

AN INTERVIEW WITH GERTRUDE GREENBLATT

An Oral History Conducted by Dario Gratini

March 1, 1981

The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

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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 with permission of the narrator.

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—[Gertrude] Greenblatt. The date is March first, [1981]. The time is 1:20. The place is 295 Hensley, Las Vegas, Nevada. The informer, Dario Gratini, 3515 Sunset Road, Las Vegas, Nevada. This is local oral history interview.

Mrs. Greenblatt, are you a native of Southern Nevada?

No, I'm not. I'm a native of Boston, Massachusetts.

Did you come to Las Vegas with your family?

I came to Las Vegas in 1953 with just my husband. My son was in the service at the time.

Can you tell me about the early days of Las Vegas?

Well, we came to Las Vegas because it was a very small town and we were tired of living in a big city. The people here were very friendly. After a couple of visits here to see what it was like, we decided to move here.

When we first came to Las Vegas, I went to work at the Sahara Hotel in the showroom as a waitress. I worked there for a year and five months.

Afterwards we went on to buy a house here in town. We watched the city grow from a very small community of forty thousand people to where it is today in 1981, two hundred thousand people or more.

What was Las Vegas life like when you first lived here?

When we first came to Las Vegas, as we've said before, it was a very small town and everything was very compact. The Silver Slipper was one of the nicest little clubs on the Strip and one of the few clubs on the Strip besides the Sahara, which at the time we first came here was called Club Bingo. The same management took it over, enlarged it, and called it the Sahara Hotel. The Silver Slipper was noted in those days for its special around-the-clock forty-nine-cent breakfast. It had your choice of ham, bacon or sausage, two eggs, toast, potatoes and coffee. And your

dinner special was a dollar ninety-nine cents for a complete steak dinner, either New York or fillet. It was known all over Nevada for being the place to be seen and where to go after your shift. All of the big gamblers, such as Nick the Greek, whose last name was Dandolos, would gamble there. And when he gambled there was no limit. It was the only place in Las Vegas that would lift a limit for what we now call a high roller. At that time they were just called gamblers.

What were the most important landmarks?

When we first came into this town, the only bank was on Third off Fremont Street, north of Fremont Street. It was the First National Bank; it was their beginning. There was one other little financial institution, which was a savings and loan.

There were three gambling halls in the downtown area; there was the Westerner, the Pioneer Club, the Boulder Club; and two small hotels, what is now the Fremont Hotel was the McDonald Hotel at that time and what is the Elwell Hotel was one of the biggest hotels at the time. It was on Third Street south of Fremont. It had gambling and eighty rooms. Boulder Dam had just been completed at that time and the influx of people coming in from Southern California was just beginning. A few years after we were here, they started building the Flamingo Hotel on the Strip. At that time the Sahara Hotel and the El Rancho Hotel, which was directly across the street from the Sahara, were all going through a series of construction.

What kind of stores did you have?

We had very few neighborhood stores. In the downtown area on Fifth north of Fremont was our biggest...at that time was called a supermarket. It is still there today. It's called the Rancho Market; that was the first one. The second one was Adelson's Market on the Strip at St. Louis Street. That was our first big market with other shops in the same area. Other than that there were two small markets, one on Main Street, one on Fifth Street. And following that the next

largest market opened in this town was the Vegas Village store in North Las Vegas.

By the way, on East Fifth Street there was a market named Cliff's. It was the only market in this town that was open on Sunday. Nothing else was open. It was also the only market, or the first market I should say that went in for a twenty-four-hour operation. There were times that you would go to Cliff's Market and have to wait in line to even buy a newspaper.

After working at the Sahara, where did you next go to work?

After leaving the Sahara, I went to work at the Silver Slipper. I was not only a waitress, but I was the head waitress in charge of all the crew in the dining room. There was no such thing in this town at that time as a manager; it was either a head waitress or an owner.

And then where?

From the Silver Slipper I went downtown to work as a hostess at the Westerner Club in downtown Las Vegas off Second Street. It was the place to be seen and to see all your big people in town—your attorneys, your judges, your businessmen, all of the would-be entertainers—and all of the big entertainers would meet there daily. It was a place that was open twenty-four hours a day including a very large bar for that time, also gambling. But the dining room was noted especially for its fine Italian food.

