

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES SALTON

An Oral History Conducted by George Green

April 23, 1976

The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

©Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2014

Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director: Claytee D. White

Project Manager: Barbara Tabach

Transcriber: Kristin Hicks

Interviewers: Barbara Tabach, Claytee D. White

Editors and Project Assistants: Maggie Lopes, Stefani Evans

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

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.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Southern Nevada Jewish Community Digital Heritage Project*.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

The informer is Mr. Charles Salton. The date is April 23rd, 1976. It's twelve o'clock. The place is 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, Nevada. The collector is George Green, 3552 South Bronco, Las Vegas, Nevada. The project is a local history project, oral interview, The Life of a Las Vegas Gentleman.

What's your name?

Charles Salton.

What's your address?

Seven fifteen South Ninth Street.

Were you born in Southern Nevada?

No.

Where were your born?

Morristown, New Jersey.

Why did your family come to Las Vegas?

Well, my father went broke in New Jersey. He had built a building and he didn't bond the contractor. So the contractor used the money for something else and my father was stuck with the building bills. I guess he went bankrupt and filed bankruptcy. We came out to California and we lived there for two years during which time he had a pool hall. In those days they could have poker games. Well, he was doing all right with the poker. The only trouble was he backed the wrong guy in a local election and there went his poker games. So he then came up to Las Vegas when President Hoover signed the bill authorizing the construction of the dam, figuring that there would be a boom here. He sold real estate then. My mother, my sister and I then followed and we arrived in February of 1929.

In Las Vegas?

In Las Vegas, yes, from Huntington Beach, California. Since they hadn't appropriated the money for the dam, why, real estate business wasn't so hot, but the bootleg business was good. In other words, making beer and whiskey, everything that was prohibited by the federal government through the Prohibition Act. So he went to work for a man who had a grocery store, but the only thing he sold was the malt, hops, grain and bottles, sugar and whatever else went into the making of illegal booze.

During that time, my mother also sewed since she had been a dress designer for a cheap house in New York City. Why, she had the ability to look at a pattern—a pattern—look at a dress in a newspaper and cut a pattern out from just looking at it. She sewed for quite a few people in Las Vegas.

During this time, why, my father accumulated some property, which has held us in good stead to this day. When the Prohibition Act was repealed, why, my father opened a small beer bar and eventually turned it into a hard liquor bar and put in one row—one side of the bar was slot machines. He guaranteed a jackpot and I do believe he was the first one in town to guarantee a jackpot.

What was the name of the bar?

Al's Bar.

And where was it?

Well, it was on the alley at South First Street. I guess it would be across the alley from the Derby Sports Book and it's now part of the Golden Nugget, I presume. I don't get downtown very often anymore, so I don't know.

What else was downtown? What did you have around you?

Well, when we originally came here, of course, in '29, why, you had a lot of speakeasies and

grocery stores. The business district was the first five blocks of Fremont Street and there were also residences on the last block of Fremont Street; that would be where Fremont and Las Vegas Boulevard intersect. From Fourth down there were residences there. Like in the hardware stores—what you find in a small town, the hardware stores and grocery stores. They had their wares out on the sidewalk, the brooms and pails and buckets. And also in those days, of course, we had butcher shops. A butcher shop wasn't part of the grocery store. Usually a butcher shop was separate although some grocery stores did have butcher shops in them. But butcher shop was separate. We had one theater and two outdoor theaters similar to your drive-in theaters of today. The only thing is in those days they had seats and the only time the theaters actually were in operation was during the summertime. We had two more, I guess, yeah. And we had a grammar school and a high school, which would be on Las Vegas Boulevard South, a spot now occupied by the present federal building and the county took over the old school. Now, that contained both the grammar school and the high school. Later they built a new high school, which is now Las Vegas High School and the grade schools took over the old high school.

Let's see. When did that old high school burn down? I'm trying to think now. I guess 1934 the old high school burned down. In those days they had wooden floors and, of course, they used to mop the floors with oiled sawdust. I can remember I had been home from school about a half-hour—well, I only lived three blocks from school—when the fire started. We had a volunteer fire department. And there was so many kids in the way that they couldn't even move the hoses. They had trouble moving the hoses to fight the fire. For my next two years until I went into high school, I went to school in tents. They finally built what is now the county offices over there...was the grammar school.

