

.....and it all began

By Stanley W. Paher
Historian, Writer

Last Thursday, October 31, Nevada celebrated its 110th birthday. Nevada is often called the "Battle Born" state because it was during the Civil War in 1864 that Nevada became the 36th state of the nation.

Actually, the first settlers came to Nevada only one year after the great gold rush to California in 1849. The first settlers were mostly ranchers and farmers who lived in the valleys around Carson City and in the Lake Tahoe area. Even these few hundred settlers organized a local government to protect themselves and their rights.

In the summer of 1859 the great silver lode was discovered at Virginia City, and more than 10,000 people moved to there to stake out claims on the Comstock Lode. By March 2, 1861 Nevada Territory was created and nine counties were organized in Northern Nevada.

Finally on October 31, 1864, Nevada became a state. The first governor and most of the other state officers were Republicans. At that time Las Vegas and all of southern Nevada was part of the territory of Arizona. But in 1867 the U.S. Congress passed a law that enabled Nevada to acquire this area from Arizona. The population at that time was mostly Mormon farmers and Paiute Indians, and where Las Vegas is now there was a large cattle ranch and an old fort.

For the rest of the 19th century Nevada prospered because of the mining industry. Las Vegas was never a political power because at the most there were only five voters in the area. In 1900 Las Vegas had a population of only 30 people. All of the political power and the wealth was in northern Nevada, around Reno and Carson City.

During 1904 and 1905 the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad was built through the middle of Las Vegas Valley. Many of the railroad construction workers and others from California came to settle in the new town of Las Vegas which was officially founded on May 15, 1905. At that time the town was only five blocks wide and six blocks long.

Las Vegas continued to be a small railroad town for the next 25 years. But in 1930, when Las Vegas had only a population of 5100 people, construction started on Hoover (Boulder) Dam. All of the new activity created a boom in Las Vegas, even though the nation was in the midst of the Great Depression. Also, gambling was legalized in 1931, and both Las Vegas and Reno soon had large business districts filled with saloons and gambling halls.

Las Vegas really began to grow after 1940 because of several things: the creation of Nellis Air Force Base, the building of the industrial plants at Henderson, and the continued growth of the gaming, entertainment and resort hotel industry. The Atomic Energy Commission facilities brought many jobs to southern Nevada. With the dynamic growth came political power to Southern Nevada for the first time.

In 1960 Las Vegas had a population of 64,000 people. As a result of a famous Supreme Court decision in 1963, the Nevada Legislature was reapportioned, and the balance of political power thereafter rested with the south. New districts were carved, and West Las Vegas was represented for the first time by Republican assemblyman Woodrow Wilson. Now the same area is represented by two assemblymen and a state senator.

Now Las Vegas has 11 of the state's 20 senators and 22 of the 40 assemblymen, because both houses of the legislature are based on population. There are now about 515,000 people living in Nevada with more than 55% of them living in Clark County.

LIKE IT IS

be re-opened, and justly so. As a reporter, I can not point a finger at Officer JENSEN without complete knowledge of the incident, however, many Blacks have been beaten and gunned down by over-zealous cops...These "trigger happy" policemen also beat and kill "lily whites and pancake colored tans." The point I am attempting to make is this, Sheriff RALPH LAMB should investigate every incident, in which a citizen is killed by a policeman, whether the victim is white black, green or colorless...they are just as dead ...LAMB as boss of the department, is charged with the responsibility of protecting all citizens, and may I remind him, that the burden of proof or innocence is up to a jury of our peers, and should not be left to the discrepancy of police officers.

The West Side Story

Early in this century the area now known as West Las Vegas was nothing but sagebrush and sand and populated by rabbits and lizards and an occasional rattle snake. But the building of the railroad from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles in the summer of 1904 soon changed everything. Soon a tent town sprang up alongside and west of the railroad tracks next to the street that is now called "A" Street. This tent village was the very first town ever established in Las Vegas Valley, a full eight months before Fremont Street and modern Las Vegas was ever thought of!

After October 1904, when freight trains began to come to Las Vegas Valley, this little community grew fast because from it all of the freight for the nearby mining camps was unloaded and hauled away in big horse drawn wagons and stage coaches. There were huge corrals for horses and mules where "C" Street is today, and in the area now underneath the new freeway.

All during the winter of 1904 and early 1905, all kinds of people were coming and going from this tent town on the west side of the railroad tracks. There were teamsters, swampers, rounders, garroters, railroad construction workers, peddlers and saloon men. In all, there were a dozen saloons, two meat markets, two stores and four restaurants all housed under canvas and boards.

Early in 1905 a tall young red headed engineer surveyed the 80 acres of the West side to sell town lots. This man, J.T. McWilliams, correctly claimed that he owned the original townsite and sold his lots for \$100 to \$300 apiece. Also the owners of the railroad from Salt Lake to Los Angeles surveyed a townsite in the area which became Fremont and Main Street. Naturally, spirited competition developed between the two townsites, and both made enticing offers to get people to buy lots and settle in their town. There were low down payments and liberal time allowed to pay for the property.

In the spring of 1905 there were about 200 people settled on the west side. Railroad Street (now "A" Street) was a row of tents facing the railroad tracks, and inside the tents were saloons, stores and boarding houses. The canvas hotels held no heat, and the raw cold winds of early spring blew through them relentlessly. Mattresses filled with straw were laid on frozen ground, and occupants had only one or two thin cotton blankets.

During the long winter evenings men huddled near the pot bellied stoves in the tent saloons and gulped occasional shots of whiskey while gambling. These pleasures, even if one were losing, were preferable than going to bed in the cold. Plain-dressed railroad men, dusty prospectors, and cowpunchers all told wild stories and enjoyed the pleasures of a few women dressed in gaudy satins. They danced with the men and induced them to drink at the bars to increase their commissions on the liquor sales.

All kinds of new construction, including the building of a round house and an ice plant, kept the people in the west side, despite the crude surroundings, made even more unpleasant by the refuse strewn on the streets and the flies and bugs brought in by the horses and mules. This plus the spring heat that May made living uncomfortable.

Finally on May 15, 1905 the railroad's townsite along Fremont and Main Streets was auctioned off. Because of powerful backing, the railroad townsite soon proved superior to McWilliams' town on the west side. Through the summer of 1905, the railroad townsite lured most of the businesses from the west side, and a fire in the fall of 1905 destroyed most of what was left. The tent town on the west side became a memory.

After 1905 to 1940 many stucco and wood frame houses were built on the west side, chiefly occupied by low income white workers. In fact, in 1940 there were not more than about three or four dozen blacks in all of Las Vegas Valley. But the building of Basic Magnesium plant at Henderson changed all of that. Many Black workers were imported from Tallulah, Alabama and other places to work at the new facility.

The original Black populated area in Las Vegas itself was on First Street near Stewart, adjacent to the prostitution district. But after World War II, most blacks resettled in the area that became popularly known as the West Side. At that time, the area was inferior in development to the rest of Las Vegas; streets did not get a good paving until the mid-1950's under Mayor C.D. Baker's regime. After about 1960 the area became better known as West Las Vegas and political strength increased, resulting in long needed civic improvements and enhancement of its culture. The West Las Vegas area truly has a history of its own, and what is written here is only part of the story. -written by Stanley W. Paher



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