforts many service men and war workers have been saved from these disabling diseases." The rate may have gone down, but it would not stay down, as the next year would proved.88

The Mayor stepped in next, as the drive to curb prostitution continued into 1944. Mayor E. W. Cragin informed hotel, club, taxicab, and tavern operators that a renewed effort was being made to clean-up the town. One reason behind the new drive was the increase in venereal disease. Mayor Cragin looked to these before mentioned operators to assist the city, using the threat that if they didn't do it themselves the federal government would step in and do it for them. The raids continued.89

Women and taxicab drivers were both arrested in an effort to clean up Las Vegas, and to keep the federal government from enforcing the May Act. The beginning of May, 1944, saw the arrest of four taxicab drivers, John Doherty, Phillip Millstone, James Bancroft, and Louis Stein. All four were charged with soliciting and procuring clients for

---

prostitutes. The beginning of June saw the arrest of eight women on suspicion of prostitution. The arrest was coordinated between the police, the military and the health department. Later that month, five more women were arrested. The women were not only held in jail because of prostitution, but also to have a health exam to determine whether or not they were infected with a venereal disease. The military was quite concerned with the increase of the venereal disease rate in Las Vegas. The police would not only continue to arrest individuals for prostitution, but soon the city fathers went after establishments where prostitution rings were in place.®®

The El Cortez became the first establishment to be declared off limits by the Army and have its liquor and gaming licenses revoked because of the alleged prostitution ring in place. The El Cortez’s desk clerk headed the prostitution ring. In November of 1944, the city council, police and Army officials tried to work with the owners of the El Cortez to halt the prostitution ring within the El Cortez. This included the El Cortez voluntarily closing its bar, cocktail lounge and gaming casino. The El Cortez only complied for six hours, reopening all three areas. The city, police and Army wanted the El Cortez restricted because of the increase of venereal disease rates in the area were

traced back to the premises. One of the women who worked in the El Cortez as a prostitute came forward and stated that the ring had been led by the desk clerk, arranging through the bell men for clients and the rooms the girls would use. This prostitute came forward because she had not been paid after a week's worth of work. By revoking the El Cortez's liquor and gaming licenses the city and federal government meant to show that they were going to pursue any cases of prostitution. The problem soon became much larger.  

December of 1944 proved to be a blessing for Reno, but a burden for Las Vegas. Reno made a sweep of known local prostitution establishments and forced the women to leave. Many of the prostitutes came to Las Vegas, most of them found themselves in the county jail. The police and county health commissioner were doing their best to try and investigate and obtain a health examination for each woman, but the area where the women were held, commonly referred to as the Pink Room, was over its limit of prisoners it could hold. The police then deemed it necessary to release some of the women even without thoroughly checking their background or their health. Health would continue to be an area of great concern to the Army.  

In 1945, the Army sought the help of local establishments in decreasing the number of cases of venereal disease. Colonel George Henry called on all owners of
hotels, motor courts, clubs and bars to assist the Army in curbing venereal disease by forbidding any prostitutes from conducting business in their establishments. Major Phillips also informed Las Vegas resort owners that a serious problem had arisen with the returning troops who had contracted venereal diseases overseas, and the spread needed to be contained. The Army also assisted local police in the containment of the disease, by assisting the police with local round-ups of prostitutes who would undergo health examinations. The end of the war brought the end of the Army's involvement in local affairs regarding prostitution.\(^93\)

The city of Las Vegas had tried to cooperate as best it could with the military in regards to its "number two tourist attraction," but the end of the war meant an another evolution for the small city. Tourism, especially regional tourism and the spread of more commercial flights, national and eventually internationally, came to play a greater, and dominating, role in the city. The people of Las Vegas needed to figure out whether legalized prostitution had a place in the new image of Las Vegas, desert resort destination.

\(^93\)Las Vegas Evening Review Journal, February 9, 1945, 8.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
CHAPTER 7

THE FINAL DEMISE OF THE
"NECESSARY EVIL"

