BLACK ENTERTAINERS IN LAS VEGAS: 1940-1960

In some circles Las Vegas is thought of as the entertainment capital of the world. One Las Vegas newspaper columnist has called it TBCOTA (The Best City of Them All).[1] Whether it is either is debatable and dependent on personal taste. For those who are interested in gambling--high rollers or penny pinchers, fabulous hotels, gourmet dining, spectacular stage productions, or big name entertainers, Las Vegas might well be the entertainment capital of the world. However, it was not always that way.

In 1931, Phil Tobin introduced a Bill in the Nevada assembly to legalize gambling in the state of Nevada.[2] His action was prompted by the effects of the Stock Market crash of 1929 on the state's economy.

> The Depression had put the state's silver industry in a shambers. Silver dropped from 53 cents an ounce in 1929 to 27 cents in 1931. Copper fell from 18 cents to 6 cents a pound. Agriculture suffered a 260 percent decline, brought on by a 1930 drought and then a severe winter. Gov. Fred Balzar and the state lawmakers had no choice but to search for a new silver during that legislative session. Casino gambling was the silver they dug out of the legislative stationary.[3]

Prior to 1931 there were only a handful of games of chance played in the state of Nevada. They were: lowball, stud, draw poker, bridge and 500.

> A day after Gov Fred Balzar placed his signature on the bill legalizing gambling in Nevada. Clark County Sheriff Joe Keate issued the state's first gaming license to the Northern Club. Nevada Gaming License No. 1 was issued March 20, 1931, to Mayme V. Stocker and Joe H. Morgan, a family friend and 10 percent partner.[4]

The Northern Club along with those other establishments which subsequently were licensed on Block Sixteen, the only area of Las Vegas

where gaming establishments were permitted, did not originally discriminate. During those early years of the 1930s, anyone who had a dollar to risk was welcome to do so. Among Las Vegas' population at that time could be found blacks, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Korean Americans and Native Americans. With the exception of the latter group which had resided in the area even before Las Vegas was founded in 1905, the others had been a small part of the population from the early years of the Twentieth Century.[5]

Shortly after the Hoover Dam project got underway, several road houses and saloons appeared on the new highway connecting Las Vegas with the dam site. These places which catered to the dam workers, who, in large part, were southerners, did institute segregationist practices. However, during those years, tourism, a hotel industry and showroom entertainment was not evident in Las Vegas.

As the dam project neared completion, national interest intensified. Many Americans traveled to southern Nevada to get a glimpse of the technological wonder. As the numbers of visitors increased, the need for accommodations grew. The few hotels on Fremont Street and elsewhere were inadequate for such numbers. By 1936, the annual number of tourists had grown to nearly 400,000.[6] A few new hotels opened in the downtown area and zoning changes were initiated in order to make possible the serving of alcohol and allowing gambling in those places. Previously, dating back to 1905, all such activity had been restricted to Block Sixteen which was the "red light" district.

The few black businesses, in the meantime, which had been historically also located in the downtown area, were systematically squeezed out. They were denied license renewals if they did not agree to re-

locate.[7] Not only were they pushed out but there were, essentially, no other places to go. The McWilliams Townsite, which would become the hub of the black population of Las Vegas by the mid 1940s, had a predominantly white population, with a small percentage of Hispanics, which was not receptive of a black population. Their reticence only exacerbated an already deteriorating racial climate which had been initiated earlier by discriminatory hiring practices on the Hoover Dam project.[8]

Following the beginning of the dam project, what had been reasonably good race relations in Las Vegas, metamorphosed into something more closely akin to those found in Mississippi during that era. Interestingly, over the following two decades, many referred to Nevada as the "Mississippi of the west."[9] Manifestations of those changes are found in the beginning of segregation in movie theaters, swimming pools and other public accommodations. Even though they had not been integrated before, even a house off ill repute for the colored trade opened in 1933.[10]

Still, on the surface, owing to their limited number and their reluctance to voice their displeasure at the increasing evidences of discrimination publicly, blacks could come and go as they saw fit and did not experience much in the way of discrimination from "old time" Las Vegans.

> Before 1931 Negroes were welcome in Nevada society. There was no discrimination or segregation. The hardy pioneer was interested only in his fellow man's character and ability--not in his color, race or creed. Then the poor whites from Texas, Louisiana, Florida and other points south moved into the state with their gaming devices and bootlegged money and took over not only the gambling but the social and political life of the state as well.[11]

By the beginning of the 1940s, Las Vegas' gaming halls and saloons were joined by a fledgling hotel industry. The latter catered to a more well-heeled clintele of businessmen and travelers. Entertainment was not the incentive to visit the saloons and gaming establishments. Gambling was the primary attraction and there was little need to use other devices to attract players. Due to the limited number of such places, there was not very much competition for gaming dollars.

In 1941, a southern California businessman opened the first of the lavish resorts on the old California highway to the south of Las Vegas. That highway was an extension of Fifth Street which later became Las Vegas Boulevard or the "Strip". The El Rancho Vegas Hotel was the most modern hotel in Las Vegas. It was built in a ranch style and its motif was western. During its first years of operation the entertainment in its showrooms was all country/western.

The more well known western entertainers appeared not only at El Rancho but at downtown hotels as well. They discovered that not all visitors were interested in gambling and drinking. It was out of this atmosphere that live entertainment began to be viewed as a draw for tourists. During those early years, entertainment was generally viewed as something that the women could do while the men gambled.

Two years following the opening of the El Rancho, the Last Frontier opened farther to the south of the now developing "strip". It was the first place visitors from southern California would see upon their arrival to Las Vegas and the last upon their departure. Partially due to its remoteness, it took on some of the characteristics of a "road house". It was over a mile from the El Rancho and more than five miles from Fremont street. Similarly to the El Rancho, the Last Frontier

also had a western motif and during its first two years, its entertainment was also western. Other establishments, which featured entertainment, generally followed the lead of the El Rancho and the Last Frontier. There were some occasional acts, however, which featured Hollywood movie stars who were multi-talented and they brought song and dance acts to Las Vegas. Their popularity on the silver screen served as an inducement for audiences. However, most places continued with their country/western themes.

A quality of sameness existed in the new hotel industry. They all looked the same, offered the same games of chance and provided similar entertainment. There was little need for tourists to go from one place to another. The one element, of what had become a formula, which could be altered was entertainment. The diversification of that would influence tourist traffic.

In 1944, the El Cortez, on Fremont Street, presented the Deep River Boys. It was the first large hotel with "colored" entertainment.[12] A year later, the Las Frontier introduced Tip Tap Toe, a trio of colored tapdancers.[13] In both instances, those groups performed for several months at those establishments and they played to full houses. During those first years, black entertainers were provided accommodations at many of those places.

There had been at least one other black entertainer in Las Vegas before the Deep River Boys appeared at the El Cortez in 1944. Pearl Bailey, who has been a regular on Las Vegas' entertainment scene for over forty years, first performed in 1941.

> In 1941, during the war, we played at a base (Nellis Air Force Base) in a place called Las Vegas. When you got off the train there was the main street and inside all those places people were throwing dice and playing slot machines, with policemen looking on. None of us had seen anything like it before, and, at that time, other than people who'd been abroad to Monte Carlo,

> other folks in America hadn't seen it either. We went into those spots and played the machines. (How ironic that a few years later "people of race" were barred, though now they're allowed in again.[14]

In 1941 the transition from an integrated community to a segregated community was yet in its infancy. While it is true that it had already manifested itself in some areas of the town, it had not, at that time, permeated the saloons and casinos.

By mid-1940, two new hotels opened on the developing "Strip". The Fabulous Flamingo Hotel and the Thunderbird Hotel brought new life to the area and simultaneously a new atmosphere to southern Nevada. During the early 1940s, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel of "Murder Inc.", visited Las Vegas. He recognized almost immediatedly the possibilities for making big money. "This is a gold min , 'Siegel was saying to Ginny one day, suddenly beginning to envision something really big. The Hell's Kitchen hoodlum was mulling over in his mind a grandiose scheme--building the biggest and finest gambling establishment in the world."[15]

Shortly thereafter, after having met with some of the 'mob' leaders and securing their financial backing, he began to lay the groundwork for building what he would call "The Fabulous Flamingo Hotel." It was located on the south end of the "strip" and became only the third such establishment there. For the times and in comparison to other local establishments, including its neighbors the El Rancho and the Las Frontier, it was a magnificent structure and Siegel wanted to make it rival any hotel in Monte Carlo. Its opening in Late December of 1946 was a new experience for Las Vegas. Other places had had grand openings but none to the extent of Siegal's place. "It was a glittering premier in true Hollywood style, but nothing less could be expected of a $5,600,000 enterprise."[16]

The Fabulous Flamingo catered to a different clientele. While it is true that Siegel had established associations among the acting colony of Hollywood and even some European royality, a large portion of his clientele were associates from back east and the new rich oil tycoons of Texas and Louisiana. His Fabulous Flamingo catered to those groups and those others whom they would tolerate. Both had long harbored social reservations in regards to blacks.[17]

The Flamingo brought a new kind of entertainment to Las Vegas. Not being westerners, the New York bunch brought in entertainment of the sort which was popular in cafe society of New York. Additionally, because one of the favorite past times of New York's elete was to go "slumming" at the Cotton Club of Harlem, they were well aware of black entertainers who performed there and elsewhere. Ginny Hill, who was Siegel's girlfriend, had once owned an interest in the Cotton Club and she did have some imput in determining what acts would perform there.[18] In Las Vegas at the Flamingo Hotel, she would exercise similar responsibilities from behind the scenes.

Siegel ran full page ads for the opening of his new hotel. They not only announced the opening but they also said something of the policies of the new establishment. One ad, for example, read in part:

> The Flamingo has been built for Las Vegas, its people and the visitors that are now being attracted to our doors from all over the world. The Flamingo owners believe in Las Vegas, its future: it realizes the potential possibilities here for the greatest playground in the universe. The entertainment will be assembled from the world's stage, from radio and Hollywood studios.[19] The top bands of the nation will play music for your dancing.

Benjamin Siegel, along with being a gangster, was also a showman. He not only wanted his place to be the most glamorous, he expected the same of his employees. Occassionally, the standards he created for the

latter resulted in embarrassing situations for him and the hotel. Shortly after the opening of the hotel, while surveying his domain, the following episode occurred.

> Bugsy was most fastidious about the help's appearance at the Flamingo. Everyone, and that included even janitors, had to wear a tuxedo. It was a very classy place. One morning on his way across the patio, Siegel spotted a tuxedo-clad man stretched out on a chaise lounge. Bugsy ran over and kicked viciously at the chair. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded. "Get back to work, you bum, before I boot your ass." The man sat up, his eyes popping out of his head. "But-but," he stammered, "I'm a g-g-guest".[20]

Siegel was noted for that kind of behavior. He always carried a pistol to carry out his threats. He realized that most of the other hotel owners did not care for him. They felt that his being a gangster would give Las Vegas a bad name and, in its infancy, they did not think that Las Vegas could overcome that kind of reputation. Siegel went out of his way to at least create the illusion that the Flamingo was a respectable place. He was concerned about who entered the hotel and how they comported themselves. He was not willing to risk anyone making the Flamingo appear to be a dive. He took many precautions to guard against that happening.