What did they specialize in the Westerner Club in their food line?

Well, it was noted for three big things. First of all, breakfast was served twenty-four hours a day anywhere from forty-nine cents to a dollar and fifteen cents. The second thing they had was a dealer special around the clock for ninety-eight cents that included your soup, your salad, a choice of two entrees, your beverage and dessert. In the evenings only, from six o'clock at night until six o'clock in the morning, they had the only fresh fish in Southern Nevada. All fish in all markets were brought in frozen. The fish that was served at the Westerner Club were flown in

daily. And your dinners ranged in price from two dollars and fifty cents to four dollars and fifty cents for the super deluxe dinner.

How has management changed from the fifties till now?

In the fifties when you were in charge of a dining room, you were told what management wanted and how it was to be run. As long as you went about your business and followed the orders, there were no true problems. People worked their six days a week, which, of course, now they only work five days a week; that was due to union intervention. Today, with the way the hotels are operated compared to what they were in those days, a young man or a young lady going out on the town could go to any hotel—the Thunderbird, the Sahara, the El Rancho, the Flamingo—and for the price of a cup of coffee or a pot of coffee, for seventy-five cents you could see either a dinner show or a midnight show. Today we all know that the prices are between twelve dollars to thirty dollars for midnight show and from fifteen dollars to fifty dollars for a dinner show. That was not the case during the early days. All departments were subsidized by the casino management. We did not have to show a profit. We served good food [at] reasonable prices so that the people coming here to visit and the tourists to gamble could gamble. They did not have to spend money on food. Your dinner buffets, your midnight buffets ranged in price between a dollar and a dollar and a half.

What are the price ranges of the same services now?

Well, at today's prices in the coffee shop you may get a hamburger for three dollars and fifty cents, a Coke for a dollar and a quarter to a dollar and a half. All dinners in the coffee shops of the hotels are approximately the same price. They start at about four dollars for the minimum dinner on up to twelve and sixteen dollars for a complete dinner. Nowadays a family of four can't have a complete dinner without spending at least sixty dollars.

In other words, what made the state of Nevada?

I would say the biggest thing in the state of Nevada was the fact that people could come here on a minimum amount of money and have a great weekend. Everything was paced to gambling and gambling subsidized everything else in the hotel from the food to the bars to the hotel rooms. All were minimum priced. Now a couple coming to Las Vegas has to figure on at least a hundred dollars a day without gambling. That would have to include their food and their lodging.

The initial group of the hotel industry was subsidized by what groups?

In the early days of the growth of the Las Vegas Strip and bigger hotels in the downtown area, they were all syndicated gamblers that owned them and operated them. You worked for them. You worked with them. There were no great problems at that time. Your hiring of your employees was done either through the union and, if they could not comply with the type of people that you needed, you hired anyone that you wished.

From management in the early days to management now, what do you find the differences?

The difference from management in the early days to management now is that in the early days you were hired in managerial positions for your basic knowledge of that particular job. Now it is through the courses at the universities in this town especially that go in for management courses and it has nothing to do with your background or your knowledge previous to coming in as manager; you are hired on your scholastic records.

I would suggest that some of these people that are into management in the schools, in our colleges, go in for some practical experiences before they are hired. Nowadays with the corporations running the hotels, it's unfortunate that the corporations do not require our young people coming in to the industry, besides their book knowledge, do not require them to have any

practical knowledge of the job that they are going to be asked to do.

How did managerial positions pay in comparison of today and did unions have anything to do with it?

When I had my second managerial job at the Sands Hotel as a manager of the coffee shop, I was paid at that time fifteen dollars a day. A waitress' wages at that time were three dollars per shift. Fifteen dollars a day at that time was considered a very good salary. Today you are paid approximately forty-five dollars a day for the same type of work. And, of course, other things have gone up including wages for busboys and waitresses by the same percentage. Now, all of this was truly, the increases were truly due to the unions' intervention and the strength that they carried in this town.

