

An Interview with Burton Cohen

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

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Preface

Burton Cohen's long casino executive career began in the mid-1960s when he accepted a proposition to become involved with the transformation of the Frontier Hotel. He left his south Florida roots and law practice to become a co-owner/general manager of the Frontier Hotel. Thus, began his highly regarded Las Vegas presence. For nearly four decades he served in the management of some of the Strip's most famous casinos: Flamingo, Dunes, Circus Circus, Caesar Palace, Thunderbird and the Desert Inn, which remains his favorite. In this interview, Burt reflects on the positions he held, the celebrities he hired and befriended, and offers a unique look at the behind the scenes marketing and entertainment strategies that he helmed.

He shares stories of becoming entrenched in casino operations, his reflections of union experiences, and even anecdotes about moving his mother to Las Vegas.



Today is January 9th, 2009.

You're doing well so far, Claytee.

And I am here with Mr. Burton Cohen. This is Claytee White. And we're in the Regency Towers.

How are you this morning?

I am well, Claytee. And I trust this day finds you in the best of health.

Yes. Yes.

Good.

First I want to ask about your childhood, where you grew up and if you would tell me about that? Include your parents' names. And then we'll come to Las Vegas.

I was born in Philadelphia. I was about six months old when my parents moved to Miami, Florida. I went to school in Miami Beach. Went to University of Florida before the war. Spent three years in the U.S. Air Corps. After I got out, I went to the University of Miami and graduated law school in 1948.

My father's name was Joe Cohen. My mother's name was Lillian Cohen. I was raised in the hotel business going from bellhop to desk clerk when I was in high school.

I practiced law actively in South Florida for 16 years, representing a lot of the major hotels. Together with clients, we formed a company to build airport hotels, which was the coming thing many years ago. We built the first hotel on top of the municipal terminal in Miami, Florida. It had never been done before, a very complicated legal matter, but we accomplished it. And from there I took the company public. We bought a major piece of property opposite the international airport in L.A. with the proceeds. And we built the first soundproof high-rise hotel in Los Angeles. We had one in Houston, one in Birmingham. We were awarded the hotel on the site of Dulles Airport from the U.S. Government. In addition to practicing law, we pursued airport hotel deals at Orly [airport], in Paris, France, London and other areas. It was very interesting.

We interviewed a gentleman to be the general manager of the hotel in L.A. Practically all of the company's proceeds were devoted to that project. He was from Chicago, so I went to Chicago and checked into the hotel he was running under an assumed name so I could check him out. All I got were glowing reports.

This turned out to be the biggest mistake that our company ever made. The man turned out to be grossly incompetent. He practically bankrupted our company.

I subsequently left my practice, went to Los Angeles for what I thought would be a couple of weeks, but the weeks turned into months. Clients were calling me asking if I was coming back to practice law. Having devoted so much time and effort to this public company, I decided to stay with it, turn my practice over to one of my associates and devote myself full time to the hotel and the company in L.A.

We got the company in the black. And it began to prosper. And we sold the hotel to one of the major entertainers of the time—Herb Albert.

My forte was in building, developing and opening hotels, staffing them and so on. That's where I really got my jollies. I was approached by people from Las Vegas who were going to build the Frontier hotel. And I knew nothing of gaming in those days. My career goal was frankly to be a federal judge. So I knew if I came to Las Vegas I would be turning my back on that career. I was fairly well placed in Florida, being a local boy, growing up there, having been involved in politics on a statewide basis.

I was so concerned I went to Washington. One of my closest friends, Allen Boyd, was chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Authority. He was in the cabinet of Lyndon Johnson. So I went to see Allen and I told him about the proposition and what my concerns were. And Allen looked at me and said, "If you don't take that deal, I will. And those of us who know you, know that nobody will ever get to you. The rest of them can go take a flying leap." That brought me to Las Vegas 44 years ago.

Okay. Let's stop right there. Do you regret that decision?

No, I don't. Even though I had very big clients—I represented John MacArthur from Bankers Life and Casualty when he purchased the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey ranch in Sarasota—and my practice was exciting and not at all mundane.

I don't regret it because I don't think I would have ever had the experiences and the feeling of accomplishment that I have had here in Las Vegas.

Great. You said earlier that you were born in Pennsylvania, but your parents moved to Florida when you were six-months old.

They moved to Florida in 1923. We were pioneers in South Florida. My father was involved in various business endeavors and experienced many ups and downs throughout the years.

And what were they?

He and his three brothers, the Cohen brothers, had men's stores. They had four or five of them. During one of the periodic recessions that our country goes through, they had troubles. They wound up—he and one brother, buying a hotel in Miami Beach called the Clinton, which is still there. As a young man they involved me in the hotel business. My father, with only with an eighth or ninth grade education, passed the Real Estate board and became the leading real estate broker in the hotel business in Miami Beach. All of the hotels that you read about in South Beach—I delivered the Miami Herald to those hotels at about 5:30 every morning on my bicycle. I can name them one by one.