> The single-minded Siegel was also determined to run his undertaking with proper decorum. To insure that such propriety was maintained, Bugs hired some of the beffiest musclemen the mob could provide to maintain law and order and to root out any inebriates or troublemakers.[21]

The hotel opened the day after Christmas in 1946. The entertainment for the first two weeks was headlined by Jimmy Durante with Xavier Cugat. On January 8, 1947, Lena Horne replaced Durante. She was the first black entertainer to perform at the Flamingo. Her show ran two weeks. That two week engagement was pivotal in race relations in the Las Vegas community and especially in the entertainment industry. Horne's

first engagement in Las Vegas made lasting impressions on her.

> ...right after the war I made what amounted to a pioneering trek to Las Vegas--pioneering in the sense that I was the first Negro to star in a big club there and pioneering, also, in the sense that I went there right at the beginning of the expansion and glamorization of the big clubs on the strip.
>
> I was playing the Flamingo, sharing the bill with a very famous Latin Band. The leader was a real jerk--very snide when he introduced me, and not rehearsing and not disciplining the band at all. I took it for a couple of days and then called Lennie in California to ask him what to do. I was furious and ready to walk out on the whole thing.
>
> He calmed me down a little and said he would call the manager of the club who was, of course, just the front man for the gents-up-top who really owned it. He made the call all right and told the guy what was happening. They discussed it back and forth for a while and the manager was sort of noncommittal. What did he care?--we were both under contract and business was good. Why should he stir around in the situation?
>
> But then another voice came on the phone and said: 'Don't think any more about it, Mr. Hayton. I didn't know that she was having any trouble, but she will not have any further trouble.'
>
> Lennie didn't recognize the voice, so he said, 'Who's this?'
>
> 'This is Mr. Siegel.'
>
> Lennie thanked him and then called me back. 'Darling, I just want to tell you not to worry. Mr Siegel says he'll take care of everything.'
>
> 'And who the hell is Mr. Siegel?' I said.
>
> 'You know, Bugsy Siegel.'
>
> Well, apparently Mr. Siegel sent a couple of his boys around to see the bandleader and give him a little lecture. At the next show he did not introduce me. One of the men in the band did, and it was a beautiful announcement. After that, the leader made very proper announcements. And I noticed that he and his band, who had been hanging around the club between and after the shows to gamble, were suddenly in a big hurry to pack up and get outside when they finished work. I thought it was pretty funny, watching them scurrying around, being nicer than nice. And I thought there was a kind of rude justice in it, too. Which does not mean I was ever in favor of life in Las Vegas. I continued to go back there--usually to the Sands--for the next decade or so, but I never liked the atmosphere and I have finally quit going there at all. That may be foolish on my part--they pay the best prices of any cabarets in America and one engagement a year there would bring me enough so that I would never have to work in any other clubs.
>
> One time a representative of a rival club in Las Vegas

> visited my manager, Ralph Harris, at some hotel where he was staying. He was carrying a big bulging paper bag. He asked Ralph if there was any way to get me to come to his place. Ralph said he doubted it. Whereupon the guy over-turned the bag and what Ralph guesses must have been about $50,000 in small bills came spilling out.
>
> 'That's for you,' the guy said. 'Just for talking to me.'
>
> Ralph was scrambling all over the room grabbing the money and stuffing it back in the bag and telling the guy 'No, no chance, sorry.' I'd love to have witnessed that scene. In the business we were always considered crazy because we were frequently passing up little opportunities like this.[22]

Lena Horne's pioneering trek to Las Vegas in early 1947 was filled with incidents which caused her discomfort to the extent that she was not "in favor of life in Las Vegas." Not only did she have problems with the band leader but she was not allowed to enter the casino or the use of other public areas of the hotel. Nightclubs and restaurants on the slowly evolving "westside" were not inviting. In 1940 there were no blacks living in that area which was known then as the McWilliams Townsite and was the original site for the location of Las Vegas. The black population of the "westside" did not begin to locate there until after the 1940s had gotten underway. With the opening of the Basic Magnesium Plant in the new settlement of Henderson, Nevada, in excess of 3,000 black people, primarily from the southeastern portion of the United States, migrated to southern Nevada. Due to a shortage of housing at the Basic Townsite, many of the newcomers were obliged to seek shelter elsewhere. Not finding such in Las Vegas, they began to in effect, camp out in downtown Las Vegas and in the McWilliams Townsite.[23] Permanent housing did not begin to appear there until late 1942 and early 1943.[24] Las Vegas was undergoing a metamorphosis in race relations during that time. Some discriminatory practices had gotten underway as early as 1931 with the hiring practices on the Boulder Dam and the appearance of saloons, some owned by southerners, which catered to the

dam workers, many of whom were white southerners.[25] By the mid 1940s, other of the older established businesses initiated policies of segregation.

Horne's visit to Las Vegas in early 1947 was spent almost in isolation. Not allowed in the public areas of the hotel/casino, not wishing to frequent the "dives" on the "westside, finding the movie theaters segregated and having to wonder which of the other places would not discriminate against her, she spent the time when she was not performing in the bungalow provided by the hotel. Even though she did not approve of the racial climate of Las Vegas, she continued to perform there, off and on, until 1966 because, as she said: "They pay the best prices of any cabarets in America."[26]

Concurrent with the circumstances which aided in the development of a black community were steps taken to prohibit it. Before the 1940s got underway, there had been efforts to prevent the encroaching of segregation in Las Vegas. In 1939, a Race and Color Bill, designed to, if not to halt at least to inhibit the spread of segregation, was introduced in the Nevada Assembly. It died without any action being taken.[27] In spite of the fact that Las Vegas' black population was less than 200 and there was no reason to expect any sudden increase of it, those few establishments which had initiated segregationist policies with the arrival of the dam project was cause for concern because they were gradually joined by others. Blacks who lived in the downtown area of Las Vegas or on outlying ranches, found more places with discriminatory practices. Those few black entertainers who performed in Las Vegas hotels during the first years of the 1940s, as stated earlier, had to, of necessity, be provided accomodations at those places.

As an entertainment industry developed in Las Vegas during the 1940s, many blacks were among those who performed on its stages. Arthur Lee Simpkins, who was described as the golden voiced tenor, was at the Last Frontier in November of 1946. Ruth Daye was also on the bill.[28] Langston Nobel and his orchestra opened at that same hotel on November 15, 1946.[29] The Mills Brothers were at the Nevada Biltmore for a two week engagement.[30] In January of 1947, Nick Lucas and the Nicholas Brothers were at the El Rancho Vegas.[31] During that same month, Sister Rosetta Thorpe and Madam Marie Knight appeared at the War Memorial Building where they performed a gospel show.[32] The Four Seasons, who once performed with Bing Crosby and who changed their name to the Charioteers, performed for over a month at the Last Frontier.[33] In February of 1947, three new black groups appeared in Las Vegas. The Will Mastin Trio was at the El Rancho for a two week engagement.[34] The Delta River Boys performed at the Nevada Biltmore where the Mills Brothers had performed earlier.[35] Rounding out the newcomers were the Red Caps who were at the Last Frontier which was one of the more popular night spots at the time.[36]

The McWilliams Townsite or "Westside" as it would come to be called, had become the center of the black population in Clark County by the mid-way mark of the decade. Permanent dewellings had appeared along with a fledgling business community. During the war years, a USO club for "colored" soldiers had opened there along with an array of small night clubs. There was not much interest, on the part of local black residents, to frequent the new hotel/casino industry on Fremont Street and the newly developing "Strip". Owing to their nativity, many did not view the arrival of segregation with alarm. However, those who came from the North and California and those who had lived

in the community before, were distressed. Their numbers, unfortunately, made up only a small percentage of the total black population. They were not alone in their distress and observation of the changes which were underway.

> Las Vegas is troubled over the question of race relations. While colored performers like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong and Arthur Lee Simpkins are most welcome on stage, they are not welcome to stay in the hotels or eat in the dining rooms. And they are expected to sit in the back seats at the theatres. Mayor Cragin has been meeting with our new branch of the NAACP to see what can be done. I don't remember any segregation in the early days, for we all just shared together as pioneers, and I don't know how this has happened here. Perhaps it was the war, for Henderson workers insisted that Colored people live in separate facilities. Many of our Colored population are moving to the Westside.[37]

While this summation of the racial climate of the times is a result of its author's culling through newspaper reports and personal conversations, it does provide a thumbnail sketch of not only the evolution of segregation in Las Vegas but also its effects on the community. Because segregation, discrimination, prejudice and racism are sometimes thought of as interchangeable, a distinction should be made in their application. Evidences of racism can be traced back to the very beginning of Las Vegas. In 1905, the Arizona Club's slogan was; "Every race has its flag but the coon.[38] In 1909 there was a failed attempt to segregate the races in Las Vegas by Walter Bracken who was a local land agent.[39] In 1910, something called a "Darktown Ball" was held in Las Vegas.[40] "Darkie" jokes appeared in local newspapers as recently as 1921.[41] The local Elks Club staged a Minstrel Show in 1921.[42] Asians were excluded on the Boulder Dam project and blacks were discriminated in the hiring on that project until mid-1932 and not permitted to live in the Federal town at Boulder City.[43]

While each of the aforementioned manifested racism, prejudice or discrimination, measurable segregation in Las Vegas did not become noticeable until the late 1930s or widespread until the mid-1940s.

Pearl Bailey who had first visited an integrated Las Vegas in 1941, returned to perform at the Flamingo Hotel during the latter part of 1947. Unlike Lena Horne who had been provided a bungalow, she had to secure housing in the newly developing black community called the "westside". Between January and October of that year, the accomodation policy for black entertainers at the Flamingo Hotel changed. As Bailey's testimony of twenty-one years later illustrates, not only was she not provided accomodations at the hotel but she also manifested some fear of the "mob" influences in Las Vegas during that time.

> I was booked into the Flamingo Hotel, and at that time only Lena Horne and Arthur Lee Simpkins of the brown race had worked there. There were only two other places then; El Rancho and the Last Frontier. The town was so elegant you couldn't imagine, and nothing like it existed in our country. Vegas yet has to be matched for glitter.
>
> I always set up my dressing room the night before I open, even if I have to wait until three or four in the morning to do it. It makes it not seem too new to me the next day. (And for the last six years, I've rehearsed with the band the day before, for the same reason.) So, as usual, I put a tablecloth on the dressing table to make it a bit nicer.
>
> Having set everything just right, I came in the next night ready for action. And wow! It looked like a magician had been in and done a magic trick: makeup and everything were topsy-turvy. I sent for the backstage manager and asked the reason for it. He said, 'we had to take the tablecloth, as Mr. Siegel wants everything accounted for.' I asked for another, got it, and, bless my soul, the next night the same thing happened. They removed it again. Holy mackerel! Was this going to go on for three weeks? I sent again for the backstage man, and once again he gave me the bit about Mr. Siegel. So I asked him if I could talk to Mr. S. When I came off after the show, a young dapper, and handsome man was standing by the dressing-room door. Not expecting any visitor, I nodded and started into the room. But he spoke to me. 'Did you want to see me? I'm Mr. Siegel.'
>
> 'Ah! Yes, you can help me, sir.' I went into a big explanation of what I wanted: a simple tablecloth. Being a user

> of my hands, I was now tapping him on the shoulder and pointing a bony finger in his stomach getting my point across. Whatever struck me, I'll never know, but I remembered having read this man's name (I am a thorough newspaper reader, want ads and all). 'Are you Gugsy Siegel?' Suddenly I knew it--this was one of the biggest men in the underworld.
>
> He replied, 'My friends call me Benjamin, my enemies 'Bugsy.'
>
> Now you know I had no intentions of being this boy's enemy. I thought it better to be friendly! He never moved but asked me, 'Is there anything else you'd like?'
>
> Well, for some reason, it flashed through my mind how every night, going home, I'd pass a car lot, and at that time the Roadmaster Buick was the thing. I couldn't even drive a bicycle, but I wanted that car, so I told him about one I'd seen. Even if that hadn't been my desire, I was so nervous I could only figure, 'Keep talking, Pearl, keep talking about anything.'
>
> The tablecloths were piled high as my head the next show, and the following morning on the westside, in front of Mrs. Harrison's house, where I lived, sat that pretty red car. Seems as though he knew these men at the lot, called them, and said that I'd give the down payment before I finished the engagement.[44]

Clearly, in 1968, Pearl Bailey, a frequent Las Vegas performer and not anxious to appear militant, downplayed the conditions she experienced in Las Vegas during those earlier years. Others, whose livelihood were not dependent on the hotel industry had less reason to be cautious.

