

Will Anyone Ever Forget...

The Night The Moulin Rouge Opened

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Seventy-five years ago when anyone wanted to have a "cold one" their choices of where to have it were limited. On the day when the land auction was held in 1905, eager participants could barely wait for some respite from the 106 degree temperatures. They rushed to the Hotel Las Vegas only to find 128 degrees waiting for them inside the tent.

The owner brought beer outside, and the teeming throngs of thirsty tenderfoot taverners thankfully tipped their thermos tumblers to throat tickling tonsils, and taming their titanic thirst in whatever shady spot they could find.

Over the next five years Las Vegas experienced its first growing pains. Permanent dwelling were being erected but it was yet, basically, a tent city. Block 17 had been set aside for "undesirables" and it was bordered on the west by First Street, Second Street on the east, Ogden on the south and Stewart on the North.

While the place of residence for people who



FITZGERALD

"looked different" was restricted, they did have access to any and all business without restriction. Such remained the case until the late 1930s following the construction of the Boulder Dam.

Even while the Dam was under construction sightseers had begun to come to Las Vegas. New hotels opened yearly. By 1937 efforts were being made to remove Blacks from Block 17 to make room for expansion. Attempts to ward off these

segregationist trends were futile.

RACE COLOR BILL

In 1939, a Race and Color Bill was introduced by a delegation from Clark County. The Bill was designed to make it illegal to prevent Blacks access to hotels and other public accommodations. The jurists of Nevada were yet adhering to the mandates of the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 which held that the Fourteenth Amendment did not restrict private individuals or organizations from discriminating against people solely on the basis of color.

That interpretation was sustained in the Plessy vs. Ferguson Case of 1896 which introduced the "separate but equal" doctrine. Hotel interests fought the passage of the "Race and Color Bill" and it was finally dropped, just eight days after its introduction, on February 15, 1939. For the next sixteen years segregation

would be the order of the day in Las Vegas.

"Until 1947, all that was necessary to secure a gambling license in Las Vegas was an application to the City or County Commissioners. Following 1947 it required, at various times, security checks, background checks, construction of at least a third of the structure before application could be made, a predetermined amount of capital and numerous additional items.

The application made by the interests connected with the Moulin Rouge came under additional scrutiny. "Some Commission members showed newsmen unsigned letters they had received predicting trouble if a hotel that catered to interracial groups were allowed to operate in Las Vegas. There was no law against such a business.

Hitherto, a kind of "gentleman's agreement" had been in effect between the hotels. There was no law which stated that they either had or did not have to admit Blacks. It was strictly up to them. The hotels had managed to get away with that policy simply through threats of economic reprisals against Blacks who would dare challenge the policy.

LICENSE GRANTED

"The Commission itself did not touch on racial angles during the hearing but Moulin Rouge attorney Thomas Foley declared that the 8,000 colored residents of Las Vegas need a decent place to go." On May 6, 1955, twenty-five years and twenty-one days ago, the Nevada State Tax Commission granted a license to operate to the Moulin Rouge.

The primary share holders in the venture were Alexander Bisno, a Los Angeles investment broker, with 31% and Louis Rubin, a New York restaurateur, with 27%. Joe Louis, who served as an official greeter, had

2% and the remaining 39% was scattered among numerous small investors. Each share had a face value of \$12,000.

George Altman was in charge of Casino Operations and he was assisted by Morry Deitch. Sonny Boswell was General Manager, Merle Longnecker was Security Chief, Jimmy Gay was Head of Personnel, Dave Nussbaum was Head Chef, Pat Patterson was Matre d, E. "Monk" Schaeffer and Johnny Achoff were Pit Bosses, Vern Stone was in charge



GEORGE KIRBI



ANN WELDON

of the day shift, Joe Chiara was Table Boss and Benny Carter was Entertainment Director.

The location of the Hotel was very important. It was not in a white area, nor was it in a black area. It was on West Bonanza Road, which was a kind of line of demarcation between the two. Beyond Bonanza, to the north, there were no paved streets. The city had not seen fit to make those kinds of standard improvements in the Black

community in spite of the

fact that the residents were taxpayers.

HOTEL OPENING

The opening of the Moulin Rouge Hotel in 1955 was a most important event. This was true not only for Las Vegas, but for the entire nation. It was the first major hotel in the United States to be interracial and everyone was anxious to see if this "experiment" would work.

The Commission had been told by Thomas Foley that "the hotel & author of a book titled *Its Good To Be Black*, had been a credit to Las Vegas and the State of Nevada". Some people, however, predicted trouble. Some even begged for it.

The year that the Moulin Rouge opened its doors found numerous celebrities appearing at local hotels. Liberace and the Treniers were at the Riviera, the New Frontier had Carmen Miranda and the Mary Kay Trio, the Sands headlined the Delta Rhythm Boys and Freddie Bell, Louie Prima and Keeley Smith were at the Sahara along with Billy Ward and the Dominoes and the Ink Spots and Joe E. Leonard were also appearing.