Wow, they say that a lot of successful men were newspaper boys.

Well, I was one. And it was fun. I used to meet the milkman. There was a bakery called Goldstrum's Bakery and I'd hit there about six o'clock in the morning as they were putting all of the Danish out to cool. I'd give them two newspapers. I'd get a bag full of Danish, a quart of milk from the milkman and sit on the curb and just let the rest of the world go by. I enjoyed it.

I look back on my youth and I realize what a great guy my father was and the struggles that he had to provide for his family. When I went into the service, Miami Beach became a military base. The air force came in and took over the entire city and all of the hotels. And my dad struggled. But anytime I asked for money, he found it somewhere. My love and respect for him has only grown over the years. And he treated my mother, who was a beautiful woman, and who ultimately moved to Las Vegas after my sister passed away, as a queen. There was a lot of love and affection in my family. I'm very fortunate in that respect.

Oh, that's great. And do you think that's one of the reasons for your confidence?

I have always felt a certain amount of insecurity. I never wanted to be the richest guy in the cemetery and I was never driven by the buck. I never had a contract with any hotel. My job depended on yesterday's performance. In fact, when ITT Sheraton bought the Desert Inn, I was running it. John Kapioltos, who was president of the Sheraton chain, said to me, "Burton, why do you work so cheaply?" I said, "John, I've just never been driven by that." I just wanted to wind

up with what I call a little screw-you money when I retired, so that if I wanted to do something, I had enough to do it. That built a certain degree of insecurity. But that insecurity couldn't have been too great because I was never afraid to give up one position for another.

That's right. So it was just you and your sister? Two children?

Yes, a sister, five years older.

Did your mother ever work outside the home?

No. No. After my father passed away, my mother continued to live in Miami Beach, with my sister. And when my sister passed away, my mother moved out here to live with my wife and myself. I was running the Desert Inn at the time. We had a comfortable home on the property. Six months later nobody remembered me. All of the calls were for Lilly. She was quite a woman. She died at the age of 89. Walked like a queen. She used to go over to the mall from the Desert Inn and I used to watch her cross the street. My office faced the Strip. She used to walk with her head up and her shoulders back. I was always afraid that she would walk into an open manhole or something. And as much as I tried to watch her and hold her, she used to say to me, "Don't try to break me. Don't hold me back." And I never did.

How did she adjust leaving Miami, coming to Las Vegas? What was that adjustment like?

She adjusted better than any person I ever knew in my life. The local women accepted her immediately. The hotel personnel just idolized her. On the weekends, she would get all dressed up, looked like she was going to a ball. And they had a blackjack table on which they had a sign "Reserved for Lil." And she would sit there and play two-dollar blackjack. I asked her one day, "Mom, what's the driving force in playing two-dollar blackjack?" She said, "You don't understand. I get dressed. I put on makeup. I'm using my brain. I'm socializing with people. I feel that I belong." And I've never forgotten that. She always told me, Remember, Burton, your brain is a muscle; it must be worked."

Wonderful.

A wise woman.

Yes. Yes. I've learned that you expected the impossible sometimes from your employees.

You opened a hotel at one time and you wanted this line of women who all looked alike.

Well, that's not so. People have asked me in my retirement: what do you miss? I miss my

employees. I miss the camaraderie of my fellow employees. I went to their weddings. I went to their funerals. I went to their little league games. I participated in everything that they did. They were family. And they knew it. To this day where there is an ex-employee, they come up to me and hug and kiss me. And that is the biggest reward that I ever got out of all the years of working in Las Vegas.

Oh, that's fantastic. So going back, tell me about the Frontier.

Well, the Frontier was quite an experience. I didn't know who the owners were of the Frontier. I knew who came to interview me and present me with the proposition. The Frontier was being financed by John MacArthur, who I happened to have represented in Florida. But they kept me away from John MacArthur. They had somebody else who they felt was closer to him. The deal was that MacArthur would build this hotel according to certain plans and specifications. The rent was computed on the basis of a certain percentage based upon the capital that was expended for the building of the hotel. He owned the land. It was a lease on the land.

During the course of construction, the principals of the Frontier Hotel kept adding this and adding that, what I call "the champagne appetite." And I kept telling them that Mr. Mac is going to want his money for any monies expended over and above what the initial deal called for. "Oh, no. What's his name can take care of it. We'll cap it and just add it as rent." Well, the final day arrived. Mr. Mac wanted his money. They had to pay him, which greatly diminished our cage money.

Let me back up. In those days you financed a hotel by selling points. This hotel had a lease and had a commitment from the Teamsters. And you sold points for your construction money or for overruns.

To whom?

To the investors. I always thought there were a hundred points to the whole. But in Las Vegas it could be 110. It could be 120. Initially, as part of my compensation, I had an option on three points. I didn't have to come up with front money for it. I got a chance to look and see if it was a success, like a stock option. Only back in those days we didn't have stock because there were no public companies. So that made us short as far as the cage was concerned, but not short enough to be closed by the Gaming Control Board.