Las Vegas was no longer the little town on the railroad stop. It had grown into a city. A diversified city that no longer relied just upon the railroad for its existence. Las Vegas had gambling, and with the vision of men such as Benjamin Segal, Las Vegas would have high-class "carpet" joints. Las Vegas's close proximity to Lake Mead and Red Rock Canyon allowed for outdoor recreation. Further more, Las Vegas struggled to draw more industry. Eventually Nellis Air Force Base would locate just outside of Las Vegas along with Nevada's Test Site for the testing of nuclear weapons. The question arose whether Las Vegas needed or wanted legalized prostitution. Prostitutes had added to the economic base of Las Vegas previously, but now, in post-war Las Vegas, prostitutes were no longer economically necessary, although still profitable. Also, the image of what Las Vegas had evolved. The citizens, and especially the chamber of commerce promoted Las Vegas as a modern resort destination. Las Vegas needed to decide once and for all whether prostitution would be outlawed.
The citizens of Las Vegas, along with the chamber of commerce and other organizations determined it would be to the detriment of Las Vegas to allow legalized prostitution to resume. The chamber of commerce led the charge and at a meeting on January 4, 1946, along with other groups, concluded that Las Vegas must not now or ever allow legalized prostitution to make its return in the city. This group made three demands of the city and local law enforcement that were as follows:

1-The county wants no part of 'legalized' prostitution today, tomorrow or ever.
2-The citizens want ordinances, both city and county, drawn up which will bar for today, tomorrow and forever, all houses of prostitution in the city and county.
3-A morals squad shall be formed in both the sheriff's office and city police departments, which will operate in harmony to run all known prostitutes out of the city and the county.

Most citizens and organizations were clear about the end of prostitution and they wanted no one to question their determination. The idea that legalized prostitution had been a necessary vice was shot down by some of the citizens who attended the January meeting.94

Health wise the city had been better off, in terms of venereal disease rates, since the closing of Block 16. Dr. S. L. Hardy of the Las Vegas Hospital Association informed the meeting members that the rate of venereal disease "had shown a definite decline since Block 16 had been closed." Marjorie Gaston of the Nevada public health department also

apprised the meeting of new information which dismissed the idea that medical exams of prostitutes prevented infection. In fact, "Medical inspection of prostitutes is untrustworthy, inefficient, gives a false sense of security and fails to prevent the spread of infection," Gaston stated. Maude Frazier, superintendent of schools, also jumped on the health bandwagon informing the meeting that before Block 16 had been closed there were reported cases of venereal disease in the high school, since its closure, none. Local health was not the only factor behind the drive against legalized prostitution, economics also played a part.\(^95\)

Local officials and resort owners felt that legalized prostitution had no place in Las Vegas and would be a detriment to the local economy and should remain outlawed after the ordinances passed during the war emergency period ended and the ordinances expired. William J. Moore, executive director of the Last Frontier Hotel, went on record stating that "the gambling and liquor interests of Las Vegas and the county...and the opinion was unanimous against prostitution." Max Kelch, president of the chamber of commerce, concurred with resort and bar owners that legalized prostitution was bad for Las Vegas. Kelch went further to state, "if prostitution was allowed to return, it would nullify all the good advertising and publicity work the J. Walter Thompson company had done for this area." Resort

---

\(^95\)Maude Frazier's comments should be taken in check with regards to reinforcing the general feeling of the time; Ibid.
owners, local citizens and organizations made their opinion clear and the Review-Journal agreed that legalized prostitution should not show its face again in Las Vegas.96

The Review-Journal editorialized that allowing legalized prostitution to become established once again in Las Vegas was not in the best interest of the city. There were two reasons behind this new change of attitude. First, the editorial cited that cases of venereal disease had gone down since the closing of Block 16. Reinforcing the idea that prostitution should remain illegal. The most important determining factor to keep prostitution illegal was economic. The Review-Journal stated that, "The economic basis also entered into the picture and was the greatest determining factor in the final decision." These two reasons changed the minds of many citizens regarding prostitution; instead of a "necessary evil," it now had no place in Las Vegas. At one time it fit in with the idea of how Las Vegas perceived itself. The editorial noted, "Tradition had built up an aura of legitimacy around prostitution and most of the people in this state accepted it." Legitimate prostitution seemed to be on the way out, but it was never that easy in Las Vegas.97

The Junior Chamber of Commerce of Las Vegas, the Jaycees, did not agree that legalized prostitution no longer had a place in Las Vegas. Going against the grain of many local organizations to keep prostitution illegal, the Jaycees

96Ibid.
voted on a narrow margin that legalized prostitution may have had a place in post-war Las Vegas. Some suggested it could possibly even serve as a tourist draw, though many denounced that idea. The Jaycees may have been open to the idea of legalized prostitution, but the fight against prostitution continued.98