> Las Vegas, or 'Lost Wages,' as it's known in Westside, is off limits to all Negroes--except entertainers and janitors. This holds for the plushest Strip casinos and the tiniest dives in Glitter Gulch. A negro cannot rent a room, buy a sandwich, order a drink, or even drop a nickel in a slot machine.[45]

Before Las Vegas became a tourist mecca, such practices were all but unknown. Black residents had little recourse as, at that time, the hotels were their primary source of employment and there was the fear of economic reprisals with which they had been accustomed to in the south. National racial practices also had an impact due to hotel owners and visitors alike bringing their prejudices with them.

> When the eastern and northern gangsters arrived they were quick to protect the status quo. They didn't want any Nigrahs upsetting their high rolling southern gentlemen, who had more oil well than the gangsters had slot machines. And besides, many of the mobsters had been brought up in teeming slums where they had rumbled against the colored gangs and they had not forgotten their own prejudice and hatred.[46]

The discrimination which black entertainers encountered in Las Vegas was not new to them. Throughout the United States they found similar problems not only at the places where those performances were done but even in getting to them. Louis Armstrong recalls what life on the road was like.

> It was tough traveling through the south in those days. We had two white guys with--the bus driver and Joe Glaser. If you had a colored bus driver back then, they'd lock him up in every little country town for speeding! It was very rough finding a place to sleep in the South. You couldn't get into the hotels for white and the colored didn't have any hotels. You rented places in private homes, boarding houses and whore-houses. The food was awful and we tried to find places where we could cook. We carried a bunch of pots and pans around with us.[47]

The northwest was little different. Seemingly, some form of segregation existed in most places. The Will Mastin Trio found Spokane, Washington to be the same as Cab Calloway found New Orleans. Sammy Davis, Jr. was the star attraction with the Trio and he remembers one stint in Spokane:

> My father came into the dressing room and flopped onto a chair. 'Well, I covered every street downtown. Nothing!' He started taking off his shoes, rubbing his feet. 'Tomorrow I'll go back over to Mrs. Clarks and see if she's expecting anything to open up. Meantime, guess we'll have to sleep in here.'
>
> Will asked, 'You mean there's nothing in the whole city of Spokane?'
>
> 'There ain't that many colored rooming houses to start with.'
>
> 'What about a hotel?'
>
> 'Ain't a single colored hotel around!'
>
> Colored side of town? Colored rooming-house, Colored hotels? Colored, colored, colored.[48]

What the Will Mastin Trio encountered in Spokane, they also found in Las Vegas. After finishing an engagement in Seattle, which was no different, they learned of their being booked in Las Vegas.

> Will said, 'we're booked as the opening act at El Rancho Vegas in Las Vegas, Nevada, for five hundred dollars a week.' The trade papers were bursting with news about Las Vegas. It was starting to become a show town. El Rancho and the Last Frontier were the first luxury hotels and there was talk about new hotels being planned to go up near them.[49]

While Davis does not provide a date for this first engagement in Las Vegas, because reference is made only to the El Rancho and the Last Frontier hotels and because the Flamingo opened in 1946, the arrival of the Trio to Las Vegas preceeded that date. Davis' recollection of that first visit to Las Vegas is indeed revealing.

> I looked around backstage while we waited to rehearse. The band was the biggest we'd ever worked with, the floor of the stage was springy and slick, the lighting was the most modern I'd ever seen. I was standing next to the stage manager, I asked, 'Do you have it right about our rooms, that they're part of our deal here?'
>
> The manager came over to us as we finished rehearsing. 'Sorry. We can't let you have rooms here. House rules. You'll have to find a place in the--uh, on the other side of town.'
>
> I picked up our suitcases, 'let's go Dad, Will.'
>
> The hotels we'd passed in the town itself looked awful compared to El Rancho but even they were out of bounds to us. The cab driver said, 'There's a woman name of Cartwright over in Westside takes in you people.'
>
> It was Tobacco Road. A three or four year-old baby, naked, was standing in front of a shack made of wooden crates and cardboard that was unfit for human life. None of us spoke.
>
> The driver sounded almost embarrassed. 'Guess y'can't say a lot for housing out here. Been hardly any call for labor round these parts. Just a handful of porters and dishwashers they use over on the Strip. Not much cause for you people t'come to Vegas.'
>
> The cab stopped in front of one of the few decent houses. A woman was standing in the doorway. 'Come right in, folks. You boys with one of the shows? Well, I got three nice rooms for you.'
>
> When she told us the price Will almost choked. 'But that's probably twice what it would cost at El Rancho Vegas.'
>
> 'Then why don't you go live at El Rancho Vegas?'

'Pay her the money, Massy. It's not important.'
Will counted out the first week's rent. My father smiled sardonically at her. 'Looks like if the ofays don't get us, then our own will.'
'Business is business. I've got my own troubles.'[50]

By the time the Will Mastin Trio arrived to Las Vegas, the change segregation was well underway. Many of the other businesses had intiated such policies. Among them were some of the downtown movie houses as Davis learned when a sign which proclaimed; "Coloreds sit in the last three rows" was pointed out to him by a policeman.[51] Had he known, there were other movie houses in Las Vegas and there was at least one which did not discriminate. "The new Fremont Theatre is giving first class hospitality to its guests throughout the auditorium on both floors. So keep up your first class appearance and behavior which is indeed a pathmaker of the West."[52]

The 1940s wound down on a positive racial note on the national level. In 1947 Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to play baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers. As the first black in the major leagues, Robinson underwent not only the usual spring training but also conditioning for the possible negative racial reprecussions which he might face.[53] The following year, President Harry Truman signed an Executive Order which integrated the armed services.[54] There was also a series of Supreme Court decisions having to do with racial matters which improved the quality of life for Black Americans. Las Vegas, however, even as the nation moved toward becoming more integrated, continued on its path of segregation.

The 1950s marked the beginning of major hotel expansion in Las Vegas. Eleven new hotel opened during that decade with eight being on the newly developing Las Vegas Strip. As more hotels opened, the

BLACK ENTERTAINERS IN LAS VEGAS:

THE ERA OF SEGREGATION 1940-1960

Introduction:

In December of 1955, Rosa Parks refused to relinquish a seat on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus when she was so ordered by the driver. The seat was to be made available for a white passenger. That simple act of defiance ignited what was to become the civil rights movement of mid-twentieth century America.[1]

A year and a half earlier, in May of 1954, the United States Supreme Court had ruled in the Brown vs. Board of Education decision that the schools of America were to be integrated "with all deliberate speed".[2] Those two events served to spearhead the most dramatic social revolution the country had experienced since the American Civil War.

That social movement got underway a half-dozen years before I was born. Between that time and my adolescence, numerous changes had occurred. Most were positive but some were not. Among the former were such things as school integration, voting rights for minorities, open housing and equal employment opportunities. Among the latter were the murders of civil rights activists, the assassinations of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King and Presidential aspirant Senator Robert Kennedy.[3]

As a child I recall hearing my parents and relatives speak of a "civil rights" movement. I did not understand what they spoke of but, more than that, I was not interested. All of those events had occurred before I reached an age of consciousness. To me, at that time, those events all fell within the realm of ancient history. Additionally, social conditions had changed to the extent that I actually had no reason to believe that the conditions which they described were really accurate.

It was not until half-way through my undergraduate matriculation that I became aware of the social implications of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s while enrolled in an Ethnic Studies class. It was out of that experience that an interest was conceived and questions about the far-reaching ramifications of segregation evolved.

The purpose of this paper is to seek an answer to one of those questions: how did black people function under such a system? More specifically, how did black entertainers in the United States go about pursuing their careers under such conditions? Considering that the whole meaning of segregation had to do with keeping the races separated it would seem almost impossible that black entertainers would indeed be permitted to entertain white audiences. During the spring of 1983 I watched a film titled "The Lady in the Lincoln Memorial". It was about the professional life of the singer Marian Anderson. The film depicted the kinds of social problems she encountered during the early years of her career. There were places where she performed where she had a great deal of difficulty obtaining accomodations because of racial restrictions and discrimination in the hotels. In New York and in Philadelphia she found that she was required to live far away from the concert halls where she performed because no major hotel would rent her a room. She found, once she left the United States and went on a European tour, that the only place where she found such discrimination was is Nazi Germany. My reaction to seeing that was that the United States was apparently no better, as far as black people were concerned, than Nazi Germany. Upon her return to the States she was to do a concert at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The Daughters of the American Revolution denied her access to the Hall. The concert was performed, instead, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in

Washington, D.C.[4]

Realizing that such could occur in the "city of brotherly love", I began to wonder, because I was at that time living in Las Vegas, what conditions would she have found in Las Vegas during the 1940s. She never performed in Las Vegas but other black entertainers did. So, the ultimate question which I hope to answer with this paper is: How did black entertainers in Las Vegas manage during the era of segregation?

Because I know that segregation existed in Las Vegas for a very limited period of time--1940-1960, I will restrict my efforts primarily to those years. To give this project cohesiveness, I will write about the history of Las Vegas for those years and therein describe the life styles of blacks in Las Vegas for that period.

BLACK ENTERTAINERS IN LAS VEGAS:
THE ERA OF SEGREGATION 1940-1960

ROOSEVELT FITZGERALD

In some circles Las Vegas is thought of as the entertainment capitol of the world. One Las Vegas newspaper columnist calls it TBCOTA (The Best City of Them All).[5] Whether it is actually either of the two might be debatable depending on one's own personal tastes. For those who are interested in gambling--high rollers or penny pinchers, fabulous hotels, spectacular stage productions, gourmet dining, buck ninity-nine buffets or big name entertainers, Las Vegas might well be the entertainment capitol of the world. However,it was not always that way.

Las Vegas' beginning was not an Earth shattering event. In 1905 an auction was held in which lots for the new town were sold.[6] There were several hundred people on hand who had been brought in by train on tracks which had only been laid the year before.[7] There were a few tents set up to offer some respite from the intense heat and the closest thing to a saloon was a structure with a wooden floor and planks rising for four feet around the sides with a canvas tent attached to the top.[8]

Among the throngs in attendance there were some racial minorities. There was one black man who was part of the maintenance crew with the railroad. Additionally, in that same capacity, there were Mexicans and Chinese. Others of the latter two groups, who were not affiliated with the railroad, were also there. Paiute Indians, who had lived in the area for years, stood solemnly by as the land--their land, was being auctioned. In spite of such racial diversities, there were no racial incidents reported and all those who had come to bid on the lots being auctioned were able to do so with no restrictions. A result of this is

that in early Las Vegas there was no racial restrictions in housing.[9]

Over the next twenty-five years there were only two instances in which anything which even remotely resembled racial problems occurred. The first was during the summer of 1910 following the Johnson/Jeffries heavyweight fight in Reno, Nevada.[10] Some few disgruntled Jeffries supporters spent several days terrorizing blacks not only in Nevada but in other parts of the country as well.[11] The second took place during the 1920s at a time when there was a resurgence of Klu Klux Klan activity throughout the United States. Klaverns were established in Nevada and in 1924 there was a Klan parade on Fremont Street of Las Vegas.[12] Such activity was short lived due in part to the fact that there were so few blacks in the state and also because of the "wild west" atmosphere which still prevailed.