And also in those days you had a private opening, closed to the public, a black-tie affair in which all of the casino owners and all of the big shots would come in and give you a courtesy lay-down. Now, that could launch or sink your ship. Everyone that came in that night beat us. I mean we just got killed. So we came up short once more.

We had that great big neon Frontier sign, which annoyed Howard Hughes who lived opposite at the D.I, and we turned it on for the opening. Bob Maheu, who was running Howard Hughes' empire at the time, sent an emissary to buy the hotel. We had devoted so much time and effort into it, we declined. He ultimately bought the place. We got every dollar we had invested, but we didn't make profit for the time and effort we had expended. But it saved a lot of investors from getting wiped out.

What was it like, the day-to-day work of the construction process and opening? Give me a typical day.

Oh, my. The best comparison I think you can use is the landing at Normandy during World War II. There were so many things that had to be handled. Don't forget you're opening a hotel/casino structure from zero. Everything had to be bought, uniformed, and placed, from toothpicks on up. I had what was called an item book, which was about three or four books thick. First we had weekly meetings and then it got to be daily meetings. And various items were assigned to various department heads. Each one had to report back as to their process, their purchase orders. And we had a purchase order book that we would crosscheck. Today all of that is done by computer. Those days, it was done by hand.

We developed a room status system, which existed nowhere else in Las Vegas, in which the maid went into the room and would plug in. Down in the housekeeper's room, a light would go on.

She would plug in what?

Where the radio and the television were was an outlet that we added within that piece of furniture. A man by the name of Ralph Mossa invented that; he's still alive. She would plug into the outlet and a light would go on in the maid's room, which meant that the maid was in that room. When she got ready to leave, she would unplug, which meant that the room, according to the status board, was now available. The idea was to be able to turn over a ready room so you didn't have a

mob waiting in the lobby. And don't forget we had 700 rooms, which was a major hotel in Las Vegas at the time.

I'll never forget coming from Miami Beach where they had places called Wolfie's and Rascal House, which were restaurants-delis. But they had a roll basket that you got when you sat down for breakfast with all kinds of rolls. And if you didn't eat them, you could take them with you. I wanted to do that. But to bake a roll, you have to have a roll man; it's a specialty. There was only one roll man in town. You have to put bricks in your oven; it's a complicated thing. And I wanted him, so I called him. He came over and I made him a proposition he couldn't turn down. I envisioned a pie display rack with salt sticks hanging down on each table, you know, a lot of atmosphere.

After I made him that proposition, I got a call from somebody who told me I really didn't want that roll man. This is how naïve I was. And I said, oh, yes, I do. And they said, "Okay, Burton." A week went by and I got another call from somebody else. He said, "Burton, think through it; you really don't want that roll man." I said, "You know, I really don't want that roll man." I don't know who it was; if I did know, I don't remember. But the excitement.

There is a fellow still around by the name of Howard Anderson. Anderson owns all of the radio stations along the highway. He was with Summa. Hughes was going to cut him loose. His job there, I think, was PR. I said, "I'll take Howard. I didn't know him from Adam. And I'll never forget after opening night of the Desert Inn—which we rebuilt in 1976—he came in, threw himself on the couch with his arms outstretched and he said, "What do I ever do in my life for an encore to this?"

We had a fireworks display that was synchronized to music on every FM station in Las Vegas. People were stopping their cars at night watching the fireworks and listening to the music. I mean we did some wonderful things at the D.I. when I opened it up.

How early did you hire the people who would be in charge of the various departments?

How far in advance?

Yes.

That's difficult to say. As the hotel progresses you bring them on. There are certain people you need immediately. You've got to get your housekeeping. You've got a certain lead time to buy

your dishes and so on. You start adding your food and beverage man. Your sales department is on staff the minute you break ground; so you have a sales brochure with drawings that can be pulled out later and actual pictures inserted so you don't waste anything.

At the Frontier I designed a uniform for the bellmen, which was like a modified West Point uniform. They had epaulets, white gloves. And I instituted what was called the march of the bellmen. And when the shift changed once a day—I think it was going from day shift to swing shift—on the speakers the song from the [movie] River Kwai came on and in came the bellmen. They stood at attention. The relief bellmen came in and the next shift left. You couldn't get into the lobby.

We went to Hollywood and we hired prominent character actors that you saw in those days in the movies. The faces were familiar, but nobody ever knew their names. And we put them in uniform. So-and-so was behind the front desk. When guests would check in, they'd look up and say, "Don't I know you?"

Hank Kovell came up with a slogan: "Put yourself in our place." And we carried that out through the entire advertising program. Quite exciting.

How did that creativity -- where did that come from?

