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## "So Much for Fond Five-Dollar Memories": Prostitution in Las Vegas, 1905-1955

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“SO MUCH FOR FOND FIVE-DOLLAR MEMORIES”:

PROSTITUTION IN LAS VEGAS, 1905-1955

By

Marie Katherine Rowley

Bachelor of Arts in History  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts in History

Department of History  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
May 2012

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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Marie Katherine Rowley

entitled

### **“So Much for Fond Five-Dollar Memories”: Prostitution in Las Vegas, 1905-1955**

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### **Master of Arts in History**

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**May 2012**

## ABSTRACT

### **“So Much for Fond Five-Dollar Memories”: Prostitution in Las Vegas, 1905-1955**

by

Marie Katherine Rowley

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Over the fifty years examined in this thesis, the interactions between federal and local officials shaped prostitution policy in Las Vegas and Clark County. At times that federal authorities were concerned about prostitution in the county, local leaders balanced tradition and economic necessity in their responses. In the early twentieth century, prostitution’s benefits to the local economy outweighed fear of federal reprisals, so local officials worked to protect the city’s brothels. By the start of World War II, the federal government’s increased power and presence in the West made local officials more willing to abandon the tolerance for prostitution in the community and pursue an aggressive campaign of enforcement against suspected prostitutes. In the years immediately after the war, county and city officials undertook a “war on vice” that targeted brothels that periodically emerged in various parts of the community. Finally, in 1954 a federal raid on one of Southern Nevada’s most successful brothels initiated a series of events that led to a permanent end for brothel prostitution in Clark County. This thesis illustrates the connections between two important histories: the growth of Las Vegas from a small railroad town into a modern resort city, and the expansion of the federal government’s power and influence during the first half of the twentieth century. Prostitution serves as a lens through which to view how these two narratives are linked.

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## Introduction

Federal involvement in Southern Nevada in the twentieth century shaped the ways that Las Vegas officials and citizens responded to prostitution in their community. At times the federal government directly influenced local policy, as when local officials collaborated with military authorities during World War II to arrest and detain hundreds of women suspected of prostitution. In other cases, federal influence more indirectly shaped local policy, as when the post-war boom of Southern California inspired Las Vegas to remake its image to cater to a new class of tourists. The attitudes of local officials toward prostitution in the Las Vegas area shifted dramatically from open acceptance in 1905 to total disdain by 1955. Studying local approaches to prostitution is an important way to examine how the federal government's influence during the middle of the twentieth century impacted the growth and development of the American West.

The regulation of sexuality is an essential element of state-building. As historian Margot Canaday has argued, as the federal government expanded its power and influence over the course of the twentieth century, it increasingly sought ways to regulate gender and sexual norms and to police nonconformity.<sup>1</sup> This study demonstrates that prostitution was one area where the federal government asserted this authority. In the early twentieth century, federal officials were concerned about evidence of gender and sexual deviance in the country, but made only limited and indirect attempts to encourage conformity. As the state's power and influence dramatically expanded during World War II and the Cold War so too did its efforts to enforce gender and sexual norms more directly among its citizens. This thesis provides further evidence supporting Canaday's argument and uses prostitution as the site for describing increased federal regulation of sexuality over the twentieth century. During the building of the Hoover Dam in the early 1930s, federal officials encouraged Las Vegas officials to close down the houses of prostitution in the

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

city. During World War II, the federal pressure became more direct, as government and military officials worked closely with local leaders to suppress prostitution in the community. By the 1950s, the federal government's interest in prostitution in Las Vegas reached its highest point to date, as FBI agents bypassed local authority completely by raiding a brothel on the outskirts of town. This pattern, though enacted on a small local stage, reflects significant national trends that shaped American history in the twentieth century.