For the most part, Las Vegas settled in to be just a small dusty town in the middle of the desert which served as a forwarding station for mining districts to the north around Rhyolite and Beatty, Nevada and to the south in Eldorado Canyon. Of course it continued to serve as a maintenance depot for the railroad.[13]

During that quarter of a century there were a handful of small hotels, restaurants and saloons but there were no casinos. The population had grown to just over 5,000 by 1930 with most of the work force being involved in either mining, ranching and building trades.[14] Some gambling did take place but it was not an organized effort. The back rooms of saloons were generally where such activity could be found. Following the adoption of the Volstead Act (Prohibition--18th Amendment) of 1919, even saloons were hidden away in back, not so readily accessible, rooms.

Everyone circumvented the laws. It was a kind of game. Nevadans had done so for years with the "illegal" gambling and, beginning in 1919 they did the same with prohibition. There were a number of illegal stills stashed away in the mountains and deserts surrounding the town. Everyone, for miles, could see the bootleggers bringing their manufacture into town. Their trails were illuminated by the spiralling columns of dust their vehicles generated.[15]

The decade of the 1930s was pivotal in Las Vegas' history. The depression had officially started the year before in late October of 1929. Beginning in 1914 efforts had been made to generate support for the construction of a dam on the Colorado River.[16] Those efforts finally bore fruit in 1929 with the Swing-Johnson Bill which not only approved the construction of a dam but also appropriated the necessary funds for doing so.[17]

The depression pulled the rug out from under employment in the entire country. When the news of a possible large federal project on the Colorado River went out, people from throughout America were attracted to Las Vegas.[18] What had been a small, quiet town where everyone knew each other suddenly evolved into a town filled with strangers who brought along with them whatever social mores they had been nurtured by in whatever places they came from. Among those mores were certain social/racial reservations and prejudices.

Las Vegas was not prepared for the great influx of people who began to arrive there in 1930. Many of the newcomers lived in their cars or in other kinds of make-shift shelters. Over thirty thousand arrived and more than forty-two thousand sent letters of inquiry concerning job opportunities on the dam site. As a work force which ultimately averaged over 5,500

was being assembled, Phil Tobin was introducing a Bill in the Nevada Legislature to legalize gambling.[18] It was not a friviously made motion.

> The depression had put the state's silver industry in a shambers. Silver dropped from 53 cents an ounce in 1929 to 27 cents in 1931. Copper fell from 18 cents to 6 cents a pound. Agriculture suffered a 260 percent decline, brought on by a 1930 drought and then a severe winter. Gov. Fred Balzar and the state lawmakers had no choice but to search for a new silver during that legislative session. Casino gambling was the silver they dug out of the legislative stationary.[19]

Prior to 1931 there were only a handful of games of chance played in the state of Nevada. They were: lowball, stud, draw poker, bridge and 500. "A day after Gov. Fred Balzar placed his signature on the bill legalizing gambling in Nevada, Clark County Sheriff Joe Keate issued the state's first gaming license to the Northern Club. Nevada Gaming License No. 1 was issued March 20, 1931, to Mayme V. Stocker and Joe H. Morgan, a family friend and 10 percent partner."[20]

The Northern Club along with those other establishments which subsequently were licensed did not discriminate. For the remainder of the 1930s, anyone who had a coin to risk were welcome to do so. For the first two years following the approval of legalized gaming, there was still a prohibition on alcoholic beverages. However, in 1933 the prohibition Amendment was repealed with the passage of the 21st Amendment.[21]

Las Vegas of the 1930s once again resembled a boom town of the old west. Tent cities sprang up and the crime rate spiralled. Most of those offenses were bulgularies, petty larcenies and vagrancy.[22] Along with those apparitions, a new social problem appeared. Blacks, who were hopeful of gaining employment on the dam project were denied jobs for the first two years of its construction. Although the reason given was that they did not have experience, few others did either. The problem was outright

discrimination.

We can get some understanding of the general perception of the work force on the dam project from an editorial which appeared in a local newspaper describing both the project and the workers.

> When the Hoover Dam has been completed, an average number of nearly 4,000 employees will have rolled up the stupendous number of 71,500,000 man-days worked by the typical dam worker of 37 years of age, white, American born, and representing every state in the union.[23]

Efforts by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People focused some attention on the hiring situation at the Project. William Pickins, Field Secretary of the NAACP, investigated on more than one occasion.[24] Little came of those investigations. The president of the Six Companies, the name of the company which was building the dam, said that he "had never heard of any refusal to employ colored people and that he would take the matter up immediately on his return to Boulder City, and see that provision was made for their employment on the work when and if they had the necessary experience".[25]

One of the white men who worked on the project had this to say about his background in construction before coming to Nevada:

> I came to Nevada in 1931 from Missouri. I was looking for work just like everybody else. At that time people were living in tents out here at the dam. I went out there and went to work. I had never done this kind of work before. From what I could see nobody had. We just learned as we went along. When I started off they were still digging the tunnels. I worked there for a while. After that I became a high-scaler and that's what I did until I retired in 1974.[26]

Clearly there is room for doubting the veracity of the president of the company considering the above statement. Similar comments are made by others who yet reside in Las Vegas and in Boulder City who are members of the '31ers Club.

It would take almost two years from the time that the first shovel of dirt was lifted at the dam project before the first blacks would be hired. In July of 1932 the first ten blacks were hired on the project.[27] Their numbers varied over the next four years of the construction between a high of 65 and a low of 10.[28] Throughout that period, they were not well received by either the company or by the white workers. The seeds for future racial antagonisms were being sown.

When the construction of the dam was completed, most of those who had come for employment and worked on the project went on to work on similar projects down the Colorado River or up to the northwest to the Grand Coulee Dam. Las Vegas returned to its former solemn lifestyle.

The great majority of the white workers who had brought their prejudices here and had acted them out departed. The memories lingered on. Black permanent residents and those few others who came here to work and who remained, had been shown a different view of their white friends and neighbors. Their numbers were so small, however, that they did not voice their consternation.

The depression was coming to a close. The dam was heralded as one of the Wonders of the World and a local publicist predicted that it would become a major tourist attraction and that people from all over the country would come here to see the Great Boulder Dam.[29] He was not wrong.

It started as a mere trickle but its volume grew and grew. As the number of visitors increased, the need for accomodations for them became more and more apparent. There were a few small hotels on Fremont Street but they did not have nearly enough rooms to accomodate the influx. The competition among visitors for those few rooms which were available enabled inn keepers to elevate their tariffs. It also caused them to begin to consider expansion of their hotels. Others opened new hotels.

Las Vegas' population stood at just over 7,000. There were less than 200 blacks here at that time. The lifestyles of all were affected by the new tourism. Blacks who had entertained difficulty obtaining jobs on the dam site were now finding jobs as maids, porters and bartenders in the hotels and saloons. All of these were service jobs and, for those years, blacks were yet stereotyped to fit them. It should also be noted that the salaries for those jobs were relatively low. Local whites assumed the better paying jobs. This phenomenon also impacted on the black population. As more white people, including women who became waitresses and such, left home to go to work in the new hotel/casino industry, a need for babysitters, housekeepers/cleaners and yardmen grew. On the surface these might appear to be menial jobs and indeed they were, the basic fact, however, is that black people and others were going to work. The depression was coming to a close.

Entreprenuers of all sorts began to become aware of the business possibilities for Las Vegas. Steps were taken to rezone the downtown area. Some businesses which either did not or could not cater to the tourist were systematically driven out by not renewing business licenses. This was particularly true for those few black owned businesses. While each case was separate, each black business owner had to anticipate being told to leave. The cosmetic of Fremont Street was slowly changing.

Dating all the way back to its beginning, Las Vegas had set aside one block for all of the saloons and bordellos--Block 16 was the "red light" district. With gambling and drinking becoming legally recognized, it became increasingly difficult to restrict those places which provided them. Zoning laws were changed and all of Fremont Street was opened for businesses which did cater to the new trade.

For the two years following the completion of the Dam project, Las Vegas made definite moves towards developing a tourist trade. Events in Europe would have negative impacts on that effort. At about the same time that Adolph Hitler's panzers were blitzing Poland, a Race and Color Bill was being introduced in the Nevada Legislature. The bill was introduced by a delegation from Clark County (Las Vegas).[30] It was designed to make it illegal to prevent blacks access to hotels and other public accomodations. 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.[31]

As has been stated, Las Vegas had experienced very little, if any, racial problems during its early history. The first evidences had been during the hiring on the dam project. Those efforts to drive small businesses from the downtown area, especially black-owned businesses, marked the first of a sustained drive towards segregating Las Vegas.

Black businesses were denied license renewals if they did not agree to relocate. Not only were they being pushed out but there was no where else to go. The McWilliams Townsite had experienced some limited growth but it was still undeveloped and, additionally, those who lived there were not happy about the prospect of "colored" people moving in. Even though there were less than 200 blacks living in Las Vegas at the time, they were beginning to experience economic discrimination and segregation.[32]

At about that same time, the local movie houses initiated segregation policies. Blacks were restricted either to the balconies or to designated other downstairs areas. Public swimming pools were being placed off limits and, finally, they were denied entry to the houses of "ill repute".[33]

Still, on the surface, blacks would come and go as they saw fit. Their limited numbers possibly caused them not to voice their displeasure at the increasing evidences of discrimination publicly. Also, before any serious damage could be done, the United States entered World War II. That interrupted the growing tourist trade due to the rationing of not only gasoline but also building materials needed for the construction of new hotels but now needed for the war effort.

Numerous military bases were established in the California and Arizona deserts not too far from Las Vegas. Thousands of soldiers were stationed at those bases. As was the practice of the time, those military units were segregated. Soldiers, on weekend passes, who came to Las Vegas were expected to go to segregated establishments. There were no "colored" places, to speak of, in Las Vegas in 1940. They did begin to evolve. The McWilliams Townsite became the area where black Las Vegans were driven.

As those events were beginning to take place there was yet another major development for southern Nevada--the opening of the Basic Magnesium Corporation in Henderson, Nevada. The plant brought over 13,000 new citizens to the state. Henderson would become the largest town in that part of the state and Las Vegans did not cherish the thought of losing their position of being the largest community in southern Nevada. After much haggling, it was decided that those units constructed to house the workers in Henderson would be dismantled once the project would be completed. Further, there was not enough housing constructed in Henderson to accomodate all of the workers. Additional housing was built in Las Vegas in an area called Huntridge. Only white people were permitted to live in that development.

In Henderson segregated housing was the order of the day. Those few blacks, less than 1,000, who did manage to find accomodations lived in an area called "Carver Park". White workers were assigned to Victory Village on the opposite side of the highway. Others of the latter group found some relief in a trailer park set up just down the highway.