(Inaudible question)

I went from the second half of the first grade through high school. I spent one semester away at the University of California in 1940, and then I went to a trade school for a few years. But all of my formal education has been in Nevada, practically. Practically all of it has.

So you've been in Nevada for quite a long time.

Yes. We have been in Nevada for forty-seven years now.

Where did you live when you first came?

Well, originally we lived on North Ninth Street. Matter of fact, when we lived there the old Las Vegas Hospital hadn't been built yet. I can remember them building it. That hospital is made out of adobe brick and I used to watch them make the adobe brick; in other words, get the clay and put the straw in it and then set it out to dry.

That's come a far cry from hospitals now.

Yes. Well, and in those days...I remember I was in there to have an operation when I was fourteen. They had an elevator, but the elevator was worked by a rope and a fellow in there would pull up on the rope and that's the way that you'd go up on the elevator.

I hope the guy was pretty strong.

He had to have lasting power.

Did it have a weight on it?

No, huh-uh, just a pulley arrangement. Well, like the cable car system in San Francisco where there's no end to the pulley; it's a loop. Well, this was a rope loop. I think they probably had...with the system of pulleys, I think they probably had it so it didn't take too much tug. But it was a long time going between floors.

Could it slip very easily, like if the guy lost hold of it?

No. In other words, if he missed it and the rope stopped, that's where she was, right there, until

he started up again.

Have you ever been married?

No.

Have you participated in any kind of social activities, such as church?

Yes. I was active in the old Las Vegas Jewish Community Center, which is now Temple Beth Sholom. I was a member of the board of directors for six years. At the time that I sold insurance, I was active in the (Laughlin) Insurance Association.

Did you ever participate in, say, like the Helldorado?

I participated in the first one as a Boy Scout and my participation was—I'll take that back. I think I marched it in once in the band; when I was in the Las Vegas High School Band, I marched in it, too. I didn't like to march in it because they always had the horses between us and they never had enough sense to have somebody out cleaning up the horse manure. No matter how you tried, you were going to step in it sooner or later. But the first Helldorado when I was a Boy Scout, why, we each had a little gate or something that we watched to let the performers in. The first Helldorado was held on Fremont Street one half block south of Las Vegas Boulevard South and Seventh Street; in other words, it was a block and a half and that included the corral for the riding and all the sideshows in the carnival. Everything was housed right there. And they had a parade that would start at, well, where the Union Plaza is now, and then it would end there at the Helldorado. The first one, everybody really got into it. I mean very few people went out and bought clothes, especially the women; they made their clothes. The men, of course, they bought the fancy duds and cowboy boots and things like that. But it was a real community spirit, small town community spirit that you'd probably find in Henderson now.

How many people would you say lived in Las Vegas?

Oh, five thousand, I guess. I don't know. I really didn't pay attention to those things in those days.

That's a small town. I can't imagine Las Vegas being small.

Oh, yes, Las Vegas was a small town.

That's strange.

Also, back while the town was small, we had a very interesting political situation; we had two mayors and two sets of city commissioners. This was brought about by the fact that the newly elected mayor was what you would call now a do-gooder and the existing city council didn't want to rock the boat that much. So he proceeded to appoint his own city council and the city council elected one of their members mayor. Now, the only one I can remember was the person they elected mayor and his name was H.P. Marble [Harmon Percy]. He was the father-in-law of Archie Grant, the person for whom Grant Hall is named. It finally went to court, and, of course, the city commission won out and Marble was named mayor and they appointed someone to replace him on the city commission.

Did they have any clashes, trouble between the two?

Of course, the meeting nights were fixed by ordinance. So they would both try to meet on the same night. I can remember the chief of police coming up to my father and saying, "Well, I just locked the doors and kicked them both out." Of course, as soon as the suit was settled, he got fired.

Fired for doing his job, keeping the peace.

That's right. Trying to keep peace and he was fired.

Were you ever involved in the politics at all?

No, no. I can't say I was really involved. I used to donate money here and there to different

politicians.

You didn't actively participate.

I didn't actively participate or campaign.

Do you remember any of the presidents here?