It came from a lot of people. Some of the ideas were mine. Hank Kovell had the idea about the character actors. Everybody put a little bit of salt into the pot. My theory was, and always has been, if a department head couldn't run his department better than I could I sure as heck didn't need him. I wanted him to pull my red wagon along. I didn't want to pull his. You don't need to know how to fly an airplane to run an airline, but you have to have enough sense to be able to know whether you're getting a BS job or not.

I learned that the Desert Inn was your favorite place.

It was.

Why?

It had everything. It had a golf course. Historically, it was the place of choice for the locals. If they wanted to have a wedding or a party, if they wanted a touch of class, they went to the Desert Inn. I loved that touch of class. We built the first free-standing spa in Las Vegas, a gorgeous facility designed by Tony Marnell. We had tennis courts. The Desert Inn represented a true resort.

And the buildings were unusual in the fact that we had a flock of two-story buildings with balconies overlooking the golf course.

When I first came to Las Vegas and friends took me to the Desert Inn for lunch, to be comped at the Desert Inn was really something. I mean that was an accomplishment. The Desert Inn had The Skillet Room, which was opened late at night, manned by African-Americans in white jackets. They looked like Pullman porters. And all of the gamblers would fall in for a late supper or early breakfast.

So the Desert Inn through prior operations had a reputation of class. And in my exposure to it, I tried to perpetuate that class in its operation, in its entertainment, in its service. We were the first Las Vegas resort to be admitted to the Preferred Hotel Chain, which consisted of the top international hotels. We were the first four-star hotel with a five-star restaurant. We were devoted to that. And I think we accomplished it.

Tell me about your fingers into the entertainment areas.

The things I kept a close eye on and was totally involved with were entertainment, advertising and PR, my minor in college. I had a feel for the entertainment business having been raised in South Florida where all of the major entertainers performed in those days.

In those days, the early days here, there was a prevalent rumor that the entertainment people and directors were getting kickbacks. That was a concern of mine. To eliminate that perception I handled all of those contracts personally. I'll never forget an entertainment manager who came to see me about a particular act. And I said, "Well, how much is it?" And he said, "It's so much." It was a group and he says, "There is ten percent that hadn't yet been allocated."

I said I beg your pardon?"

"Yeah, Burt, there's ten percent there that hasn't been..."

I said, "I can't book your act and I'll never book another act from you."

He asked why. I stated that I didn't want people to think that I'm giving certain people business and I'm getting a kickback on it. "It ain't going to happen. Now get out of here."

But do you think he did that because that's what he had to do at other places?

No. Nobody had to do it. But they thought that would give them the juice to seal a deal. I'm not saying it existed at other places, but there was the belief that at some places if you wanted to book

your act, be it a lounge act or an up and coming act, there had to be a kickback involved. I wanted none of that.

As to the advertising part, I loved that. I loved to be innovative. When it came time to buy billboards in Los Angeles, I actually rode the boards to see where they were going to be and how good the visibility was. Even to this day when I get a magazine—and I get them all—the first thing I look at is the advertising. It just fascinates me.

Oh, that's interesting. Tell me about some of your favorite entertainment here.

Oh, my.

From the old days, from the 50s and -- no. When did you move here, '66?

Well, it was about that time. When we opened the Frontier Hotel I was involved to a degree in booking the acts. Don't forget there were other people involved in booking the acts for the lounge. We had Vic Damone, Fat Jack Leonard, Ben Blue and his group, and Tony Martin. The main showroom was the province of still other people.

I remember there was a rehearsal during which I went backstage. I looked at what was going on and I said to the other people involved, "This show is not ready. It needs another two to three months." I was asked, "What do you know about show business?"

I called Ben Novak, a former client at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach, which was a prime hotel. Count Basie and Tony Bennett had just closed a two-week engagement there and you couldn't get into the room. I spoke to their manager and they were available. We could have brought them into the Frontier. I knew we'd do well. No, they decided to go with this show instead. It had open now. Well, it was one of the biggest flops in Las Vegas history.

I've had some flops. I brought a show in to the Desert Inn called *Alcazar*. It was a French revue. I went to Paris three or four times to see this show. It became difficult for me to judge whether this show was really good because it was in Paris or whether it was simply a really great show. I convinced myself it was good. I brought it in and the public just did not understand it. The show actually winds up with the audience getting up on stage and dancing with balloons and confetti falling. It was an interactive type of thing, and it did not go well.

After that I stayed with true entertainers. When I was at the Flamingo we had an entertainment director for part of the time named Bill Miller, who was probably one of the best:

he brought in Tom Jones. He also wound up booking the acts at the International Hotel, which is now the Hilton.

What Kirk Kerkorian did, since he had built the International and still owned the Flamingo, was to put me in the Flamingo and take everything there and put it in the International. The idea was to sell the Flamingo. He took all of the hosts, all of the sales department, leaving us there with a shell. But much to his surprise we were able to get the Flamingo into the black.

Bill Miller's time was now devoted completely to booking acts for the International. Since we were now in competition, even though we had the same owner, I got more involved. We had some great entertainers—Frankie, Sonny and Cher.