Blacks, on the other hand, unable to find housing in Las Vegas, denied access to Huntridge and not having a representative number of housing units assigned them at the worksite in Henderson ended up going to the McWilliams Townsite. There were few houses there at the time and they were inhabited. The new arrivals were forced to live in cars, lean-tos, makeshift housing and whatever else they could find. More than 3,000 blacks lived under those conditions in the McWilliams Townsite.

The majority of the new black population were southerners from the states of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. The same was true of the white workers. The former did not pay much attention to the acts of discrimination and segregation. They had lived under such conditions all of their lives. Further, they sensed somehow that they were actually better off. They were in at least two categories. Economically it was true because they were now earning as much as $1.49 an hour and "back home" they would have been lucky to have earned that much a day. Politically there were significant improvements. In the South they had been denied the right to vote. In Nevada they were permitted to vote for the first time in their lives. In more ways than not their quality of life had improved 200%.

Blacks found little respite on the job site. It was characterized by segregation. There were white and there were black crews. There were

white job categories and there were black job categories. There were even white water fountains and latrines and blacks had theirs. The plant at Henderson, Nevada mimicked the social/racial practices of the South.[36]

> Before 1931 Negroes were welcome in Nevada society. There was no discrimination or segregation. The hardy pioneer was interested only in his fellow man's character and ability--not in his color, race or creed. Then the poor whites from Texas, Louisiana, Florida and other points south moved into the state with their gaming devices and bootlegged money and took over not only the gambling but the social and political life of the state as well.[37]

Not all of the blame can be placed at the door of the gaming people. In more ways than not they might have offered what the market demanded. At any rate, as more and more areas of the overall community became segregated, it became increasingly easy for segregation to take over those remaining areas.

In 1940 there were some gaming halls and saloons. That's all they were. The few hotels in town catered to a more well-heeled clintele of businessmen and travellers. There were the occasional saloon singers and banjo strummers or piano players but they were rare. They were not the incentive to visit the different saloons. Gambling was the big item and there did not seem to be a need to try to attract players. Due to the limited number of such places there was not all that much competition for gaming dollars.

The 1940s did mark the beginning of the hotel/casino/entertainment era. It also marked the beginning of the "Strip". Fremont Street, which would later be known as "Glitter Gulch" did have a hotel industry. It was, however, in its infancy. There were the Biltmore, the Apache, the Arizona Club, the White Spot and a few others. Collectively they

had fewer than 200 rooms.

In 1941 a southern California businessman opened the first of the lavish resorts on the old California highway to the south of Las Vegas proper. That highway was an extension of Fifth Street which later became Las Vegas Boulevard or the "Strip". The El Rancho Vegas was the most modern hotel in Las Vegas. It was built in a ranch style and its decor was all western. During its first years the entertainment in its showrooms was all country/western. The owners were convinced that such was better suited for Las Vegas which still had managed to maintain its western flavor thanks to an annual Helldorado Days which had been initiated in 1935 which featured rodeos, mock gun fights and Roy Rogers and others who made several "cowboy" movies about Nevada, Boulder City and Helldorado.

The more popular western entertainers appeared not only at El Rancho but they began to appear at the downtown hotels as well. The latter discovered that not everyone who came to Las Vegas was interested in gambling and drinking. Couples who came here usually pursued different interests. Though it may appear chauvenistic, the men usually gambled while their wives attended shows.

In downtown Las Vegas locals still frequented the establishments. This included black patrons. Perhaps owing to its lavishness not many went to the El Rancho during its first years. It was a place whose prices appealed to the more well-to-do. Additionally, it slowly began to replace San Francisco as the place where Hollywood types would go to escape the sameness of Los Angeles.

Two years later, in 1943, the Last Frontier opened farther to the south of the slowly developing "strip". It was the first place visitors from southern California would see upon their arrival and the last upon their departure. Partially owing to its remoteness it took

on some of the characteristics of a "road house". It was over a mile from the El Rancho and more than five miles from Fremont Street.

Like the El Rancho the Last Frontier also had a western motif. During its first two years its entertainment was also western. Those other establishments which did have entertainment generally followed the same format. There were some occasional acts which highlighted Hollywood movie stars. Hollywood, during those years, had contract players who not only were expected to act but also to sing and dance. However, Las Vegas over-loaded with the Sons of the Lone Frontier, Jimmy Wakeley and other cowboys.

Some of those early entertainment directors at some of those hotels realized that they had to offer something different if they expected to gain an advantage on other businesses. Entertainment was becoming an important ingredient to the entire tourist business. The gaming would be essentially the same from one place to the next. The entertainment would ultimately become the draw.

In 1944 the El Cortez on Fremont Street presented the Deep River Boys. It was the first large hotel with "colored" entertainment.[38] A year later the Last Frontier introduced Tip Tap Toe, a trio of colored tapdancers.[39] In both instances those groups performed several months at those establishments and they played to full houses. It became apparent to the hotel owners that such groups could generate the kind of interest and cash flow which they were looking for.

During the next fifteen years, until 1955, there was hardly a time when there was no black entertainers appearing somewhere in Las Vegas.

There had been at least one other black entertainer in Las Vegas before the Deep River Boys appeared at the El Cortez in 1944--Pearl Bailey.

> In 1941, during the war, we played at a base (Nellis Air Force Base) in a place called Las Vegas. When you got off the train there was the main street and inside all those places people were throwing dice and playing slot machines, with policemen looking on. None of us had seen anything like it before, and, at that time, other than people who'd been abroad to Monte Carlo, other folks in America hadn't seen it either. We went into those spots and played the machines. (How ironic that a few years later "people of race" were barred, though now they're allowed in again.[40]

In 1941 the transition from an integrated community to a segregated community was yet in its infancy. While it is true that it had already extended itself to housing, work conditions, movie theatres and swimming pools, they were yet permitted to enter the saloons and casinos. Those handful of black entertainers who performed here for the first half of the 1940s did indeed find accomodations in the hotels where they performed.

By mid-1940 two new hotels had opened on the Strip. The Fabulous Flamingo and the Thunderbird brought new life to the area and simultaneously a new atmosphere to southern Nevada. During the early 1940s, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel of "Murder Inc.", while visiting in southern California came to Las Vegas for a bit of fun and relaxation. He recognized almost immediatedly the possibilities for making big money. "This is a gold mind, 'Siegel was saying to Ginny one day, suddenly beginning to envision something really big. The Hell's Kitchen hoodlum was mulling over in his mind a grandiose schme--building the biggest and finest gambling establishment in the world"[41]

Shortly thereafter, after having met with some of the 'mob" leaders and securing their financial backing, he began to lay the groundwork for building what he would call "The Fabulous Flamingo Hotel". After much

wheeling and dealing the hotel was ready to open in 1946. It was located on the south end of the "strip" and became only the third such establishment there joining the El Rancho and the Last Frontier. It was truly a magnificent place and Siegel wanted to make it rival Monte Carlo. Its opening in late December of 1946 was a new experience for Las Vegas. "It was a glittering premier in true Hollywood style, but nothing less could be expected of a $5,600,000 enterprise."[42]

The Fabulous Flamingo catered to a different clientele. While it is true that Siegel had established associations among the acting colony of Hollywood and even some European royality, a large portion of his clientele were associates from back east and the new rich oil tycoons of Texas and Louisiana. His Fabulous Flamingo catered to those groups and those others whom they would tolerate. The latter two groups had long harbored social reservations in regards to blacks.

The Flamingo brought a new kind of entertainment to Las Vegas. Not being westerners, the New York bunch brought in entertainment of the sort which was popular in cafe society of New York. Additionally, because one of the favorite passtimes of New York's elete was to go "slumming" to the Cotton Club of Harlem, they were well aware of black entertainers. Ginny Hill, who was now Siegel's girlfriend, had once owned an interest in the Cotton Club and she did have some input in determining what acts would perform there.[43] In Las Vegas at the Flamingo Hotel she would exercise similar responsibilities from behind the scene.

Two months before the Flamingo would open its doors an event occurred which illustrates the racial atmosphere yet prevalent in the

state of Nevada. The University of Nevada was scheduled to play a football game at Mississippi State University. C.R. Noble, the Athletic Director of Mississippi State sent a letter to Joseph T. McDonnell his counterpart at the Nevada school inquiring if the latter intended to bring its "negro" athletes and warning that if the answer was in the affirmative that the game would be cancelled.[44] William Bass and Horace Gillam, both vital cogs to the Nevada squad and All-America candidates, were the center of the controversy. The dispute carried on for several days. "Hundreds of letters and telegrams concerning the racial dispute had reached university officials, the overwhelming majority urging that Nevada cancel the game."[45]

Those letters came not only from within the state but from around the country as well. "A New York attorney wrote that he 'hoped the Board of Athletic Control will notify Mississippi State that there will only be Americans playing on your team'."[46] Not all of the letters were of that same tone. "Expressing the opposite view was a letter from a Memphis resident who declared, 'there is no doubt but for the safety of the Negroes concerned it would be best for them to stay out of Mississippi. A hint to the wise is sufficient'."[47] By November fifth, the game had been called off.[48]

Nevada of 1946 was quiet dissimilar from Mississippi at least in the athletic arenas. Not only were the athletic teams integrated but for years, dating back to the Gans/Nelson and the Johnson/Jeffries boxing matches of the turn of the century, there had been integrated fight cards in Nevada. During that same year, 1946, at the Frontier Hotel and other sites throughout Las Vegas there had been black boxers plying their trade. Dixie Lee Fleming, a local, and Edgar Robinson of

Los Angeles were frequently listed on the fight cards.[49]

The newspaper headlines also give us an indication of yet another dimension of race relations. At a time when the Black population of southern Nevada was not quite 4,000, the Sunday newspapers carried the scores for football games played the day before. One example lists the outcomes of sixteen games (32 teams) and four (8 teams) of those were of all black colleges. Arkansas AM&N, Wiley, Xavier of New Orleans, Marshall, Philander Smith, Southern of Louisiana, Tuskegee, and Texas College were all listed prominently.[50] This may well be owing to the fact that almost 20% of Las Vegas' population was black, thanks to the recent migrations due to the Basic Magnesium Plant in Henderson and the fact that a great majority of those recent immigrants had migrated here from those states where those schools are located.

It is understood that there are profound differences between athletic and social interaction or integration. Still, in terms of the latter, we have not yet had any well defined evidences of out and out discrimination within the field of entertainment.

As has been stated, the census reports of 1940 showed less than 200 blacks residing in southern Nevada. As the hotel industry got underway in the late 1930s and early 1940s there was not a distinguishable black community in Las Vegas. Those few black entertainers who might have played Las Vegas between 1937 and 1945/46 had to, of necessity, be provided accomodations within the hotels where they performed. They also took their meals at those same hotels or at other eating establishments throughout the town.

However, it was during those same years that a black community began to develop. When the primary activity at the plant in Henderson was completed in 1943 a number of the white workers departed the area. Blacks, on the other hand, left the plant and went to work in the newly developing hotel/casino industry as maids, groundskeepers and porters. Their presence in Las Vegas became more permanent.

The United States of the 1940s was characterized by a new awareness of the racial condition. In large part that awareness was dictated by the events of World War II. World War I had been fought ostensibly, to make the world safe for democracy. It had not achieved that goal. Now World War II was to thwart the drive of Nazism and its teachings of racial superiority. Americans, especially black Americans, were cognizant of the inequity of fighting such a war in Europe when similar conditions were prevalent at home in the United States. Even as the war waged on, there were certain events which proved embarrassing to blacks who fought for democracy and their country which merchandised itself as the haven of democracy.