Las Vegas is one of America's sunbelt cities, a term used by urban historians to describe the southern and western population centers that experienced dramatic population growth in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Massive federal spending contributed heavily to the growth of all the sunbelt cities, and Las Vegas is no exception. Much of its growth can be traced to two periods of intensive federal involvement in the area: the creation of the Hoover Dam and subsequent New Deal projects in the 1930s, and large defense projects during World War II and the early Cold War, including the creation of the Las Vegas Air Gunnery School and the Nevada Test Site. Unlike the other sunbelt cities, however, Las Vegas built its economy almost exclusively around gambling and tourism.<sup>3</sup> Las Vegas' history can serve as both a model for other sunbelt cities and a unique case study for how a city can develop with an economy built around activities that are considered taboo elsewhere in the country. As sociologists Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson and Kathryn Hausbeck have written, "Nevada built a tourist industry on turning deviance into leisure."<sup>4</sup>

Since its earliest days, prostitution was one form of "deviance" that Las Vegas embraced for its own profit. When Las Vegas was founded as a railroad town in 1905, it adopted many of

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<sup>2</sup> David Perry and Alfred Watkins, eds, *Rise of the Sunbelt Cities*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977); Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Metropolitan Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-2000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), 13. Miami Beach and Honolulu are both sunbelt cities with tourism-based economies; however, they do not have legalized gaming as Las Vegas does.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck's *The State of Sex: Tourism, Sex, and Sin in the New American Heartland*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

the characteristics of the state in which it was located. As a sparsely populated state with an economy built almost exclusively on mining, Nevada in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized by libertarian and laissez faire attitudes typified by its open acceptance of gambling, drinking, and prostitution.<sup>5</sup> As a small town built to serve the needs of the railroad workers on the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad and the miners from the nearby Bullfrog and Goldfield Mining Districts, young Las Vegas willingly embraced the state's libertarian attitudes. At the same time, increased urbanization in the East inspired a fascination with images of the West's frontier past.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, Las Vegas reflected the development of many of the state's earlier boomtowns, such as Virginia City and Goldfield, and early city boosters embraced the frontier imagery associated with those early mining towns.<sup>7</sup> Like its boomtown predecessors, saloons and brothels were "anchoring" businesses in early Las Vegas, and Block 16's "resorts" contained both.<sup>8</sup> The district comprised up to eight saloons with brothels attached, on First Street between Ogden and Stewart, just two blocks from the railroad depot in the heart of the city's downtown business district.

The brothels of Block 16 existed in a quasi-legal gray area until 1942. During this time, the city worked to grow and define itself in a relatively autonomous environment, free of state and federal intervention. The city government never officially recognized them or licensed them, but openly acknowledged their importance to the city and encouraged the local police department to regulate them to maintain order and safeguard public health. The state government, based in the distant capital Carson City more than 400 miles north of Las Vegas, was unconcerned with prostitution generally, and paid little attention to the tiny town in the south. The first challenge to

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<sup>5</sup> Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and its Hold on America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 40. See also Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 55-56.

<sup>7</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 47. Contemporary newspapers consistently refer to the establishments on Block 16 as "resorts," presumably because they acted as gambling halls, saloons, and brothels all in one. To reflect these multiple purposes, I have adopted this word throughout this study.

the red-light district occurred when the federal government first established a significant presence in southern Nevada when it began construction of the Hoover Dam in the early 1930s. Block 16 withstood this initial challenge, but the increased federal presence in the area after the dam's completion meant that the community began to abandon its romanticized self-image as an artifact of the Old West and its acceptance of Block 16 as a symbol of that image. By 1941, enough Las Vegans had turned against the red-light district to allow an enterprising real estate investor to successfully force its closure.

At the same time that they were working toward closing down the brothels on Block 16, the City Commissioners established a new red-light district at the Meadows, a neighborhood just outside city limits. The Meadows came under immediate fire from the federal government, however, as Army officials preparing for World War II demanded its closure in early 1942. Anxious to keep the servicemen from the nearby Las Vegas Air Gunnery school spending their paychecks in the city's casinos and saloons, local officials quickly complied with this request, ending the city's history of sanctioning and regulating a local red-light district. During World War II, local officials worked diligently to appease state and federal officials who wanted to prevent the spread of venereal disease among the servicemen stationed in the area by implementing a policy of "forced isolation" of women suspected of engaging in prostitution. Throughout the war, the local law enforcement agencies arrested hundreds of women in Las Vegas and detained them in the city jail until a doctor verified that they were free of disease.