Yes, President Roosevelt was here at the dedication of Hoover Dam. We called it Boulder Dam in those days. Of course, he was part of the typical western welcome that they gave in those days, ten-gallon hat, and he was shown the sites. He came in by train.

Which Roosevelt?

Franklin Roosevelt.

Did any of the other presidents come?

Well, of course, since the war, let's see, Lyndon Johnson was here when he was running for re-election. I don't remember who else was here when they were in office. There may have been someone. I don't know.

So gambling was pretty important to your family when it was first legalized, when your father had the bar. You said he was the first one that had a jackpot.

Well, guaranteed jackpots. He had what they call the old Bonus machines. When you spelled out *bonus*, you got an extra eighteen nickels or whatever it was, quarters or whatever that you were playing. Of course, gambling had been illegal here until 1930. They had had gambling, then they voted it out, then they voted it back in. It was strange to have legalized gambling and speakeasies. Of course, you couldn't have a speakeasy in a gambling business. But we did have speakeasies. One speakeasy, why, they had padlocked it up, the federal government had, and the fellow had a storeroom in the back of the bar, so he just opened that up as a bar and left the front bar padlocked and that's the way he went on with his business.

So Las Vegas really didn't have any trouble with federal agents?

Oh, I would say no more than the rest of it. I've often heard my father tell this story about the time the federal agents came to town and they didn't want anyone to know they were here. So they splashed some mud on their license plates. And the local motorcycle cop—we had one in those days—he ran them out in the country someplace while everybody notified the speakeasies so they could get closed. Then when he figured everybody was closed, why, he gave them a ticket or something; I don't know, for having mud on their plates, and let them back into town.

It seems like it was pretty lax in the attitude towards prohibition.

I think it was that way all over the country, just listening to what my parents and their friends said.

I kind of got the impression that your father's saloon or bar was the first one downtown, was the only one downtown.

No, huh-uh. I say he was the first one, I think, to guarantee a payout on a jackpot; in other words, I think on a nickel machine he guaranteed four dollars, something like that. They would just bring the money, count it. If it didn't come up to four dollars, then he would make up the difference. See, that jackpot...as you pump your nickels or dimes, quarters, halves or dollars into the machine, part it goes to fill the tube, which gives you the various payouts, and then part of it also goes into the jackpot. So in some cases, if you have one jackpot right after another, you're not going to have too much in there. That's why on a lot of the new machines, why, they give a token or else they fill a jackpot immediately from the outside.

Just from the way you were talking what downtown is like, it had your father's place (inaudible), the supermarket and the other shops.

No, you couldn't call us—the supermarket was out by the time he opened his place up. He was

just one of many bars for the size town that we had. All those that had been illegal then became legal when the law was repealed. He was another one that opened up.

You didn't have anything like the Horseshoe?

No, the Horseshoe was not here. As a matter of fact, where the Horseshoe is when I first came here was a big hole in the ground and later they built the Apache Hotel there. P.O. Silvagni built the Apache Hotel.

What other casinos (inaudible)?

Well, other casinos...we had the Boulder Club and then we had the Las Vegas Club; they were the early ones, the two big ones, two early ones.

Las Vegas Club, is that still there?

Well, no, the Las Vegas Club is where that Bingo Club is on Fremont Street now and the Las Vegas Club that we have now is across the street over in the (inaudible). And then we had the Northern Club, which is where the Monte Carlo Club is now, but that was just a small club. And then we had some others. Oh, boy, I can't even think of them now. Well, of course, in those days I was of tender years.

When did the bigger ones start coming in, like the Horseshoe and maybe Union Plaza?

Oh, all that's after the war.

The Four Queens?

After the war. We also had the Pioneer Club. See, what happened was when they had the reform drive in Los Angeles just prior to the war, they kicked out the gamblers, so a lot of them came up here. So we had the Pioneer Club. Oh, boy, what was the name of that other one? I can't think of the name of it. Anyway, it was run by McAfee. The Pioneer Club was owned by [L.B.] "Tutor" Scherer. And then, of course, McAfee was instrumental in the building of the

Golden Nugget.

Who was McAfee?