"Experiences on the home front drove the morale of Negroes to a new low."[51] Mass migrations had occurred among blacks from the South to the North and West where there were greater employment opportunities. In the north they were relegated to the older neighborhoods where negro ghettos developed. In the west there were no older neighborhoods for them. There they were relegated to vacant areas where they developed their own neighborhoods without much assistance from the authorities, builders or banks. "Within the five-year period between 1940 and 1945 the negro population of Los Angeles County, for example, increased from 75,000 to 150,000."[52] Similar changes occurred

throughout the remainder of the country.

As those migrations took place racial anxieties increased in those places where the southern black migrated to. Often, those anxieties erupted into race riots. "On June 20, 1943, the most serious race riot of the war period broke out in Detroit. At the end of more than thirty hours of rioting twenty-five Negroes and nine whites had been killed, and property valued at several hundred thousand dollars had been destroyed."[53]

All of those events, nationwide, did eventually have an impact on race relations in Las Vegas. While it is true that during the formative years of the hotel industry of the early 1940s there were few occasions of racial intolerance in Las Vegas, the community was constantly growing and people from those parts of the country where racial animosities existed became part of the new population of Las Vegas.

It was in that kind of developing racial atmosphere that the Fabulous Flamingo Hotel was born. Siegel ran full page ads for the opening of his new hotel. They not only announced the opening but also said something of the policies of the new hotel. One ad read in part:

> The Flamingo has been built for Las Vegas, its people and the visitors that are now being attracted to our doors from all over the world. The Flamingo owners believe in Las Vegas, its future: it realizes the potential possibilities here for the greatest playground in the universe. The entertainment will be assembled from the world's stage, from radio and Hollywood's studios. The top bands of the nation will play music for your dancing.[54]

Benjamin Siegel, along with being a gangster was also a showman.

He not only wanted his place to be the best looking, he expected the same of the employees. In realizing those expections, he generated outrageous requirements.

> Bugsy was most fastidious about the help's appearance at the Flamingo. Everyone, and that included even janitors, had to wear a tuxedo. It was a very classy place. One morning on his way across the patio, Siegel spotted a tuxedo-clad man stretched out on a chaise lounge. Bugsy ran over and kicked viciously at the chair. 'What the hell are you doing?' he demanded. "Get back to work, you bum, before I boot your ass'. The man sat up, his eyes popping out of his head. 'But-but', he stammered, 'I'm a g-g-guest'.[55]

Siegel was noted for that kind of behavior. He always carried a pistol to carry out his threats. He realized that most of the other hotel owners did not care for him. They felt that his being a gangster would give Las Vegas a bad name and, in its infancy, they did not think that Las Vegas could overcome that kind of reputation. Siegel went out of his way to at least create the illusion that the Flamingo was a respectable place. He was concerned about who entered the Flamingo and how they comported themselves. He was not willing to take any chances on anyone making his place look like a dive. He took the necessary precautions to guard against such.

> The single-minded Siegel was also determined to run his undertaking with proper decorum. To insure that such propriety was maintained, Bugs hired some of the beffiest musclemen the mob could provide to maintain law and order and to root out any inebriates or troublemakers.[56]

The hotel opened the day after Christmas in 1946. The entertainment for the first two weeks was headlined by Jimmy Durante with Xavier Cugat. On January 8, 1947, Lena Horne replaced Durante. She was the first black entertainer to perform at the Flamingo. Her show ran two

weeks. The following is taken from her autobiography and gives us a glimpse at what playing Las Vegas in January of 1947 was like.

> ...right after the war I made what amounted to a pioneering trek to Las Vegas--pioneering in the sense that I was the first Negro to star in a big club there and pioneering, also, in the sense that I went there right at the beginning of the expansion and glamorization of the big clubs on the strip.
>
> I was playing the Flamingo, sharing the bill with a very famous Latin Band. The leader was a real jerk--very snide when he introduced me, and not rehearsing and not disciplining the band at all. I took it for a couple of days nad then called Lennie in California to ask him what to do. I was furious and ready to walk out on the whole thing.
>
> He calmed me down a little and said he would call the manager of the club who was, of course, just the front man for the gents-up-top who really owned it. He made the call all right and told the guy what was happening. They discussed it back and forth for a while and the manager was sort of noncommittal. What did he care?--we were both under contract and business was good. Why should he stir around in the situation?
>
> But then another voice came on the phone and said: 'Don't think any more about it, Mr. Hayton. I didn't know that she was having any trouble, but she will not have any further trouble.'
>
> Lennie didn't recognize the voice, so he said, 'Who's this?'
>
> 'This is Mr. Siegel.'
>
> Lennie thanked him and then called me back. 'Darling, I just want to tell you not to worry. Mr. Siegel says he'll take care of everything.'
>
> 'And who the hell is Mr. Siegel?' I said.
>
> 'You know, Bugsy Siegel.'
>
> Well, apparently Mr. Siegel sent a couple of his boys around to see the bandleader and give him a little lecture. At the next show he did not introduce me. One of the men in the band did, and it was a beautiful announcement. After that, the leader made very proper announcements. And I noticed that he and his band, who had been hanging around the club between and after the shows to gamble, were suddenly in a big hurry to pack up and get outside when they finished work. I thought it was pretty funny, watching them scurrying around, being nicer than nice. And I thought there was a kind of rude justice in it, too.

> Which does not mean I was ever in favor of life in Las Vegas. I continued to go back there--usually to the Sands--for the next decade or so, but I never liked the atmosphere and I have finally quit going there at all. That may be foolish on my part--they pay the best prices of any cabarets in America and one engagement a year there would bring me enough so that I would never have to work in any other clubs.
>
> One time a representative of a rival club in Las Vegas visited my manager, Ralph Harris, at some hotel where he was staying. He was carrying a big bulging paper bag. He asked Ralph if there was any way to get me to come to his place. Ralph said he doubted it. Whereupon the guy over-turned the bag and what Ralph guesses must have been about $50,000 in small bills came spilling out.
>
> 'That's for you,' the guy said. 'Just for talking to me.'
>
> Ralph was scrambling all over the room grabbing the money and stuffing it back in the bag and telling the guy 'No, no chance, sorry.' I'd love to have witnessed that scene. In the business we were always considered crazy because we were frequently passing up little opportunities like this.[57]

Lena Horne's pioneering trek to Las Vegas in early 1947 was pock-marked with incidents which caused her discomforth to the extent that she was not "in favor of life in Las Vegas". Not only did she have problems with the band leader but she was not allowed to enter the casino or the use of other areas of the hotel. Places on the westside were not inviting and she would not subject herself to the numerous other humiliations she might encounter in going to theaters or other public places. Her stay in Las Vegas was not unlike the life-style of a hermit. She was confined to her bungalow.

Throughout most of the 1940s there were black entertainers who performed in Las Vegas. Arthur Lee Simpkins, who was described as the golden voiced tenor, was at the Last Frontier in November of 1946. Ruth Daye was also on the bill.[58] Langston Nobel and his orchestra appeared at that same hotel on November 15, 1946.[59] The Mills Brothers

were at the Nevada Biltmore.[60] In January of 1947 Nick Lucas and the Nicholas Brothers were at the El Rancho.[61] During that same month Sister Rosetta Thorpe and Madam Marie Knight appeared at the War Memorial Building where they performed a gospel show.[62] The Four Seasons, who once performed with Bing Crosby, changed their name to the Charioteers and performed for over a month at the Last Frontier.[63] In February of 1947 three new black groups appeared in Las Vegas. The Will Mastin Trio were at the El Rancho[64], the Delta River Boys were at the Biltmore[65] and the Red Caps were at the Last Frontier.[66]

Initially those entertainers were provided accomodations at the hotels. That policy slowly changed. As 1947 reached the half-way mark those changes became more noticeable.

> Las Vegas is troubled over the question of race relations While colored performers like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong and Arthur Lee Simpkins are most welcome on stage, they are not welcome to stay in the hotels or eat in the dining rooms. And they are expected to sit in the back seats at the theatres. Mayor Cragin has been meeting with our new branch of the NAACP to see what can be done. I don't remember any segregation in the early days, for we all just shared together as pioneers, and I don't know how this has happened here. Perhaps it was the war, for Henderson workers insisted that Colored people live in separate facilities. Many of our Colored population are moving to the Westside.[67]

It is not clear just when, how or why a policy of segregation was initiated. We know that in January of 1947 that if the policy existed it was not universal because Lena Horne had accomodations at the Flamingo and, as far as we know, other black entertainers were also provided accomodations at the hotels where they performed. By the end of 1947 that cordiality had ended.

Pearl Bailey performed at the Flamingo during the latter part of 1947. Unlike Lena Horne, she had to secure housing in the newly developing black community called the "westside". Sometime between January and October, the policy of the Flamingo Hotel had changed. Bailey describes her visit and her experiences at the Flamingo Hotel best:

> I was booked into the Flamingo Hotel, and at that time only Lena Horne and Arthur Lee Simpkins of the brown race had worked there. There were only two other places then: El Rancho and the Last Frontier. The town was so elegant you couldn't imagine, and nothing like it existed in our country. Vegas yet has to be matched for glitter.
>
> I always set up my dressing room the night before I open, even if I have to wait until three or four in the morning to do it. It makes it not seem too new to me the next day. (And for the last six years, I've rehearsed with the band the day before, for the same reason.) So, as usual, I put a tablecloth on the dressing table to make it a bit nicer.
>
> Having set everything just right, I came in the next night ready for action. And wow! It looked like a magician had been in and done a magic trick: makeup and everything were topsy-turvy. I sent for the backstage manager and asked the reason for it. He said, 'we had to take the tablecloth, as Mr. Siegel wants everything accounted for.' I asked for another, got it, and, bless my soul, the next night the same thing happened. They removed it again. Holy mackerel! Was this going to go on for three weeks? I sent again for the backstage man, and once again he gave me the bit about Mr. Siegel. So I asked him if I could talk to Mr. S. When I came off after the show, a young dapper, and handsome man was standing by the dressing-room door. Not expecting any visitor, I nodded and started into the room. But he spoke to me. 'Did you want to see me? I'm Mr. Siegel.'
>
> Ah! Yes, you can help me, sir.' I went into a big explanation of what I wanted: a simple table-cloth. Being a user of my hands, I was now tapping him on the shoulder and pointing a bony finger in his stomach, getting my point across. Whatever struck me, I'll never know, but I remembered having

> read this man's name (I am a thorough newspaper reader, want ads and all). 'Are you Bugsy Siegel?' Suddenly I knew it--this was one of the biggest men in the underworld.
>
> He replied, 'My friends call me 'Benjamin', my enemies 'Bugsy'.
>
> Now you know I had no intentions of being this boy's enemy. I thought it better to be friendly! He never moved but asked me, 'Is there anything else you'd like?'
>
> Well, for some reason, it flashed through my mind how every night, going home, I'd pass a car lot, and at that time the Roadmaster Buick was the thing. I couldn't even drive a bicycle, but I wanted that car, so I told him about one I'd seen. Even if that hadn't been my desire, I was so nervous I could only figure, 'Keep talking, Pearl, keep talking about anything'.
>
> The tablecloths were piled high as my head the next show, and the following morning on the westside, in front of Mrs. Harrison's house, where I lived, sat that pretty red car. Seems as though he knew these men at the lot, called them, and said that I'd give the down payment before I finished the engagement.[68]

Pearl Bailey's reaction to her encounter with Benjamin Siegel tells us quite a lot about the relationship between black entertainers and the newly developing hotel industry of Las Vegas. It is obvious that she had great fear of Siegel and wouldn't dare do anything which might anger him. If his rule was that only those negro entertainers which he selected could stay at the Flamingo, then she would not dare question it.