After the war, the federal government's involvement in local affairs waned, but the tremendous population and economic growth of Southern Nevada that its wartime activities had initiated shaped the community's actions and attitudes toward prostitution for the next decade. The post-war period was marked by an expansion of the middle class nationally and a new interest in leisure, and Las Vegas officials shrewdly positioned the city as an ideal vacation spot for the nation's tourists. City and county leaders pushed for multiple reforms to modernize the city to meet the needs of a population swelling to support the growing tourist industry and to

bring the city closer to their ideal version of a major U. S. metropolis. One of these reforms was a renewed crackdown on prostitution, and from 1946 until 1954 community's relationship to prostitution was defined by the tensions between county and municipal authorities who were each eager to portray themselves to local voters as leaders in a perpetual "war on vice." During this period, the public discourse on prostitution in the community centered on a series of brothels that opened in various locations throughout the county. Whenever a new brothel came to the attention of the local press, city and county authorities publicly decried prostitution and announced their intentions to close the establishment. In most cases, law enforcement officers staged dramatic raids on these brothels, and the "hot spot" would fade from headlines within a few months. The notable exception to this rule was the Roxie, a brothel located in an area of the county known as Four Mile, which remained in operation throughout this period despite repeated announcements by local officials that it would be closed.

In 1954, the Roxie's apparent immunity was finally broken when the federal government again asserted its authority to police gender and sexual deviance by directly intervening at the brothel at Four Mile. In April, FBI agents raided the brothel and arrested its owners, Roxie and Eddie Clippinger, and its manager, Dick Kellogg. Later that year, the government charged them with violating the federal law against white slavery and tried them in a federal court in southern California. The raid and trial were evidence of the federal government's growing power in the early Cold War years. Just as it was policing nonconformity among leftists and homosexuals, the FBI was also interested in eliminating organized crime, of which prostitution was a key element. Again this direct action by the federal government triggered a series of events that indirectly influenced the way the community approached prostitution. During the trial, one of Las Vegas' two newspapers, the *Las Vegas Sun*, revealed that the county sheriff and at least one county commissioner had been receiving bribes to keep the Roxie in operation. The *Sun's* revelations permanently altered the political landscape in the community and turned public opinion toward permanent abatement of brothels in the county. After the attention of the federal trial and the

*Sun's* exposés, brothel prostitution ended in Clark County, and when the Roxie closed for the last time in early 1955 no new establishment emerged to take its place.

Throughout the fifty years of this study, the official policies and informal attitudes toward prostitution in the Las Vegas community were constructed by the tensions between federal influence and local necessity. The periods of Las Vegas' most rapid growth, first during the building of the dam and then again after World War II, coincided with the moments when citizens most seriously evaluated the role prostitution played in the local economy. When the federal government first began pressuring the city to end prostitution in the early 1930s, city officials resisted because the brothels were important to the frontier image that brought miners, railroad workers, and dam workers to Block 16 on payday. City officials became more accommodating when the federal government's power grew during World War II, pragmatically shifting local policy in order to keep the defense spending that was building up Southern Nevada. In addition to directly investing in Southern Nevada, the federal government also set the stage for the growth of the leisure economy that supported Las Vegas' growth into a major resort city in the post-war period. The resulting narrative provides both a case study for the ways that the federal government shaped the western states and cities in the twentieth century, and a fascinating example of how the factors unique to Las Vegas made its approaches to prostitution distinct from other cities.

This thesis significantly deepens and challenges the existing historiography of prostitution in America. Beginning with Ruth Rosen's *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*, in 1983, urban historians, social historians, and historians of sexuality have investigated the role prostitution has played in America's history. The majority of these studies have focused on major U.S. cities in the East, South, and Midwest in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or on mining towns in the West in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The standard

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<sup>9</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); see also Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City,*

narrative of the history of prostitution in America closely parallels the period of rapid urbanization during the Industrial Revolution. As urbanization swept across America in the nineteenth century, most major cities developed a red-light district—a defined and limited urban space set aside for the expression and experience of illicit sex. Prostitutes in these districts crossed the strictly defined boundaries between public and private space that limited the movement of most women. Motivated by moral outrage at perceived sinfulness, concerns for public health, or sympathy for the “fallen women” of the red-light districts, Progressive reformers launched aggressive campaigns across the country against the red-light districts and their residents at the turn of the century. In the introduction to *The Lost Sisterhood*, Ruth Rosen wrote, “[R]eformers succeeded by 1918 in enlisting the state to close down the previously tolerated red-light districts in most American cities.”<sup>10</sup> Most historians have accepted this trope, with the result that red-light districts are considered a product of the nineteenth century almost exclusively. Indeed, Timothy Gilfoyle called the period ending in 1918 the “century of prostitution,” and most historians agree that by the 1920s the brothels in most cities’ tenderloin districts were cleared out and their residents driven to practice their trade more secretly.<sup>11</sup>

This study challenges this narrative by introducing Las Vegas as an example of an urban center with a red-light district that enjoyed popular and official sanction well after the 1920s and investigating western prostitution in an urban context. It joins an emerging body of historical studies that establish that in younger cities, particularly in the West, red-light districts escaped the efforts of Progressive reformers in the 1910s, and instead faced their most strenuous challenges

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*Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Alice Clements, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Mara L. Keire, *For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1890*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Anne Seagraves, *Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West*, (Hayden, ID: Wesanne Publications, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Rosen, xii.