He was one of the people that they ran out of Los Angeles for having a gambling in a vice. As a matter of fact, if you ever watch the “City of Angels,” you'll hear them mention McAfee on that program. I happened to catch it one night and McAfee's name was mentioned as being in control of gambling in a vice.

In Los Angeles?

Yeah, in Los Angeles.

You said something earlier about a shooting that occurred and that you were right around the corner when it happened.

Yes, McAfee's right-hand man was killed and I was around the corner when it happened. Everybody was going every which way trying to chase the man down. I never did get the straight up. But one of the early attorneys in this town, Louis Comb, was a friend of ours. Someone said—I don't know; I'd have to talk to someone that's been here the same length of time that I have been here, but who was older at the time. But I understand there was a murder committed and they couldn't get a witness to the murder because no one would own up to being at the place when it happened. They finally convicted him, anyway, but they got a light sentence out of them.

Without any witnesses they convicted him?

Well, evidently somebody talked, but they couldn't get enough witnesses so that he really didn't get the sentence—he didn't get the death penalty out of it.

We still had the death penalty back then?

Oh, yeah.

Do you remember any other—that guy McAfee—any other mobsters coming into Las Vegas?

Well, of course, Bugsy Siegel came into Las Vegas. He built the Flamingo Hotel. The El Rancho Hotel was built in 1940 by Hull, who owned the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. And then a fellow by the name of Griffith came to town, and this was during the war or just prior to it, and he liked it here. So he built the Last Frontier Hotel. The Last Frontier Hotel was built on the order of a Wild West village; in other words, they'd have a block of rooms that would look like a fort. And then, where the Silver Slipper is now, he had originally intended to build a Wild West park there with old-fashion trains and buckboards and all this sort of stuff. And then, of course, back in the thirties, Tony Canero, the man that built the Stardust, had a place here called The Meadows, which was down on...I guess it would be Mojave Road. I'm not sure. But he had always been big in L.A. gambling and was also connected with one of the gambling boats they had in L.A.

So who was the guy that brought in Rancho?

Tommy Hull. He was a hotel man. I don't know. The story is that he had to stop off here for a flat tire and saw the fact that Nellis Air Force Base was here and decided to hotel and build.

Oh. So that was the end of the Strip, right?

That was the Strip. He started the Strip, right.

The Last Frontier...?

Well, the New Frontier it is now where the Last Frontier used to sit.

How come it's not here anymore? How come that idea this guy had...?

Well, because these hotels change hands and the last group that had it decided they wanted a more modern hotel. So they called it the New Frontier.

I think something like that would help the...keep the local people busy as well at their place, as well as be a tourist attraction.

Well, it probably would, but it doesn't seem like the public is going out for that now. It doesn't make any difference to them as long as you've got the gambling and the shows.

Do you remember any of the big gamblers?

Well, the first big gambler that I can remember was Carl Laemmle, who founded Universal Pictures. He used to like to come up here and play Faro, Faro. He used to lose about eight thousand dollars in a sitting and that was—not eight thousand in a sitting, eight thousand for the full length of time he was in town and that was a big, big, big gambler in those days.

Did they treat him (inaudible)?

They treated him royally.

Do you know of anybody else, any movie stars?

Well, they used to come up here occasionally. I never heard of any of them being treated as gamblers. I remember Dick (Borang) was here once. Nelson Eddy was here. This was prior to the war.

How come you think the mobsters...why do you think they came into town? Why did they decide—

Oh, I think the reason they came into town was because what they had been doing where they came from was illegal and here it was legal and they would be respected; in other words, in those days nobody questioned anyone's past and they accepted you at face value. If you ran a tight operation, why, fine. And they kept the town clean. You didn't have any monkey business going on here when they were running things.

What do you mean “kept the town clean?”

Well, I mean you didn't—prostitution was as rampant as it is now. We had legalized prostitution until they built the Nellis Air Force Base. Then some Jane good-doer came into town and decided that that was no place for an air force base, next to legal prostitution. From what I understand she gave them an ultimatum. So they closed the prostitution down.

Well, why do you think that's the town kind of downhill (inaudible)?

It hasn't gone downhill. It hasn't gone downhill. It's just gotten bigger and you've got a twenty-four hour town. That means you need a police force three times the size of a regular town. I personally don't think that this merger is that good because as soon as they made the merger, why, I noticed that in my neighborhood alone, we don't get the police patrol we used to get.