Who were some of the entertainers that you would book today if you were still in the industry?

I have to be honest with you. I don't know or really understand what is popular today. I can't hum one of the tunes that they're singing. I don't understand the lyrics. I don't understand their performance. I'm not a square and I know that music and entertainment have changed with the times. But if Frank Sinatra was still alive, I would still be booking him. My best act was Sammy Davis Jr. I would still be booking him. A lot of the local places are now booking a lot of the acts that I used to book. And they're doing quite well. Neil Sedaka. You name them, they're there. Debbie Reynolds. Don Rickles.

The Orleans books a lot of them.

That's right. They're there. But booking new acts? I wouldn't know what to book today.

Anything that is worth anything goes on concert tours where instead of playing into -- don't forget our showroom only had 700 seats.

Oh, that's right.

Instead of playing to a 700-seat showroom, they make more money in one night than I could pay them in a year. So it would be difficult. I would have to have somebody else do that. I couldn't.

After the Frontier where did you go?

To the Desert Inn for the first time.

And then from there?

I went to Circus Circus.

Yes. Circus Circus you helped to open? Yes. Okay. So tell me what that was like working at the big top?

That was an experience that everyone should go through only once in life. I worked with Jay Sarno and Stan Mallin. Jay was the driving force. Stan tried to control Jay, which was impossible. The hotel was built with a commitment from the Teamsters. There was a shortage of funds from the get-go, especially because Jay who had a champagne appetite and great imagination. His idea was to replicate Caesars Palace. And trying to control Jay in his excessiveness was very difficult.

We had a reinforced concrete ramp that went from the balcony down to the main floor. And there is Jay with the contractor down wanting to move it over three or four feet; saying it didn't have the right flow where it was located. I told, Jay, he was not moving that ramp. He took his keys, threw them on the ground and asked, "Why do you fight me on everything I want to do?" I said, "Jay, if I don't who will?" He looked at me and says, "You're right," and walked away.

He was quite a guy, difficult to control. To get into Circus Circus you had to walk up a flight of stairs. And you came in at balcony level, not at casino level. I said to Jay, customers have got to come in on the ground floor... Well, we had them come in through the balcony. I asked about the people who were infirm or elderly and couldn't get up the stairs. He said let them stay out.

On the balcony level, there was no gambling; there were the carnival games. All of the slots and table games were below. There also was an admission charge. If you wanted to come to Circus Circus, you paid to get in. His theory was that you got the circus acts free. And they were the greatest. His theory was—and he was right—that some of these acts would rather stay in one place and raise their family instead of getting on a train and traveling all over. And we had some great, great circus acts. That's where I learned all about stage and circus rigging.

Initially, we didn't even have restrooms on the ground floor. The restrooms were on the balcony level. I told Jay he had to have ground floor restrooms. He refused. Needless to say, when Bill Bennett bought Circus Circus, the first thing he did was to put in a ground floor and restrooms; to move everything to where it belonged. By this time, I had already left.

But the opening of Circus Circus was something to behold. We were on The Ed Sullivan

Show nationally. Gina Lollobrigida was the star. All of the executives were dressed in riverboat gambling type of costumes. You should have seen me: I looked like a penguin with a hat.

Do you have the pictures?

No. If I did I lost them.

I'll never forget I was determined that I was not going to go to bed until Sarno—also in one of those outfits—went to sleep. So it was almost lunchtime the next day. And Sarno's sitting at a 21 table with his eyes open. I go by there and I go like this. He's sound asleep.

He wanted to build a restaurant, which would seat maybe 50, at most, 65 people. It was going to be designed by the Croft brothers who did all of the puppet work in Hollywood at that time. The arms of the trees would move. And the leaves would move. And it would have been phenomenal. But I think the restaurant would have cost two- or three-hundred dollars. And, of course, we didn't have the funds. But we had a lot of neat things attributable really to Jay Sarno and his creative thinking.

Great. That's wonderful.

You worked at the Thunderbird, at Caesars Palace and the Dunes. Tell me about the Dunes.

It wasn't in that order. From Circus Circus, Kirk Kerkorian called me and I went to the Flamingo and rebuilt the Flamingo; we did a complete redo over. We opened a restaurant over the porte de cochere called The Speak Easy. It was the biggest hit in Las Vegas. If you wanted to get in, you had to knock on the door. All of the waiters carried toy guns. If you ordered wine—and these were my idea—it was delivered in a violin case.

I went to Hollywood. There was a restaurant there called Noonan's that had the best barbequed ribs in California. I love barbequed ribs. He never sold to Las Vegas; so I went to see old man and we made a deal. He would never sell to anyone in Las Vegas except me. In fact, when Steve Wynn opened the Golden Nugget, he wanted to get that rib and Noonan wouldn't sell it to him. So Steve called me and asked if I would please tell Noonan to sell him the ribs? I said okay because I was already out of the Flamingo.