<sup>11</sup> Gilfoyle, 304.



during the expansion of the federal government's power in the West during World War II. For example, Josh Sides' recent study of San Francisco argues that though it faced many challenges in the early twentieth century, the brothels in San Francisco's red-light district remained in operation until the mid-1940s.<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Nichols' study of prostitution in Salt Lake City focuses on the last half of the nineteenth century but is notable for focusing on a western urban center instead of the mining camps that dominated the earlier historiography.<sup>13</sup> This thesis seeks to continue this trend in the literature by contributing to the understanding of the significance of western urban centers in the mid-twentieth century in the history of prostitution in America.

By moving the study of prostitution forward past World War II, this thesis also contributes to the growing historiography on gender and sexuality during the war and in the immediate post-war period. The role of prostitution in shaping gender ideology and sexual norms during these periods deserves much further study. Beth Bailey and David Farber, Elizabeth A. Clements, and Marilyn Hegarty have examined prostitution during World War II; Chapter 2 of this thesis expands their work by presenting Las Vegas as a case study of the topic.<sup>14</sup> Histories of prostitution after the war are even scarcer.<sup>15</sup> Research on this topic can serve to complicate the common narrative of post-war America by exploring the unique constructions of gender and sexuality that emerged in this time period, continuing the work of such scholars as Elaine Tyler

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<sup>12</sup> Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Nichols, *Prostitution, Polygamy, and Power: Salt Lake City, 1847-1918*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii*, (New York: Free Press, 1992); Clements, 240-258; Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008);

<sup>15</sup> Two scholars have recently presented unpublished papers on prostitution in the post-war period, indicating that the subject is now emerging. Colin R. Johnson, "Sexual Conventions: Prostitution and the Culture of Commerce in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Chicago," (paper presented at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians in Amherst, MA, June 11, 2011); Stephanie Chalifoux, "Highway Girls: Sex Work Migration in the 1950s Rural South," (paper presented at the American Historical Association Conference in Chicago, IL, January 8, 2012).

May, Joanne Meyerowitz, Margot Canaday, and others.<sup>16</sup> In particular, Canaday's study of the ways in which the state's growing power during the twentieth century was reflected in its increased regulation of gender and sexual norms influenced the framework of this thesis. In a 1994 essay, Donna Penn identified the lesbian and the prostitute as archetypes of female deviancy in post-war culture.<sup>17</sup> This study uses Penn's thesis as a starting point for understanding the cultural implications of prostitution in Las Vegas history; however, much more research is necessary to reconstruct the basic histories of prostitution in this time period before a truly cultural history of the subject can be attempted. This paper aims to begin the process of opening this field for future study.

Finally, this study also expands the broader urban historiography by adding to the growing literature on the development of Las Vegas. In his book *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, historian Eugene Moehring wrote, "[D]espite its traditionally scandalous reputation, Las Vegas deserves to be studied as a dynamic resort city and one of the fastest growing sunbelt centers in postwar America."<sup>18</sup> This thesis seeks to support Moehring's assertion by illuminating an element of Las Vegas' history that has largely been overlooked. In addition to Moehring, Michael Green, Hal Rothman, John Findlay, and other historians have explored the rapid growth of Las Vegas in the twentieth century and the development of its tourism-based economy, but the role of sex work in that development is still poorly understood.<sup>19</sup> For example, Moehring's *Resort City in the*

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<sup>16</sup> Elaine Tyler May's pioneering work *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), was one of the first to challenge the mainstream historiography of post-war culture by analyzing the constructions of gender and sexuality during that time. For more recent works continuing this challenge, see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Canaday.

<sup>17</sup> Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America," in *Not June Cleaver*, Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., 359.

<sup>18</sup> Moehring, xi.