Las Vegas was in the middle of nowhere and evidences of the "mobs" presence were clear. The wages were great and one more act of discrimination could be tolerated as they were tolerated in other parts of the country by black entertainers.

The transistion had taken place--at least partially. Pearl Bailey, at that time was not the big star she would later become but, for the time being, she was relegated to the westside.

"Las Vegas, or 'Lost Wages,' as it's known in Westside, is off

limits to all Negroes--except entertainers and janitors. This holds for the plushest Strip casinos and the tiniest dives in Glitter Gulch. A negro cannot rent a room, buy a sandwich, order a drink, or even drop a nickel in a slot machine."[69] The treatment which blacks received was very humiliating but there was nothing they could do about it. Locals relied on the hotels for employment so they could not speak out and, as Lena Horne said, the hotels paid the best fees in the entire country. However, there might yet be another angle. It has something to do with some of the hotel owners.

> When the eastern and northern gangsters arrived they were quick to protect the status quo. They didn't want any Nigrahs upsetting their high-rolling southern gentlemen, who had more oil wells than the gangsters had slot machines. And besides, many of the mobsters had been brought up in teeming slums where they had rumbled against the colored gangs, and they had not forgotten their own prejudice and hatred.[70]

Another reason why black entertainers were not publicly vocal about the discrimination they encountered was that it was not new to them. Around the United States they had found similar problems not only in doing their performances and at the places where those performances were done, but even in getting to them. Louis Armstrong points out not only the problems but the kinds of things black entertainers were forced to do in their futile attempts to circumvent those acts of discrimination.

> It was tough traveling through the south in those days. We had two white guys with us--the bus driver and Joe Glaser. If you had a colored bus driver back then, they'd lock him up in every little country town for speeding! it was very rough finding a place to sleep in the South. You couldn't get into the hotels for white and the colored didn't have any hotels. You rented places in private homes, boarding houses and whorehouses. The food was awful and we tried to find places where we could cook. We carried a bunch of pots and pans around with us.[71]

The northwest was no different. Everywhere had it own form of segregation. Call it dejure or call it defacto it all came out the same. The Will Mastin Trio found Spokane, Washington to be the same way that Cab Calloway found New Orleans. Sammy Davis, Jr. was the star attraction with the trio. He remember one stay in Spokane:

> My father came into the dressing room and flopped onto a chair. 'Well, I covered every street downtown. Nothing! He started taking off his shoes, rubbing his feet. 'Tomorrow I'll go back over to Mrs. Clarks and see if she's expecting anything to open up. Meantime, guess we'll have to sleep in here.
>
> Will asked, 'You mean there's nothing in the whole city of Spokane?'
>
> 'There ain't that many colored rooming houses to start with.'
>
> 'What about a hotel?'
>
> 'Ain't a single colored hotel around!
>
> Colored side of town? Colored rooming house, Colored hotels? Colored, colored, colored.[72]

Jim Crow laws of one kind or another existed everywhere when it had to do with blacks. Las Vegas became no different. During the late 1940s, unless one were a name star, black entertainers encountered the same kinds of treatment in Las Vegas that they encountered everywhere else. As the 1940s wound down, most black entertainers who had not only performed on Las Vegas' stages but lived in the rooms, ate in the restaurants and lost their earnings at the gaming tables, found that they were not longer welcome in the latter categories. Even those who continued to live at those hotels were provided quarters in either individual bungalows such as those at the El Rancho or satellite smaller duplex suits as at the Sands and a few other places. Those hotels which did not have such isolated accomodations did not book the "big name acts". Incidentally, they were required to take their meals in those quarters and they were not permitted in the cas no areas.

What Sammy Davis, Jr. and the Will Mastin Trio experienced in

Spokane, they were to find waiting for them in Las Vegas. As they finished up a stint in Seattle, which was no different from Spokane, they got the news. "Will said, 'we're booked as the opening act at El Rancho Vegas in Las Vegas, Nevada, for five hundred dollars a week.' The trade papers were bursting with news about Las Vegas. It was starting to become a show town. El Rancho and the Last Frontier were the first luxury hotels and there was talk about new hotels being planned to go up near them."[73]

Their arrival to Las Vegas almost went unnoticed. They felt, however, that they were finally getting into the big time.

> I looked around backstage while we waited to rehearse. The band was the biggest we'd ever worked with, the floor of the stage was springy and slick, the lighting was the most modern I'd ever seen. I was standing next to the stage manager. I asked, 'Do you have it right about our rooms, that they're a part of our deal here?'
>
> The manager came over to us as we finished rehearsing. 'Sorry. We can't let you have rooms here. House rules. You'll have to find a place in the--uh, on the other side of town.'
>
> I picked up our suitcases, 'let's go Dad, Will.'
>
> The hotels we'd passed in the town itself looked awful compared to El Rancho but even they were out of bounds to us. The cab driver said, 'There's a woman name of Cartwright over in Westside takes in you people'.
>
> It was Tobacco Road. A three or four year-old baby, naked, was standing in front of a shack made of wooden crates and cardboard that was unfit for human life. None of us spoke.
>
> The driver sounded almost embarrassed. 'Guess y'can't say a lot for housing out here. Been hardly any call for labor round these parts. Just a handful of porters and dishwashers they use over on the Strip. Not much cause for you people t'come to Vegas.'
>
> The cab stopped in front of one of the few decent houses. A woman was standing in the doorway. 'Come right in, folks. You boys with one of the shows? Well, I got three nice rooms for you'.

> When she told us the price Will almost choked. 'But that's probably twice what it would cost at El Rancho Vegas.'
> 'Then why don't you go live at El Rancho Vegas?'
> 'Pay her the money, Massy. It's not important.'
> Will counted out the first week's rent. My father smiled sardonically at her. 'Looks like if the ofays don't get us, then our own will.'
> 'Business is business. I've got my own troubles'.[74]

The law of supply and demand was in effect. Mrs. Cartwright knew that she had the Will Mastin Trio at a disadvantage. Other black entertainers who stopped-over at her house encountered the same treatment.

In 1947 Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to play baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He became the first negro to be "so honored". Before the season started there was the usual spring training for the players. Robinson, however, had to undergo additional conditioning. He was warned that there might be reprecussions. That in some towns some of the fans might call him names, throw things at him and generally make life difficult for him. He was told that he would have to accept all of that with a smile on his face and go on about his business. He listened very carefully to every word that he was told about what his behavior was expected to be. He was told that he would be a pioneer for his race and that future chances for negro players in the major leagues would be greatly influenced by how he comported himself. Little did Branch Rickey realize that Jackie Robinson and every other black person in America, had been weened on such instructions from the day of their birth and that they were well aware of their status in American society and how they were expected to act.[75]

Black people were not docile nor were they masochistic. They merely tried to make the best of a bad situation. They never appreciated the treatment they got. They tolerated it only. Sammy Davis, Jr. is a good example of the extent of resiliency black people were required to possess in order to survive in the United States during the last years of the 1940s and on through the 1950s. Following their first show on their first night Sammy made a suggestion:

> Whattya say we get dressed after the next show and go look around the casino. I got fifty dollars that's busting' t'grow into a hundred.
>
> We went out the stage door and around the building. The desert all around us was as dark as night can be but the casino was blazing with light. The door opened and as some people came out there was an outpour of sounds such as I'd never before heard: slot machines clanging, dealers droning, a woman shrieking with joy--and behind it all, a background of the liveliest, gayest music I'd ever heard. As I held the door open for my father, my head went in all directions to slot machines, dice tables, waiters rushing around with drinks, a man carrying a tray full of silver dollars.
>
> I saw a hand on my father's shoulder. A deputy sheriff was holding him, shaking his head.
>
> We rode to Mrs. Cartwright's in silence. They got out of the cab and I continued on downtown where there was a movie theater, where for a few hours I could lose myself in other people's lives.
>
> A hand gripped my arm like a circle of steel, yanking me out of my seat, half-dragging me out to the lobby. 'What're you boy? A wise guy?' He was a sheriff, wearing a star badge and a big western hat. His hand came up from nowhere and slapped across my face. He'd done it effortlessly but my jaw felt like it had been torn loose from my head. 'Speak up when I talk to you!'
>
> 'What'd I do?'
>
> 'Don't bull me boy. You know the law.'
>
> When I explained I'd just gotten to town and had never been there before, he pointed to a sign. 'Coloreds sit in the last three rows. You're in Nevada now, not New York. Mind our rules and you'll be treated square. Go on back and enjoy the movie boy.'[76]

Welcome to Las Vegas--the best city of them all.

The 1940s was not all bleak. Had Sammy known, there were more than one movie house in Las Vegas and there was at least one which did

not discriminate. "The new Fremont theatre is giving first class hospitality to its guests throughout the auditorium on both floors. So keep up your first class appearance and behavior which is indeed a pathmaker of the West".[77] Also, there was a club on Fremont Street which allowed negroes entry--the Club Alabam.[78] Unfortunately, Las Vegas of the late 1940s had grown into one of those places where a Negro would minimize humiliation by calling first and asking "do you serve Negroes?"

The marquees along Fremont and those on the Strip procla black entertainment throughout the remainder of that decade. The 1950s marked the beginning of major hotel expansion in Las Vegas. Eleven new hotels opened during that decade with eight being on the Strip. As more hotels opened, the competition for entertainment grew. Some new faces appeared on the scene. The Golden Gate Quartet was at the Last Frontier.[79] Brother Burns appeared at the Club Bingo.[80] The Rover was at the Thunderbird.[81] The Ink Spots lit up the Thunderbird.[82] Arthur Duncan was the opening act at the Bingo.[83] The Four Knights spent their nights at the El Cortez.[84] There were many many more.

As the Will Mastin Trio had to in Spokane, each black entertainer who came here had to hope that when they went to the westside for accomodations that they would be available.

In the meantime, the cosmetic of the westside changed. There were more evidences that people were getting out of the cardboard shanties and building homes for themselves, as they could afford to do so. A number of those new homes were constructed with the black entertainer in mind. Homeowners, who had the room, stood to make a lot of money from renting those rooms. As Mrs. Cartwright had done with the Will

Mastin Trio upon their arrival. They were charged $15.00 per room. At the time, rooms at the El Rancho were going for $4.00 per night. There was definitely a need for a change.

The 1950s ushered in, along with the hotel boom, expanding efforts at publicizing Las Vegas. Jack Cortez began publishing an entertainment guide titled Fabulous Las Vegas. It showcased all of the acts performing in town and, as publicists have a penchant to, it made each appear to be something that a visitor just wouldn't want to miss on a visit to Las Vegas. The following are examples:

> Its production in the Flamingo Room in this Easter presentation. New York's famous broadway, moved to our town in all it dazzling and glamorous fanfare... Headlining this super production and direct from the Mocambo, is 'The singing toast from coast to coast!, BILLY DANIELS. To describe this man and his songs we must use the book that offers all the adjectives there are. Billy captures the audience with his unsurpassed voice from start to end. His voice is so powerful--and soft--that he can use a mike or do without it. Mr. Daniels rendition of 'Black Magic' is difinitely the best we ever heard. And when he gives out with a jump tune with his accompanist, Benny Payne, joining--WOW! The joint's jumping: What a treat they are! An accurate description of Billy Daniels is 'HE SINGS WITH HIS HEART', and that's for sure.[86]

Billy Daniels performed well, according to Cortez, and during that two weeks there were no rooms at the inn.