After the Flamingo, Cliff Perlman of Caesar's fame and who I knew from Florida, was going to build the Mark Anthony Hotel at the Thunderbird. The property at the time went from

Paradise Road all the way to the Strip: you could have had an entrance on both sides, it would have been the most glamorous hotel. It would have been the forerunner of what you see today in high-rise hotels. I mean, at the time, it was mind-boggling.

So I went with Caesars. I was on their board. And I went to the Thunderbird. About a year after getting the Thunderbird, Egypt invaded Israel. An oil crisis occurred and you couldn't get financing anywhere. We kept trying to finance it to no avail. I was at the Thunderbird for four years.

At the Thunderbird, we got our own plane, a 720, which we leased. We had the exterior painted in Thunderbird colors. The interior was done in Thunderbird colors.

And what were those colors?

Like Indian colors. Everything was an Indian color to follow the Thunderbird theme. We put in a junket program of 102 flights a year.

I brought in name entertainment—Tony Martin and Cyd Charisse, and Donald O'Connor, all of them in what was called the first four-wall deal. A four-wall deal—and I prepared the contract which a lot of the hotels borrowed for years—is one in which the entertainer is sure of his ability to draw. They took the revenue from the show and I handled the advertising. That was my expense. A lot of them just didn't make it. Their ego was bigger than their ability to draw. But it gave me what I wanted. It gave me the entertainment, and that worked for us.

We didn't put five cents in to rehab-ing the hotel, but you could eat off the floor. The help was just beyond belief.

We brought up-and-backs from California, San Francisco, Los Angeles. I contacted the airlines to find out when they had flight time on a plane that might be on the ground with some crew time that might be left before they had to get back into the pattern the next day. So we would have a flight that would arrive at 12 o'clock at night and leave at about four or five in the morning. And it was loaded with junket people who would put up X amount in cash, let's say in those days \$1500 or \$2500 in cash in the cage, and they got 2500 in match play, which meant they got paper that they could bet, which matched dollar for dollar what they had. Now, if you won you got paid in a negotiable check. If you lost we took your paper.

So all of them sat there playing their paper until it was gone. They still had their \$1500 or

\$2000 in the cage. And since the plane didn't leave -- surprising the number of times that plane was late -- they would start using their cash. And our cash drop just would go right through the roof because they had no place to go. It was like three or four o'clock in the morning. There were no shows. I had them locked in.

We had Redd Foxx there, who just packed them in. We had the Traneer Brothers who packed them in. We did a great job there. Unfortunately, the Marc Anthony hotel never got off the ground.

From there I went to Caesars. I was the executive vice president. Billy Weinberger was president. He was like a mentor to me but I sat and didn't do much of anything.

And that seems impossible for you.

It was. It was very frustrating. The people below Billy Weinberger knew I knew Cliff Perlman and that we had gone to school together, and they were afraid of me. I don't carry tales, never have, never will. Ask me a question, I'll answer you.

Billy went to Atlantic City. And a big contest was born as to who was going to succeed Billy. Harry Wald, who was with Caesars, from the beginning, used to sleep in his office and wouldn't go home. I would say to Harry to go home to his wife and family and I would stay.

I went to Cliff and told him the man who deserves this position is Harry Wald because he's devoted his life to this property. Well, Harry got it.

Summa -- Phil Hanifan came to me while I was at Caesar's and wanted to know if I wanted to go back to the Desert Inn. They were having trouble. They were rebuilding the Desert Inn and they were having trouble getting it out of the ground.

And this is your forte.

I went back and I worked with Tony Marnell and Lud Corrao with Marnell Corrao Construction. Lud happened to have been the foreman when we were building the Frontier Hotel. So Lud and I got along very well. And we were able to get that hotel up and running and out of the ground and staffed and everything. And I stayed there for a fairly long time.

How long was that, fairly long?

Eight or nine years I guess. At that time there was a lot of jockeying going on in the corporate office. They had a guy over there by the name of Jim Cox from Austin, Texas, who was

jockeying against John Goolsby to be the head of Summa. And Cox didn't know anything about the hotel business. He was constantly Monday morning quarterbacking everything. He'd call me and to talk to me. "Why did you lower the green fees in the summertime on the golf course?" I said, "Jim, it's a hundred and ten degrees out there."

He says, "Yes, but that's the Desert Inn Golf Course."

I said, "Jim, the golf course doesn't know the difference between somebody paying \$40 and somebody paying a hundred dollars." I said we need the revenue.

"Oh, no, raise it."

I said, "Okay, it's your store."

"Why don't we have seats in the lobby where people can sit and read?"

I said, "Jim, we're in the gaming business."

I didn't even want to put televisions in the rooms. It was stuff like that. So I realized it was time for me to hang it up. So I retired.

Okay. But you missed -- where did the Dunes fall in here?

It's coming.

Okay, good.

So I retired. Joined the Las Vegas Country Club...Lousy golfer, but I enjoyed going out. And I got a call from the owner of the Dunes, a man by the name of Jack Anderson. The Dunes was in bankruptcy.