<sup>19</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*; Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005); Hal Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); John M.

*Sunbelt* and Moehring and Green's *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, only briefly discuss prostitution in the immediate post-war period.<sup>20</sup> Chapter 3 of sociologists Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck's study of legalized brothel prostitution in Nevada provides a synthesis of the existing literature on prostitution in Las Vegas. This thesis expands their work by presenting significant new research not present in the secondary sources they surveyed. In a 2002 essay, Joanne L. Goodwin wrote that Las Vegas women's history "is in an early stage of development" and lamented that the search for historical sources on sex work in the city had been "unrewarding."<sup>21</sup> This study seeks to contribute a preliminary understanding of the ways in which sex work impacted the city's history by presenting an in-depth analysis of a large amount of primary historical sources.

In addition to examining Las Vegas' history of prostitution as a whole, this study also refutes a common element in the narratives of prostitution in Las Vegas. Soon after Block 16's closure in early 1942, local residents began conflating the timing of its abatement with the Army's request that the city help eliminate prostitution near the Air Gunnery School. For example, in his 1946 memoir, former City Attorney Paul Ralli wrote that "Uncle Sam... closed the Block."<sup>22</sup> In oral histories collected in the 1970s, many long-time Vegas residents also recalled this version of events, telling their interviewers that the city officials closed the block's brothels because "they had pressure from the Army."<sup>23</sup> Most historians have included this version of the chronology when they discuss Block 16.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the City Commission closed the resorts on the block several weeks before the Army's request. Though officials at the Air Gunnery

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Findlay, *People of Chance: Gambling in American Culture from Jamestown to Las Vegas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 60-61; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 117-118.

<sup>21</sup> Joanne L. Goodwin, "She Works Hard for Her Money: A Reassessment of Las Vegas Women Workers, 1945-1985," in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas*, Hal K. Rothman and Mike Davis, eds., (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 244, 257 (note 5).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ralli, *Nevada Lawyer*, (Dallas: Mathis, Van Nort, and Co., 1946), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Daly, taped interview with Charles Malkoski, February 25, 1975, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 104.

School would surely have targeted Block 16 if it still existed, their first complaints about prostitution in the city were directed at the Meadows, Block 16's successor.<sup>25</sup> Though this discrepancy is a relatively minor one, it points to the necessity of reassessing the accepted version of Las Vegas' history of prostitution, which has been perpetuated largely by popular myth rather than detailed analysis of the available sources.

In addition to challenging the dominant understanding of Block 16's history, this study adds considerably to the understanding of prostitution in Las Vegas after the block's closure. Both popular and scholarly authors who have addressed prostitution in the city's history have focused almost exclusively on Block 16, due largely to its almost legendary status as a remnant of Las Vegas' early frontier image.<sup>26</sup> Moehring's *Resort City in the Sunbelt* and Moehring and Green's *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, both briefly mention the brothel at the Kassabian Ranch and the Roxie, but they offer very little detail on these events and do not include the other brothels that drew the community's focus in the post-war period.<sup>27</sup> Popular understanding of the 1954 raid on the Roxie and the subsequent scandals has been shaped primarily by the chapter on those events in *The Green Felt Jungle*, a 1963 book detailing the role of organized crime in Las Vegas' development.<sup>28</sup> One of the co-authors, Ed Reid, played a key role in these events as the *Sun* reporter who first broke the scandal, and his version of the story is therefore obviously biased. To date there is no known secondary source that discusses the city's policies regarding prostitution during World War II, nor any source that places the post-war raids on the Kassabian and the Roxie in full context. By surveying fifty years, this study is the first to attempt a broad history of prostitution in Las Vegas and place it in a fuller context of larger events at the local, state, and national level. This thesis is intended to be not a micro-history of prostitution in Las

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 1 for more detail on the closing of Block 16, and Chapter 2 for more information on the Army's complaints about the Meadows.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Sarah Hall Washburn, "Changing Images: The End of Legalized Prostitution in Las Vegas." M.A. Thesis, University of Nevada-Las Vegas Department of History, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Moehring, 61; Moehring and Green, 117-118.

<sup>28</sup> Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, *The Green Felt Jungle*, (London: Heinemann, 1963).

Vegas, but to illustrate how this topic reflects important elements in urban history, gender and sexuality history, and modern U.S. history more broadly.