There is one thing that I dislike about our Culinary Union in the last few years. They have more or less become lacks in trying to fit the person they send out for a job interview to the type of place that they are to be hired for. I don't think they are screening them to the point where there are sending out the people that know the type of operation that they're going to work in. It's unfortunate that we have to turn people away that do not have the knowledge of...let's use one instance. A restaurant or a dining room or a coffee shop that requires tray service does not have the time to teach a new employee that never carried a tray how to carry a tray or how to set a table. The average person that comes into your personnel office looking for a waiter or waitress job that never worked in that type of operation should really learn it on their own before they come in to apply for that type of a job. I feel that it should be up to the unions to give courses in how to carry trays and how to set tables and the things that are expected of them as a coffee shop, dining room or restaurant employee.

What did you do in the old days for recreation after your shift?

Well, it was really a fun town. The whole crew, whether it was a day shift, a swing shift or a graveyard shift, could go to very many places. We did go to one place that was ultra-special to all of us; it was called the Day Dream Ranch. It was the only swimming pool in Las Vegas that was open twenty-four hours a day. They had a riding stable. They had hayrides. You could accommodate as many as a hundred people at one time for any of their activities. And we did manage to go out there and have a great time with dancing to a jukebox. Some of them would drink; some of them didn't drink. But a lot of us swam. A lot of us had picnics out there, took the hayrides.

We did a lot of things that youngsters don't really do today. We did go up to Mount Charleston. We did go up to the lodge. We would go out to Lake Mead and have our picnics out there. It was always a fun thing.

There was one thing that I'd like to make clear. We had a saying when we first came into this town, not only me, but the whole town said the same thing; if you're going to gamble, don't unpack your bags. It was an unwritten rule at that time that you did not gamble especially in the place that you worked nor did you lose your paycheck every payday gambling. Some truly did, but they didn't stay here very long.

How has management changed in the years you've been in this town?

When we first came into this town and for a good many years afterwards, it was a real friendly atmosphere no matter where you worked. Every manager, every owner knew everybody by name and called them by their own name. They were treated well and they were given the opportunity to advance in their positions or to any position that was available in the hotels. Today, with the corporations owning the places, it's a very cold atmosphere. You may and you may not know who the owners or the managers are in the place even though you've worked there

for years. Years ago when a new manager in any department was brought into the hotels, they were taken around by one of the owners to the different departments, introduced to whoever was in charge of that department, the name was given, a little bit of their background was given and what they are here to do. This is one of the things that our management today does not do. You can come to work today and have one manager and come to work tomorrow and there is a new person there and you don't even know who he or she is or what their job is or what you are supposed to call that person.

Is there any change in how the guests are treated from the early days until now?

Yes, there is a great change. In the early days of Las Vegas if a person had been in this town, once, twice, or the third time, you asked their name. You called them by name from that time on. It was a friendly sort of a thing to do and one that management encouraged. Now they don't want you to become friendly with the guests. They don't want you to ask anyone their name. It's a very unusual happenstance, but it does happen today. And I for one am very sorry to see the old friendliness gone from this town.

Who supplied the hotels with their necessities?

Well, there were very few wholesale grocers in this town. There were one or two, but they were very small operations. Most of your hotels had their own trucks going back and forth to California and Utah to bring in their meats and bring in their fresh fruits and their vegetables. It was almost a daily run. It was a routine. Of course, at that time we still had the trains running, too, and a good many of our supplies were brought in by train. But nine-tenths of it was brought in from the other states by truck. Some of it is still brought in by truck. But most of it is really purchased here in Las Vegas at this time because there are larger wholesale houses. Many of the wholesale houses from California have moved or opened, shall I say, a branch here.

It is much simpler now than it was in the early days. For instance, if you were of the Jewish faith, there was no such thing in this town in the early days as buying anything in the kosher food line. There was no such thing as sour cream, any kind of smoked fish. There was no such thing as outside—one little company that did make cream cheese. But other than that there were no kosher-style breads, no kosher-style foods of any kind.

Have the restaurants and the hotel at your time, have they upgraded?