Is this Jack Anderson, the attorney who worked for Legal Aid at one time?

No. Out of Sacramento. He owned the Maxim Hotel here in town. So he came to me as the debtor in possession and wanted me to take it over. Clive Jones, who was the judge at the bankruptcy court, said by all means I approve Burt Cohen to take over.

So I went to the Dunes. It took Phil Arce with me, who had run the Frontier after me. At the Dunes, the rooms were like barracks. They had a high-rise, but around the back were two-story hotel rooms that were old. I said, if it doesn't move, paint it. Well, believe it or not we got the hotel in the black. And we wound up selling it to a Japanese gentleman by the name of Nangaku for \$157 million, which in those days was a humungous (amount).

I remember calling Donald Trump, when I knew and had worked on a project with. My

obligation was to operate and sell that property so that creditors could be paid. He said why don't you come to Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach?

Trying to soften me up. I told Donald, I didn't have time for that. I had creditors that needed to be paid. He offered, I think it was either 65 or 85 million. We wound up selling it for \$157 million.

I stayed there until we sold it to Mr. Nangaku, who then moved into an office. I stayed on the payroll to make sure that all of the creditors were paid. And then Kirk called me. He wanted to buy the Desert Inn. And he said would you run it? So I went back to the Desert Inn.

Wow. For the third time.

Third time. And stayed there until I was 72 and decided to smell the roses before they put dirt in my face.

What are your greatest memories about that third time going back to the Desert Inn?

Anything spectacular?

Yes.

And that's right. The owner, Kirk Kerkorian.

Going back to the Desert Inn was like going back home again. I am happy to say that a lot of my fellow employees were still there, people that had worked there from the day they graduated high school. So that was very, very gratifying.

Over the years what was it like to work with the union, the Culinary Union especially?

I've got a strong feeling about unions. I feel that when management is not responsive to the needs of its workers there is a place for a union. You've got to have it. In the early days of Las Vegas that's what existed. The employees had no paid holidays. If you wanted to summarily dismiss somebody, you dismissed them. You had only paid federal holidays. There was really exploitation for the lack of a better word.

So when management starts responding to the needs of its employees—giving them health care, giving them time and a half and double time, giving them a guaranteed workweek, giving them paid vacations, giving them a grievance committee to make sure that no one is putting his relative in to fire somebody—the need for a union begins to dissipate.

Where the abuses of the union took place was as they were trying to grow, they increased

job classifications. For instance, at the Desert Inn, which was unionized, I had at least five different classifications of porters. There was a casino porter, a restaurant porter, a housekeeping porter, a utility porter. If a casino porter reached over his head to change a light bulb, that was an abuse. In the restaurant kitchen, I couldn't take somebody from one area to another area to help out. Different classification. Abuse.

I've had a love-hate relationship with the union. Always got along with them, even though during the 1984 culinary strike, they shot out the back window of my car. I got a call the Culinary head telling me his people weren't responsible for that. Well, when your car gets shot up, I said, I want you to know I'm not responsible.

My employees who loved me would be out on the line picketing—"Kill Cohen, hang him,"—and I'd send out coffee to them and water and cold drinks. When the strike was over, they came back and it was all love and honey again. I recognized their right to do what they had to do to support their union.

What kind of person was Al Bramlet?

Al Bramlet marched to his own -- excuse me.

(Phone call.)

So how much more time do you have?

Let's go another 15 minutes.

Okay, great.

Where was I?

Al Bramlet.

Al Bramlet was his own man. He did grow the union. Having a legal background at the Frontier when we were negotiating a labor contract -- I'll never forget this -- I was on the committee to represent the Frontier Hotel in the labor negotiations. We were negotiating and we were at a sticky point. And all of a sudden an individual shows up—and Bramlet is sitting there—and says to Bramlet, "Can I talk to you a minute, Al?" Bramlet got up. And they rode up and down the elevator about five or six times. Came back in. And the problem had been solved, which was surprising to me.

I was pretty square in those days. Little pieces of straw were dropping out of my hair. But

Bramlet did grow the union. We always got along.

I remember one time that really rattled me about the union. They had a guaranteed workweek. I'm running the Thunderbird Hotel. Comes Christmastime. In those days you could shoot a cannon off in this town and not hit anybody at Christmastime. We closed down buildings and everything else. We kept a core. And I said to this staff, I said, look, I'm going to give you all four days instead of five days. You'll get all your benefits. The hotel will assume that. But this way everybody will get a piece of the pie. Everybody will be working. It's Christmas.

Bramlet comes in to me and asks what I'm doing. He tells me that I can't do that. He says they have a guaranteed workweek. I said, "Al, it's Christmastime." He says I can't do it.

I said, "Then I'm going to have to lay them off. He said, well, then that's what you do."

That inflexibility rubs me the wrong way because a union contract shoe doesn't fit every foot. Each hotel and each operation is different. Now, it was all right for me to be flexible to give people additional time off for a wedding or a funeral or something. They would write that down. And come negotiating time they'd say, "Well, we'd want this and this."