As Goodwin noted, the task of assembling historical sources on an illegal practice can be challenging. Further complicating this project, Las Vegas' tremendous growth in a relatively short period of time resulted in a web of inefficient local bureaucracies and a forward-looking attitude among citizens, both of which made record-keeping and archiving haphazard. Because of the scarcity and unreliability of local government records, much of the information on events and attitudes in Las Vegas in this thesis was recreated through the use of local newspapers, primarily *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* and *The Las Vegas Sun*. Further complicating matters, the *Sun* did not begin publishing until 1950, so from 1942 to 1950 local discourse on prostitution was shaped almost entirely by the *Review-Journal*.<sup>29</sup> These newspapers are challenging sources in themselves because of the strong opposing political opinions of their editors, Al Cahlan at the *Review-Journal* and Hank Greenspun at the *Sun*. This thesis acknowledges these sources' subjectivity, and at times the two newspapers' biases are themselves important elements of this history. A wide array of other sources was used to corroborate events detailed in the newspapers and provide crucial additional information, particularly about events at the state and national levels.

Many manuscript and record collections outside Las Vegas expanded the scope of the narrative, although these also had some limitations. For example, the American Social Hygiene Association collection in the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota contains a folder of field reports conducted in Nevada between 1949 and 1952. These reports provide rich details on prostitution in the state at the time. However, although these reports periodically refer to undercover investigations conducted by ASHA field representatives, the results of these investigations are not present in the archive. The Nevada State Archives in Carson City contain many records from the State Department of Health; however, after 1947 the Department of Health's priorities shifted and the records no further significant information on

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 2 for more information on the history of the local newspapers.

vice conditions in the state. This project utilizes sources from eight different archives in four states. These sources include records from federal agencies, the Nevada state government, Clark County, and the cities of Las Vegas and North Las Vegas. Although no single archive or collection provided a complete narrative of prostitution in Las Vegas history, read together the various sources in this study provide the most in-depth portrait of the subject to date.

Chapter One explores the history of Las Vegas' openly tolerated red-light district, Block 16, from the city's founding in 1905 until its closure in January 1942. It describes how the district developed in the city's early decades and explains how city officials and citizens viewed prostitution's place in the local economy and culture during this time period. This chapter then describes the first challenges to the district in the early 1930s as the federal government increased its presence in Southern Nevada through the construction of a federal building near the district and then the Hoover Dam thirty miles southeast of town. Local officials and the residents and business owners of the block resisted this pressure, recognizing the district's economic importance in the small community. Though the block withstood this initial assault, the federal government's massive investment in Southern Nevada created a population boom and a growing awareness that the city's tourism industry would expand in the future. This set the stage for a second challenge to Block 16 in 1941, when a local attorney and real estate investor named J. R. Lewis began pressuring the City Commission to close down the resorts on the block. Chapter One concludes by detailing how this challenge to the block succeeded, resulting in the closure of all the brothels on the block while Lewis bought most of the properties.

Chapter Two describes the period between the federal government's second wave of major influence in Southern Nevada beginning with World War II through the events leading up to the federal raid of the Roxie in 1954. This chapter begins with the Army's request to the city to close the newly-opened brothel at the Meadows in January 1942. It then details the ways that the federal, state, and local governments interacted during World War II to implement a policy of "forced isolation" for women suspected of prostitution. After the war, though direct federal

involvement in local policy ceased, again the tremendous population and economic growth triggered by federal action in the region influenced local approaches to prostitution. Just as they had after the completion of the Hoover Dam in the late 1930s, community leaders again assessed how prostitution might affect the growing tourism industry and concluded that it was in the city's best interests to condemn the practice. From 1946 until 1954, the local discourse surrounding prostitution centered on a series of brothels scattered throughout the county, with city and county officials periodically announcing their intention to win the "war on vice."

The final chapter addresses the events surrounding the last major federal intervention in Las Vegas prostitution with the April 1954 FBI raid on the Roxie brothel in the county and the trial of its owners in federal court in California. This event inspired unprecedented attention to the issue of prostitution in the community, spurred in large part by the intense coverage in the *Las Vegas Sun*. The federal raid and trial provided the backdrop to an investigation by the *Sun* into the brothel's connections to local politicians. This investigation uncovered connections between several local officials and organized crime syndicates, resulting in a statewide scandal and a political upheaval that permanently altered the community's policies on prostitution. In January 1955 the newly elected county sheriff finally closed the Roxie, bringing the history of brothel prostitution in Las Vegas to an end almost fifty years after it had started on Block 16.

