

# No Black Businesses In Vegas Until 1930s

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Do you remember those teeming throngs of thirsty taverners who tilted their tankards towards thirsty throats? Well, they managed to accomplish that feat because there was a saloon handy. It was merely a tent affair, but it sufficed. It stood singularly, for the moment, as the only place of business where one could wet one's whistle.

The first businesses to appear in Las Vegas in 1905, were all white owned. They included such enterprises as a bank, a mercantile, hotel, ice house, lumber yard and a few others. The business district developed primarily along Main and Fremont Street. One section, block 16, was set aside as the

saloon district. The few Blacks who lived in Las Vegas were cramped into a small one block area of block 17.

There were no entrepreneurs among them. Those who were there worked for other people. The few self-employed Blacks living in the Las Vegas area were small farmers or ranchers.

There were limited instances of minority involvement in business enterprises. By 1919, there was a Japanese barber and, also, Wong Hau had opened a Chinese restaurant. Blacks were involved, on the fringes, with activities on block 16.

However, by 1920, when

the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, Blacks lost the limited leverage that they had had there.

For the next thirteen years, until the repeal of the

used to have what she called a plantation kitchen on Third Street between Ogden and Stewart." It is reported that she specialized in southern fried chicken and that it was

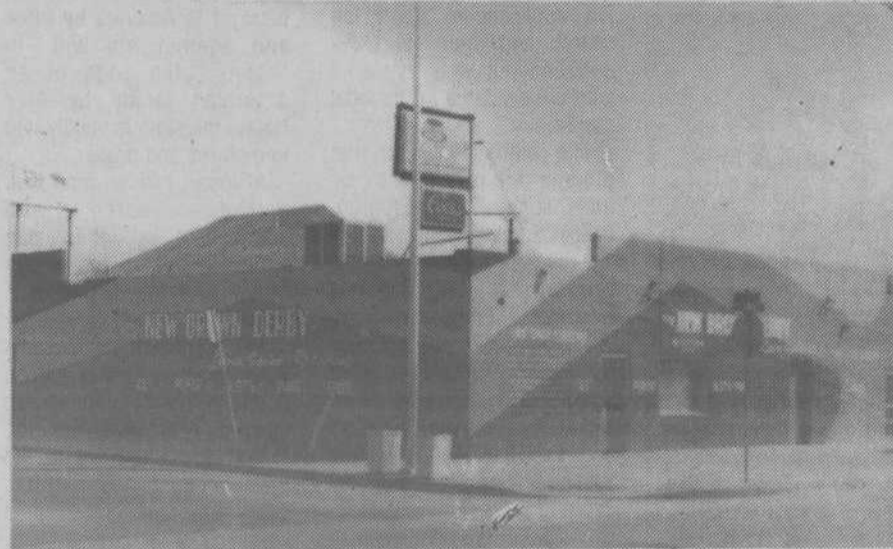
leased a large section of land, for 99 years, on Third St. Other Blacks did the same. Because of the restrictions which had been placed on Blacks in 1909 and

the city fathers turned around 180 degrees. Suddenly, Blacks were no longer wanted in the downtown area. They were systematically removed. Those who had businesses were refused license renewals if they did not move to other locations. One by one they were forced out.

As the 1930s came to a close, the racial atmosphere of Las Vegas changed for the worse. Local public accommodations began to close their doors to Black patronage. Between 1905 and 1940, Blacks could frequent any public places in the city. As that era came to a close, they had to begin to look in other directions to have their needs met.

The beginning of World War II had its impact on Las Vegas in more ways than one. Of immediate concern to us is the rapid influx of Blacks because of BMI and the newly opened nearby military installations. As "old timer" Blacks were forced out of downtown and new comers arrived, a place had to be found for them. That place was the "Westside." Older white residents did not want Blacks in the area. The Westside had not been a black area in 1940, white residents of the Westside sought passage of an ordinance designed to keep Blacks out. The petition was submitted to Mayor Russell and the City Commissioners on February 1, 1940 by the Westside Improvement Association.

R.L. Christensen.



prohibition amendment in 1933, with the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment, the bulk of jobs held by Blacks was either as domestics, porters or rum runners. The latter was illegal and the newspapers of the time were filled with the almost constant flow of arrests of Blacks for their involvements in that enterprise.

The 1930s, did bring about changes in the business activity of Las Vegas and its relationship to Blacks. A large number of Black people had migrated here in hopes of obtaining employment on the dam project. Some few established small businesses in the "negro" district or were involved in other activities. J.R. Johnson had worked as a plasterer for nearly twenty years in Las Vegas before his death in 1932. John T. Cahlan recalls a "Mammy Pinston who

a favorite eating place of a number of people. As the dam got underway and the beginning of the flow of

strictly enforced since then and the city's efforts at keeping them on block 16, the city was anxious that



sightseers got underway A.H. Snead went into the business of selling handouts and brochures which pointed out interesting things to see. As the 1930s wore on, the area between Stewart and Ogden and First and Fifth Streets saw the beginning of numerous Black businesses. Ike and Nancy Pullman

they acquire property in that area.

Once the dam was completed, the sentiments of



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