And I'd say, "You're kidding me."

"Well, Burt, you did it here."

They have a lot of members. But my theory in life has always been that that rubber band can stretch. You don't break it, but you tie it in knots and you stretch it. And that way everybody can be fairly well secure.

Two other things I want to talk about what we called the mob and I want to talk about race relations. Las Vegas was run by the mob at one point supposedly. And you've kind of referred to it through some of your answers.

Well, I got here at a time of transition. My exposure to that element was fairly well limited because Howard Hughes was buying hotels. Kirk Kerkorian had formed a public company. You were able to now have stock and tell Wall Street you want be able to finance. So the old-timers were leaving. And in all honesty they really didn't know what was going on because time had passed them by.

The ones that I did come in contact with couldn't have been more charitable. The church that was built was built on donated ground. The first Jewish temple, the same thing.

So my exposure to that element was very, very limited. There were some still around, but I wasn't exposed to them.

If you look at the history of my employment, the only real place that there was any possibility of that was at the Frontier, when I was naïve and new to this town. After that, my career took me into areas that were totally clean. The Dunes had had some remnants of old-time involvement; all of that had disappeared by the time I took over for the bankruptcy court.

So I really can't give you any mob stories.

Okay, good. And the last thing is prior to your coming here blacks were not allowed on the Strip, as you probably have heard. Even some of the entertainers had to then go across the tracks. Did you see any remnants of that in 1966 when you arrived?

Not really. For instance, the Moulin Rouge was in existence at that time. It was nothing for a bunch of us to go to the Moulin Rouge at night to see the Traneers performing. The audience was white and black and nobody ever thought anything about it.

To deny the fact that racism existed would be ludicrous. Don't forget I was raised in the South. I never went to school with a black person. The University of Florida it was an all-boys school and there were no blacks there.

I'll never forget my first real exposure was during the war. I was an aviation cadet and I had gone into town. I'll never forget I got off the bus and there was a black pilot who looked like he stepped out of Esquire with the wings on his left lapel. I went up to him. I saluted him. I said, "Lieutenant, you're a better man than me. I can imagine what you went through."

But I did see an evolution. For instance, as a child I was raised by Mabel, my black nanny. If I got scared at night as a kid, I crawled into bed with Mabel. If I was bad and my dad wanted to spank me, I'd get in back of Mabel. She'd stand there with her arms crossed and tell my father to go sit down. I'd play with her nephews and we'd eat barbequed ribs that were cooked on the corner. I never thought anything about it. That's the way it was.

Yet, at the same time when I was delivering my newspapers, a lot of the hotels didn't allow Jews: restricted clientele signs out in front. It's the way it was. To this day some of the country clubs in South Florida are still restricted. In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Country Club allows no Jews.

But that's not possible today.

The hell it isn't.

Getting back to your question, when I did hire Sammy Davis, he stayed in our hotel. And he cooked in his room because he liked to cook. He showed up with his pots and pans. I loved him; he was a gifted and fine man.

I remember two things. When I was opening the Frontier Hotel, an African-American applied for a job, a college graduate but with no hotel experience. Today I'd give my right arm for that man with what he represented and his credentials, but he had no hotel experience. And I said to him, "Please understand I've got to open this property with an experienced team. Somewhere down the line there will be an opportunity. I can't do it now." I regret that.

With the same circumstances.

The other side of the coin was at the Flamingo there was a buffet runner by the name of Stevie Cooks. A buffet runner is the one that brings out the food and the dishes to the buffet. And Stevie had lightning in him. So I asked, Stevie if he wanted to be a runner all his life? He said, no, that he wanted to be a cook. But to be a cook, you've got to have knives. I said I would buy him a set of knives. Stevie got his knives and became an apprentice cook.

Years go by. Steve Cooks comes in and says, he wants to learn to be a dealer. He wants to advance. To this day Steve Cook is an executive in the casino.

He's still here?

When he sees me we hug and kiss. I get goose bumps.

Is he still here?

Yes. He has been involved in some development on the west side. He has returned things to the community. And Stevie Cooks is a great -- I call him a kid -- a great young man today.

But it existed. You hear stories about it today, when there were black entertainers at the Sands and they had to stay elsewhere. I was never really exposed to that.

But I wanted to let you know that the Desert Inn hired some of the first black women in midlevel management positions. And they told me those stories. They were just wonderful stories.

I still hear from them. I still get calls.

I had no idea.

Absolutely. I still get calls. There was one person that worked in our laundry at the Desert Inn who is mentally challenged. I'll get a call from her. I say how are you doing? She says I'm doing just great. Just wanted to see how you are and so on and so on. That you can't take to the bank. But I wouldn't give it up for anything in the world.

That's fabulous.

Tremendous.

I have enjoyed this so much.

I hope you got what you wanted.

I got exactly what I wanted.

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