Yes. I will say that when we first came into this town we were able to go into a coffee shop and most hotels had nothing but a coffee shop. It was only in recent years that the big hotels put in their gourmet dining rooms, their specialty rooms. And nowadays no matter what it is you want to eat there is some hotel that will specialize in that particular kind of food. It does make for good business. It is interesting to know that if you don't want to eat in a coffee shop, you can go to any gourmet room in any hotel in Las Vegas including the downtown hotels. Their gourmet rooms are smaller, but they are lovely. It's a great difference.

What is the comparison of dining and gambling downtown and gambling and dining on the Strip in the early days?

Well, in the early days it didn't make any difference where you went on the Strip. Everything was very reasonable. Today I think downtown has taken away the moderate person, the one that doesn't have unlimited funds. Their prices are more reasonable downtown including their hotel rooms, their food and the limit that you can play on your gambling. On the Strip your prices are very much higher and the moderate gambler can't truly afford to gamble at a five-, ten-, twenty-dollar table and unlimited. If he's going to gamble, he really has to go downtown to play or eat at a moderate figure.

How does transportation serve from Los Angeles to Las Vegas from then to now?

Well, when we first came to this town and for many years afterwards, your transportation to and from Los Angeles was twenty-six dollars round-trip by plane. The average today is approximately one hundred dollars.

It doesn't seem to me that the people in Las Vegas that are boosting Las Vegas for tourists are looking for the medium price or the moderate player. They are looking for the high rollers. They cannot maintain that high average forever. They will have to think of some way to get the moderate players back into Las Vegas.

How does auto transportation differ from then until now from Los Angeles to Las Vegas?

When we first came to Las Vegas, the highway was only a two-lane highway approximately to Barstow—pardon me—to San Bernardino. From there on in it was often on a two-lane to a three-lane highway and it took approximately seven to seven and a half hours by auto. Now with the freeways you can make the same trip for four and a half and sometimes if traffic is heavy five hours.

Do you remember the visits of any of the presidents or other important people to Las Vegas area?

The most important presidents that I can remember was Kennedy, Nixon and Ford. And, of course, our present President Ronald Reagan did work the last Frontier Hotel many years ago, of course.

How have the utilities changed?

When we first came here there was no natural gas of any kind. Everything was complete electric from your hot water heater to your cooking facilities to what little air-conditioning you could get, which at that time there was no true air-conditioning; it was all swamp coolers.

And another interesting thing, the telephones were so completely different than they are

today. There were no dial systems. Everything had to go through an operator. You just picked up the receiver and you waited until someone answered. And sometimes a call in and around Las Vegas would take a half-hour to get through from the operator's point of view.

How has the environment changed?

Well, when we first came here to Las Vegas and until just the last five or six years, actually, we had no smog whatsoever. The days were dry and clear. The air was brisk and sharp at night. Of course, the summers were usually pretty hot. But we didn't have any of this ozone problem or the smog and the unseasonal rains that we have had here lately.

Do you remember anything about the early aboveground atomic tests?

In the early fifties when they first said they were going to explode the atomic bomb, it was well publicized and I do believe everybody in the town stayed up to not only witness what was going on if they could, but we also stayed up. We saw the flash. We felt the ground and the building shake. A few minutes after the detonation we saw the mushroom cloud that stayed for hours.

What kind of automobile dealerships did you have?

Well, when we first came here there were four auto dealerships; one was Pat Clark Pontiac, one was Gaudin Ford, one was Cashman Cadillac, and there was a Studebaker dealership. It was a good many years before some of the others. Somewhere along the line there was a Chevrolet dealership, but offhand I can't remember when it first started.

What channels did you have on TV?

The first channel that we had was Channel 8 and that was a CBS affiliate. It wasn't long after that until we had Channel 13. However, one thing I'll have to say, we did not have direct networks programs. Most of our programs were prerecorded in California or other places and sent here for later viewing and sometimes they were as much as two and three weeks behind.

Our next station was Channel 3, which was NBC. It wasn't too long after that that our Channel 13 became ABC. In the late fifties we finally got direct network programs from California, mostly. Our most popular programs were "Dragnet" and "I Love Lucy."

Would you be willing to participate in a longer interview if requested?

I wouldn't mind.

Thank you for your help on this project and the interest of the history of Southern Nevada.

[End of recorded interview]