All across town there were some black entertainers and the practice of not providing accommodations for them continued, except in rare cases. They generally had to fend for themselves. The opening of the Moulin Rouge provided them a place to stay other than in private homes on the Westside.

GOOD OL' DAYS

In 1955 five pounds of Idaho potatoes cost 29¢, a twelve oz. tin of Treet could be had for 35¢, Hormel Bacon was going for 39¢ a pound, ground beef was five pounds for 99¢ and catsup was spelled "Ketchup". On The Waterfront, The Caine Mutiny and The Bridges at Toko Ri were being shown in movie houses, and young men were being

shown how to be men. The newly born television generation was viewing "Kukla, Fran and Ollie", "Rin Tin Tin", "Superman" and "Smiling Ed". Everything was that which some refer to as the "good ol' days." For Blacks in Las Vegas, as in the remainder of the country, the "good ol' days" were merely days like all others — a constant war for acceptance.

Two and a half weeks before its opening, Mrs. Rudy B. Goodwin, California's Mother of the Year & author of a book titled *Its Good To Be Black*, had been a guest speaker at a local Black lodge. Her topic had been "A Challenging New Frontier". She spoke of the gains Blacks had made in just ninety years since slavery in spite of the obstacles they had had to overcome. The talk was well received.

Less than three weeks later on opening night at the Moulin Rouge, the impact of her comments could be seen in the composition of the patrons. Everybody was not there.

JIM CROW OPERATION

Most Black people around the country, who had the inclination and the wherewithal, did not have the disposition for coming. Most refused to travel, even from Southern California, merely to participate in what they viewed as a "Jim Crow" operation. They felt that if they were not good enough for the likes of the Sands, Sahara, El Rancho, Flamingo, Nugget and others, that they would not degrade themselves by consciously and actively participating in the venture of the Moulin Rouge.

Local Blacks had no such attitudes, nor did a surprisingly large number of local whites. There were reporters there from all the major news services and magazines. Joe Louis greeted everyone cordially. Pat Patterson had already said that everyone would be treated

like a "king or a queen." Clarence Robinson had what was described not only as the "largest chorus line" in Las Vegas, but also as "twenty-five of the most beautiful dancers in the land" comprising the Tropi Can-Can Revue with Ann Weldon being the featured vocalist.

Add to those ingredients the Wild Bill Davis singers, Ahmad Jamal Trio oozing out truly great jazz, and Stump and Stumpy with their comedic antics, and it becomes progressively easy to understand why the least complimentary compliment the Moulin Rouge received following its opening night was "Moulin Rouge is New Gem in Vegas Treasure Chest."

Another writer reported that "the newest hotel is truly beautiful and a surprise for all the doubting Thomases. The local folks are turning out in droves. Congratulations, Moulin Rouge, you make Las Vegas look good."

INTERRACIAL

Yet another had this to say, "The keynote of the Moulin Rouge, of course, is that it's interracial — open to people of all races. The owners are deserving of orchids for the magnificent job they accomplished in introducing a new and pleasant atmosphere to the resort world." Still another said, "Joe Louis' Moulin Rouge last night became the newest discovery in the billion dollar bonanza known as Las Vegas, Nevada."

George Altman, captain of the ship, said that he felt "that the staff I have is one of the best in Nevada. I feel sure that each of these men will do their utmost to make the Moulin Rouge an excellent example of good management and better understanding, not only in the casino but in every phase of our operation." And how!

By 3:00 a.m. there was standing room only throughout. Entertainers from other hotels, both black and white, were there. Las Vegas had not witnessed anything of this magnitude in its short history. All bets were covered and all tables were filled. Onlookers did not know, from one moment to the next, which famous person would be entertaining them. They were all there. A carnival-like atmosphere was in evidence and it just went on and on and on.

Except for someone who fell into the pool, the night was incident free. The reportage furnishes no references of anyone being raped, robbed, roused, rancorous, recalcitrant, remiss, removed, reluctant to relax, reneging on a bet or of being a racist.

Those who were there were not surprised. They had known all along that people of different colors are people just the same. Those who waited for "all hell to break loose" are yet waiting and wondering "what happened to the switchblades?"

For the remainder of the 1950's Las Vegas experienced tremendous changes cosmetically. It would not be until the 1960's that the "old order" would come to an end. But, thanks to that night, May 24, 1955, for the first time in sixteen years, Blacks and whites could sit at the same bar and "order whatever they wanted" and pay for "whatever they got".

JOE LOUIS

FROM TOMORROW ON NOBODY GOES TO SLEEP EARLY IN LAS VEGAS! EVERYBODY GOES TO THE MAGNIFICENT NEW Moulin Rouge LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