> The one and only Arthur Lee Simpkins, master of song and champion of champions, is co-starring at the Flamingo Hotel for one week only. Mr. Simpkins is one of the greater favorites in Las Vegas and was brought back by popular demand. His various renditions of ballads and spirituals are truly SENSATIONAL--the only word that describes him to a "T".[87]

The publication ran throughout the 1950s and on into the early 1970s. It not only carried materials on the entertainment scene but it gave the visitor a glimpse at all of Las Vegas--all, that is, with

the lone exception being the westside and the black population. In that part of town a business district had developed. There were numerous small businesses but they were generally marginal. Jackson Street, the main street of the district was the location of numerous small night clubs, saloons and some small casinos. Las Vegas' black population patronized those places exclusively. Black entertainers who came here and who lived on the westside while here also patronized those establishments. But it was not the same. None were as fancy as places on the strip and the prices were generally higher due to the limited clientele. Local blacks, especially the NAACP, decided to try to do something about it.

George Rudiak, a Las Vegas attorney, introduced a civil rights bill in the Nevada Assembly in 1953. The purpose was to neutralize those agreements which allowed for racial discrimination.[87] The bill had a great deal of support for both black and white Las Vegans. As matters stood, those who were racially different were discriminated against in theatres, hotels, restaurants, hospitals and all other public places. There was no public resistance to the bill but it failed to come out of the Assembly.

Attempts to rectify the condition on the local level met the same results. Whatever arguments were presented, the general reply was that the municipalities did not have the authority to make laws such as that and that those rights were guaranteed by the United States Constitution. Every attempt to remove the Jim Crow practices from Las Vegas was thwarted. For the next seven years, however, the attempts continued.

In 1955 a license was granted to open the Moulin Rouge Hotel. It became the first modern hotel to be built for black patrons. It was

located on a street which, in effect, separated the black and white communities. Following its opening, black entertainers no longer had to pay the exorbitant rents in private homes. Additionally, the whole aura which it created impacted on the self-concepts of the entertainers. Sammy Davis, Jr. had described the westside as tobacco road and in some ways it was that. In the late forties and as recently as the mid-fifties, the streets were unpaved, a large number of the houses did not have sanitary facilities and when it rained the streets became like glue. The Moulin Rouge became a god-send to everyone.

The presence of that hotel did present some problems. It not only was open to blacks, it was open to everyone. It became the "integrated" hotel of Las Vegas. White and black entertainers who performed on the strip, often in the same hotels and on the same bill, began to congregate at the Moulin Rouge after they would have completed their second show. White patrons of those hotels followed them to the Moulin Rouge and that had a definite impact on the revenue of those places. It did ultimately cause them to establish policies which required the entertainers and the showgirls to remain on the premises for a certain amount of time after the last show.

While the Moulin Rouge did improve conditions for black entertainers as far as their accomodations were concerned, the problem of Jim Crowism remained. There were yet embarrassing moments.

> Not too long ago a fledgling publicist at the Sahara received a phone call from an Ebony magazine reporter who wanted to interview a Negro movie star then appearing in the hotel's show. 'Certainly,' said the naive young man. 'Come right over.' But it wasn't that easy. 'Hell,' his boss explained after turning down the request, 'the guy probably won't even be able to get a taxi driver to bring him here.' As it turned out, the reporter was met at the airport and told the facts of life; later he caught the show from the wings, interviewed the star,

and left on the next plane out.[88]

Those kinds of things happened frequently. Because Las Vegas did not publicize the fact that it was a segregated town, black visitors did not make the discovery until after they would have arrived there. Once the Moulin Rouge opened, at least they were able to find accomodations. Before, however, they would make the discovery and have to turn right around and go back heme. Some did frequent the night clubs on the west-side but generally they did not make a special trip here only to be denied access to the very places that they had come here for.

As more blacks became major attractions, the hotels on the strip did begin to relent. Those two or three who had been permitted access were joined by a few others. "Negroes like Louie Armstrong and Eartha Kitt are acceptable to the hoodlums so long as they stay out of the way and don't invite their friends and relatives to the shows."[89]

There is a common story that had to do with Josephine Baker. It seems that as she did her first show, she noticed that there were no blacks in the audience. In between shows she asked what the hotel's policy was in regards to the matter of negroes entering. She was told that the hotel's policy was not to admit negroes. Her response was: if there are no negroes at the second show, I am going to walk off stage. When the curtain raised, there was a table right down front, dead center and there were several negroes dressed in tuxedoes and gowns seated at it. The manager had gone out and gotten porters and maids and dressed them and sat them down. The show went on. Following that engagement, Josephine Baker, by choice, never returned to Las Vegas.[90]

That, however, had not been the first time blacks had sat in the audience at a showroom. By 1955 Sammy Davis' star had risen to dazzling

heights. He was in demand. It was he who broke the color barrier in Las Vegas' showrooms.

> In 1955, when Sammy Davis, Jr., opened in the Venus Room at the New Frontier, the occasion was sensational in more ways than one. Seated down front in the audience was his grandmother, stepmother and sister--the first of their race to sit among the princely whites on the Strip. In the intervening eight years, the color line has become more elastic in a few Strip casinos, but even in the most liberal ones it is still far from being erased.[91]

Still there were problems which the unsuspecting would be victimized by. While they were always disturbing, sometimes there was a bit of humor involved. Consider;

> Negro singer Herb Jeffries, when arriving at a hotel, was once told that his room would be among the white guests (an almost unheard-of-concession), but that his accompanist, Dick Hazzard, would have to stay in special Negro quarters.
>
> 'If he does, I do,' said Jeffries. The owner's face collapsed when Jeffries introduced his accompanist: Hazzard is white.[92]

Eartha Kitt first came to Las Vegas in 1954. In her autobiography she describes the experience.

> April 7, 1954, I opened at El Rancho Vegas in Las Vegas, Nevada. I remember when I got off the plane in the desert, a member of the hotel staff was there to meet me with my secretary, who had gone ahead to make preparations. Driving from the airport to the highway, I saw a sign advertising the star who was to appear at the El Rancho. Letters taller than I spelled a name that I could not make a complete identification with--EARTHA KITT.
>
> When we reached the hotel, a sign on each side of the road said the same thing. Someone who had something to do with me had become a headliner. I was taken to my cabin of luxury that was just like a regular little house, everything included. A bottle of champagne waited in a bucket. Flowers scented my room. I felt strange and alone, but wanted.
>
> My rehearsal was the same afternoon I arrived. Bill Loose, whom I asked to accompany me at Henri Rene's suggestion, took over the orchestra with the arrangements he had made for me. He knew my work because he had done some of the arrangements for me at RCA. The guitarist that Bill had found for me was also there to ease the way.

> Mr. Katleman, El Rancho's boss, came into the rehearsal to greet me. During the middle of a song, he came across the room saying, 'Hello there.' I looked at him and continued the song to the end before saying 'Hello'. Beldon Katleman and I got along famously from the first moment because, as one of the orchestra men said, 'You are two of a kind. When you like you like, and when you don't, there's no pretending.'
>
> My engagement was successful, thank heavens, as Buffalo had been. Champaign was in my room every night for the two weeks. Mr. Katleman proved himself a friend and a gentleman and I never met a nicer wife or hostess than Millie.[93]

Not all of Miss Kitt's experiences in Las Vegas were as wonderful as the time she spent at the El Rancho even though she was not permitted to enter the casino.

> Shortly after she had been installed in publicity for El Rancho Vegas, Geri Nolan was driving along Fifth Street with Eartha Kitt, whose nightly performances at El Rancho were fetching stormy applause from packed-house white patrons, many of whom had endeavored to bribe seats out of the maitre d' with bills of large denomination, so anxious were they to catch her act. The temperature was a hundred plus, and Miss Nolan and Miss Kitt agreed that an icy lemonade would be a fine thing. They pulled into a drive-in.
>
> 'The heat in the car would have baked a potato,' Miss Nolan relates. 'We got out and went in, whereupon one of those desperately unattractive waitresses with poppy blue eyes and straggly hair told us she couldn't serve us in there. The contrast between the white slattern and the Negro queen made the incident widly preposterous--but you know, it still makes me ill to think about it.[94]

Finally, there was Nat King Cole. He was one of the premier crooners of all time and everywhere he played was sold out. He came to Las Vegas in 1956.

> He was offered $4,500 a week to play the Thunderbird Hotel. Being white, Nat's road manager, Mort Ruby, was offered a suite at the hotel for free during their engagement. Meanwhile, as Mort told it later, 'I had to go by cab to find Nat a place in the dirtiest, filthiest hole I had ever seen in my life. It was absolutely heartbreaking. I finally located a motel on the other side of the tracks, where the woman had the nerve to charge Nat $15.00 a day.

> The star of the Thunderbird's show could not go into the hotel gambling casino, or anywhere else in the hotel, except for a sitting room that was fixed up adjoining the kitchen. Nat decided then and there he would never play Las Vegas again unless conditions were changed.
>
> The change came two years later when my husband, as quietly as it was kept, broke the color line in Las Vegas. Beldon Katleman, one of the few sole owners of a strip hotel there, wanted the trio, and Carlos Gastel told Beldon exactly how it had to be. "We will work it, providing Nat and the boys can live, eat, gamble, drink or whatever they want to do on the premises of the El Rancho Vegas, without any prejudice shown against them whatsoever.'
>
> 'You've got it,' Beldon agreed.[95]

The second chink had been placed in the armour of segregation. Those others, lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, Sammy Davis, Louis Armstrong and a few others had initiated it by being allowed to live at the hotels even though they could not go into the restaurants or into the casinos. Finally, Nat King Cole was given "carte blanche". It would only be a matter of time before the entire superstructure of racism would come tumbling down.

As those inroads were being made on one front, the local chapter of the NAACP continued to apply pressure. An article which appeared in Ebony magazine furnished the spark to get national support. James Goodrich authored it and he said:

> Negroes themselves could be a great deal to blame for their lowly position in the town. The record shows that Negroes in Las Vegas have never been very active in civic matters. While representing as much as 10 percent of the town's population, they still exert no pressure on the city government. They are politically impotent because they have yet to show a concerted vote in elections. They have never demonstrated that they can band together in civil rights matters and generally seem to be 'don't carish' about issues directly concerning them. Close observers think their complacency can be explained by the fact that many of them are illiterates only recently migrated West from the rural South.[96]

That did it. It was bad enough being humiliated but at least the entire world did not know about it. Now it was no longer a secret. Now, finally they had to face up to it. The national office of the NAACP lent its support to the local chapter. Around the country, black people were demonstrating and boycotting in their on-going quest for civil rights. In some places those tactics had been effective and those places did not have nearly as much to lose as did Las Vegas. Why would someone in Montgomery, Alabama, Newark, N.J., Tampa, Fla., or all of those other places throughout America, want to come all the way to Las Vegas just to be involved in another civil rights march? No reason.

With the leadership of the local chapter of the NAACP, the black population, in effect, poked their heads out of their windows and yelled: "we're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore". A march on the Las Vegas Strip was planned if the walls of segregation did not come down by March 26, 1960. After many meetings, but no negotiating, which involved the NAACP and the Las Vegas Resort Association with Hank Greenspun, editor of the Las Vegas Sun newspaper, serving as mediator, an agreement was reached. At 6:00pm on March 26, 1960, segregation in the hotel industry and all other public facilities would come to an end.[97]

Had not Rosa Parks refused to relinquish that bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama five years earlier, it might not have happened.

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