The county sheriff and the Las Vegas police were determined to keep prostitution out of Las Vegas and Clark County. The sheriff's office arrested Barbara O'Malley and five men, a majority being taxicab drivers, for running a prostitution ring out of the Cottonwood Auto Court. There was a raid on the Kassabian ranch, located at the southern end of the Las Vegas city limits, a house of prostitution where one man, George Franklin Martin, was sentenced to three years in prison. Another incident involved the Roxie Motel which was ordered closed by Sheriff Glen Jones on allegations that it was also running a prostitution ring. The chairman of the county liquor board, Frank Gusewelle, stated that "recounted rumors which described the motel as a house of 'ill fame and with several girls regularly employed there.'" Gusewelle further stated that "the public will not stand for establishments such as reported there." The liquor board went on to revoke the license of the Roxie Motel. The Roxie eventually got the okay from Sheriff Jones, Jones declaring "the area is pure, as far as women are concerned." Las Vegas may have been determined to keep itself free of legalized

prostitution, but the rest of the state did not share in this opinion. Prostitution had never been outlawed by the state.\textsuperscript{99}

Legalized prostitution did not have the tainted reputation it had been acquiring in Las Vegas throughout the rest of the state of Nevada. The Supreme Court of Nevada had ruled that "houses of prostitution could be classified as public nuisances and closed," but the Nevada legislature decided to pass a bill which let the county's determine whether or not prostitution would be legal. The legislature felt it should be determined by local opinion whether or not prostitution was legalized. Some members of the Clark County Board of Commissioners contemplated whether or not Clark County should have legalized prostitution or not.\textsuperscript{100}

The matter regarding legalized prostitution in Las Vegas was not as simple as it seemed. Many citizens and businesses were clearly against the return of the vice in legal form, but there were other legal areas to be covered. The Nevada legislature wanted the county to make the decision, but it was not just up to county authorities. Officials at Las Vegas Air Force Base also had their opinion and legalized prostitution in Las Vegas would be in violation of federal law because of the restrictions of the May Act which was still in force. Some within the county felt that the opinion


\textsuperscript{100}Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, March 21, 1949, 4.
of those at the air base should not influence county matters, but clearly with the money brought in through the air base, it mattered. Las Vegas decided not to have legalized prostitution resume, and many within the community agreed with this stance.\textsuperscript{101}

Governor Vail Pittman agreed with Las Vegas that legalized prostitution was not what Nevada wanted or needed, of course, eventually, legalized prostitution would be allowed in other areas of Nevada, but not in Clark County. Forty-four years after Las Vegas had been founded and prostitution flourished, Las Vegas let it be known that it no longer had a place within the city once and for all. The editorial of the Review-Journal reflected the way in which Las Vegas's opinion had changed toward prostitution over the years stating, "nothing could do more to undermine the constructive efforts of the last ten years by the forward looking citizens of this area" than for prostitution to return in legalized form. Las Vegas now perceived itself as a modern resort city.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{101}Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{102}Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, March 22, 1949, 1, 16.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Legalized prostitution in early Las Vegas proved to have an important impact on how the town perceived itself. The "last frontier town" never seemed to question whether legalized prostitution would be a part of its societal and economic make-up, it just was. This was not only the case in Las Vegas, but also other frontier towns such as Virginia City, San Francisco, Helena, Montana, El Paso, Texas, Denver and Dodge City, just to name a few. What proved to be important was that as the city changed and grew from a new frontier town into a more established, settled town or city, that the opinion regarding legalized prostitution also changed.

Las Vegas underwent a significant change that other Nevada cities had not experienced besides Reno. Reno and Las Vegas both profited from legalized gambling and their close proximity to major California populations to allow for a tourist economy. Las Vegas also perceived itself as a modern resort destination after World War II, differing from other areas of Nevada which still maintained their fiercely guarded idea of libertarianism and frontierism. Las Vegas was willing to meld itself into what the tourist trade wanted, as
opposed to remaining fiercely independent. Prostitution did not fit into this picture even though some visitors still believe prostitution is legal in Las Vegas and not just a relic of the past.

Historically, legalized prostitution must not be relegated to the past as a colorful side light to the frontier town's development. Prostitution proved itself to be a significant part of a town's social and economic life and should be studied further in this context as opposed to a moral perception.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Population


Las Vegas (Evening) Review-Journal


*The Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Population*


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Sarah Hall Washburn

Local Address:
1708 Snow Flat Court
Las Vegas, Nevada 89134

Home Address:
2250 Oakway Terrace
Eugene, OR 97401

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, History, 1990
San Francisco State University

Thesis Title: Changing Images: The End of Legalized Prostitution in Las Vegas.

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Hal Rothman, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Dr. Willard Rollings, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Dr. Colin Loader, Ph. D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Kate Hausbeck, Ph. D.