Merger? You mean community—

Metropolitan Police Department. Yeah, when they merged the city police department and the sheriffs. If they had made the merger, they should have taken the sheriff completely out of the picture because you have a police commission and you have an elected official running the police department. So they actually have no control over who's going to run it; all they have is control over the purse strings.

So do you think that the town, the Strip run by the mob—run now by the corporation has lost a lot of the things that it had before; it's gone downhill?

Yes, I do, because when the mob was running it, they took more of a personal—you had a personal interest in each place and now it's strictly looked at as, well, this department's got to make money and that department's got to make money. Before, when the mob was running it, sure, they wanted to make money off of everything, but the quality was there. In other words, they knew from previous experience running these illegal places that they had to

offer...everything had to be of quality. Consequently, there was no place in town that didn't serve good food or didn't give you good service at the gaming tables.

So the business was really bad. They've lost the quality and maybe the personalization?

Well, I think that since we have the corporations at hand, the town has grown so large and the fact that they're bringing a lot of junkets and conventions into town that they no longer need this personal touch. Don't forget, back when the mob had it people said we didn't have a season, but we did have somewhat of a season and the season ran from Christmas to—pardon me—the non-season ran from New Year's until Easter. During that time, why, they depended on local business. So consequently, they catered more to locals. Today they don't cater to locals. They don't care about—in my opinion, anyway, it just doesn't seem to me that they have the same care for the locals that they had before. Of course, the town is much larger now and maybe they don't have to. I don't think I've been out on the Strip in the last four or five years to see a show. As far as the city growing, I think that the growth of the city was inevitable because of the boom in tourism, so-called service industry. Personally I like a town a little smaller than this.

So the town has changed for the worse (inaudible)?

Well, worse with the exception of some things. Number one is we have what I feel is an A number-one school system in Clark County now. Also, we have the University of Nevada and we would have never had it if the town hadn't grown and the tax base for the rest of the state shifted to Clark County where Clark County provides over 50 percent of the taxes for the state. Of course, this just gripes me because of the fact that they don't bring the money back in proportion to spend on our educational system. I can't understand for the life of me where Reno doesn't have that much more enrollment and they get almost twice as much money as we get or at least half again as much. I think that this should be evened out and that the University of

Nevada, Las Vegas should be expanded. As far as I'm concerned, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas is another industry and they should pour the money into this university because it would bring other industries in here and it would kind of even things up so that you wouldn't have a strike such as we had on the Strip really paralyze the town.

I know that University of Nevada, Las Vegas was always supposed to be rated the best school in the U.S. for hotel.

Well, I don't know. A lot of other schools now are starting to put hotel classes in. Matter of fact, I just read an article in Newsweek this week in which a lot of colleges now are starting to put vocational classes in, which is what the class part of the hotel classes has. And I think the university is missing the boat. I really do. I think that they are really not exploited this right. After all, what other university in the forty-eight contiguous states can offer a course in gambling that they can use once they leave the United States if they want to work in a hotel other than those in Nevada or in the islands where they do have gambling? I mean I think the hotel school here has gone down and I think it's because of the fact that they really haven't exploited it right and gotten the right people in to teach it.

You said you weren't involved in politics.

Yeah, I'm sorry, but there are some things that make me mad and one of them is the short end of the stick that the University of Nevada, Las Vegas gets.

Can you think of anything else, other good things that Vegas has brought to Las Vegas?

Well, of course, they brought the community colleges here and I think the community college is a good thing because that is becoming a vocational school. This seems to be the trend for a two-year school.

Do you regret having to spend almost fifty years of your life here?

No, I don't. I love it here.

For what reason, just the city itself?

Just the city itself and the fact that—well, of course, I guess I had a little nostalgia there to where I could walk down the street and know everybody I meet, which you can't do anymore. But I still like the city.

Are you willing to participate in any longer—any other (inaudible)?

Oh, I suppose that I will eventually start participating in other things, again, once I get through going to school.

Are you willing to participate in any other interviews?

Oh, yes, definitely. Anytime anyone wants, why, all you have to do is ask me and I'll be happy to do it.

[End of recorded interview]