

LAS VEGAS: AT HALF CENTURY



Nevada Gaming 1931-1981

Las Vegas Gunnery Became Nellis AFB

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

It seems that everybody eventually comes to Las Vegas. For most, it has only been a place to visit. I guess we're lucky that way. It just wouldn't do if everybody in the world lived here—we would really have a hard time concentrating on football at the Silver Bowl,

when the wind shifts.

While conditions in the U.S. were shifting toward a civil rights movement during the latter 1940s and early 1950s, the reputation of Las Vegas was shifting to both national and international arenas.

A few months ago the item which has

dominated the news had to do with the hostage situation in Iran. The situation was at least partially created by the relationship which had existed between the Shah and the United States. That relationship had spanned more than a quarter of a century. During the month of November, 1949, Mohamed Rez Shah Phalevi was vacationing

in Las Vegas. Young, handsome and rich—he was the toast of the town. Closely following on his heels was Senator Joe McCarthy with his long list of Communists in the State Department. He created quite a furor with his charges, especially against Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. It appears that Las Vegas always manages to get a piece

of the action.

Las Vegas was not without its share of sentimentality. Thirty-one years ago, it was much easier to effect a name change of a place. What had been the Las Vegas Gunnery School became, on May 20, 1950, Nellis Air Force Base. It was named in honor of Lt. William Nellis who was a graduate of Las Vegas High School and had been a World War II ace. He was shot down over Luxemburg in 1944. Numerous dignitaries turned out for the event and there were the usual military ceremonies.

During that same spring, there was a Grand Jury investigation on what was called voting irregularities on the Westside. The Builders Exchange and Property Owners Association helped spearhead the activities. Tom Hanley, of recent fame in the Al Bramlet case, who was a local labor leader, characterized it as following similar practices of the KKK.

Perhaps the single most telling event which epitomized the quality of life of Black people in the United States, took place in North Carolina. Dr. Charles Drew, who developed a method of storing blood plasma and who had been a major officer of the Red Cross, was seriously injured in an automobile accident. While his injuries were severe, they were not, of themselves, fatal. He died, however, because he was not permitted to enter the nearest hospital—it was for white people only. The time lapse involved in his being taken to a hospital for "colored" did much to bring about his demise.

Thirty years ago, the first atomic bomb was detonated at Yucca Flat—a bare 65 miles from Las Vegas. The fir-

st major incidence of racial equality, in the history of Nevada, occurred that day. The radiation did not discriminate and, fortunately because of discriminatory practices, there were not many Black people employed at the test site and therefore, not too many Black people were exposed to the harmful radiation. I suppose there really is something good in everything.

The activity of the AEC, at Yucca Flat, caught Las Vegas off guard. They were concerned about it but it was not wise to complain. McCarthy had already convinced the

Louise Whipple, also of Hiko, simply thought that it was patriotic—she never complained.

The detonations were frequent and they were usually during the early morning hours. "Wow". "Beautiful". "How pretty". "Look at that". "Looka yonder, looka here". Those and other such expressions were commonly heard on rooftops and at Mount Charleston, where locals went to view the explosions, each and every time a bomb went off. Black people were not among them because to get to the rooftop of one of the hotels, one would need to go through the hotel and Black people

cases. Those cases all culminated with the landmark decision of Brown vs. Board of Education of 1954. The decision was to, in theory anyway, end the "separate but equal" policy of segregation. The reverberations of that decision were to be felt throughout the country—including Las Vegas.

From 1905 through the first year of the 1940s, all children of Las Vegas attended the same schools. While there was segregation it was quite limited and then, only with housing. Most Black people lived between Stewart and Ogden beginning with the block between First and Second streets and progressing, eventually on toward Fifth Street. It was only after Black people were removed from that area and shifted to the "westside", that meaningful segregation in the schools began to occur.

As segregation in housing developed, and

as the Black population of the westside began to increase, Black children began to attend elementary school there and high school with everyone else at Las Vegas High School. The next high school did not appear on the scene until 1955. The schools which Black elementary students attended were not as generously furnished with equipment, texts, libraries and scientific materials needed for elementary science classes. Even after entering the high schools, Black students were not encouraged to take those courses which prepared one for college. Through 1955, the largest percentage of Black students in the graduating classes of Las Vegas High School was less than one percent.

The dropout rate for Black students in the local school system was quite high. It was not because they did not have the disposition for doing their school work but, rather, because

there was not a whole lot waiting for them at the end of the tunnel. How many chances at an opportunity to use a high school education did Black teenagers have during "the good ol' days?" Not many. There are not many more today. Yet we continue to stress education and hope that, sooner or later, we will get a shot at the jobs like everyone else.

By the time Martin Luther King, Jr. was returning to Montgomery to become pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Linda Brown was going to court in Topeka, Kansas and Mattie Ladd, of 1600 North "A" Street, was being named Miss Bronze Las Vegas. King was 24, Linda was 17 and Mattie was a mere fifteen years old. All three took a gamble when they entered their own private contests. All three won. Unbeknownst to either of them, the game was just getting underway and the cards were merely being shuffled.

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Fifty two cards in the deck
A lot of shuffling yet to go
Can you see a one-celled animal
Without a microscope?
The buildings were in disrepair
The books were torn and tattered
Some children didn't study too hard
After all, it had not mattered
Linda, Leroy, Mattie and others
Had greater aspirations
Their hopes, however were dampened
Because of segregation
Right pass their neighborhood school they went
And, they usually travelled by bus
Neither Thurmond, Barnett, Wallace or Faubus
Then, raised any kind of fuss
The children took their cases to court
And there they made their plea
Is this somewhere in the U.S.S.R.?
Or, is it the land of the free?



nation that to speak against the dictates of the government was tantamount to treason. Martha Bardoli Laird, of Twin Springs, recalls that "at no time did they ever warn us". Her son, Martin, later died of Leukemia. Bill Schofield, a Hiko rancher, observed contaminated cattle.

were not permitted to enter. Because the travellers would usually picnic while at Mount Charleston, on those days, Blacks were not to be found there either. Bomb parties and atomic picnics were common. For the first five years of the 1950s, atomic mushrooms captured center stage in the news—with one exception—school integration.

A joker was thrown into the deck of segregation and it was spearheaded by a civil suit which originated with the Brown vs. Board of Education, Briggs vs. Elliot, Davis vs. County School Board and Gebhart vs. Belton

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