From the first challenges to Block 16 in the 1930s to the Roxie's final end in 1955, the federal government was directly or indirectly responsible for the ways the community approached prostitution. The ways in which local leaders resisted or accommodated the federal pressure to police this form of sexual deviance reveal important details about the development of the city as a whole. This history also illuminates significant trends at the state, regional, and national levels in the mid-twentieth century.

## Chapter 1

### The Rise and Fall of Block 16

Within a year of its founding in 1905, Las Vegas had an established, well-defined red-light district located in its downtown business district. During the 1910s and 1920s, the restricted district, known as Block 16, served the ranchers, railroad workers, and railroad passengers who traveled through the tiny town. Block 16 was tolerated or even celebrated by the town's citizens, representing a romanticized version of Nevada's frontier past. As the young town moved toward becoming a modern resort city, its relationship to the red-light district changed. Federal actions in Southern Nevada initiated these changes, both by directly requesting that the City Commission close the district and indirectly by creating the conditions that allowed the city to transition from a railroad supply town in the 1910s and 1920s to a major tourist destination by the 1940s. The first challenge came during the building of the Hoover Dam in the early 1930s, which first brought federal scrutiny to the city's policies surrounding prostitution. The Hoover Dam's construction created a population boom and brought hundreds of thousands of tourists to Las Vegas. The tremendous growth in the city spurred by this federal project prompted a reassessment of the appropriateness of the brothels' location in the downtown business district. As Las Vegas again anticipated the federal government's expansion in Southern Nevada in the months leading up to World War II they abandoned their policy of tolerating the red-light district, and the brothels of Block 16 were finally closed in January 1942.

#### **The Development of Block 16**

Prostitutes were present almost from the city's founding. Las Vegas was created as a support town for the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, essentially the mid-point between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. In May 1905 the railroad auctioned parcels of land on the eastern side of the tracks to land speculators and investors, primarily from Los Angeles and



Salt Lake City.<sup>1</sup> First Street between Ogden and Stewart, the sixteenth block of the new townsite, was designated for saloons, and the lots on this block sold quickly and for the highest prices.<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately tent and simple wood-frame structures opened on Block 16 to supply the new town with liquor. Within a year, permanent buildings were erected to replace these makeshift structures, and prostitutes moved into the new saloons, prompting some citizens to express concern about moral conditions in the young town. The recently launched newspaper, the *Las Vegas Age*, reported that the city was attempting to enforce a rule prohibiting the operation of a brothel in connection with a saloon, and speculated that this push would soon cause the local brothels to cease operation permanently.<sup>3</sup> This was the first of many such predictions that would be proven false by prostitution's firm entrenchment in Las Vegas' economy and self-image.



**Figure One.** The Arizona Club ca. 1909. This photo shows the building's original façade. UNLV Libraries, Special Collection.

<sup>1</sup> Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> "Big Sale of Las Vegas Lots," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1905, 13.

<sup>3</sup> "Enforcing Law," *Las Vegas Age*, June 23, 1906, 1.

By 1910, prostitutes had moved into the establishments on Block 16, and the area became known as the town's red-light district. The centerpiece of the block was the elegant Arizona Club, which original owner Jim McIntosh had furnished with expensive mahogany furnishings, lead-plated glass, and deep red wainscoting.<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 1) The focus of the Arizona Club was its large and lavish bar, which impressed citizens and out-of-town visitors alike. The bar was such a draw to the small number of tourists that to locals that one long-time resident later explained that a trip to the Arizona Club "was just like going to a museum, almost."<sup>5</sup> Around 1909, McIntosh sold the club to Al James, who built a second story above the saloon to house several prostitutes.<sup>6</sup> (See Figure Two) Despite the sophistication of the Arizona Club's interior, the block quickly came to represent the state's "relaxed and wild" image.<sup>7</sup> A former resident of the block described it as the city's "skid row", inhabited by "tramps" and the scene of constant "fighting and hellraising" during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>8</sup> An incident from February 1910 typifies the block's early atmosphere; Joseph Goldie, a well-known local ne'er-do-well stole a horse from a ranch near town, sold it, and then spent his profits "royally" in the red-light district.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Arizona Club Sold," *Las Vegas Age*, June 23, 1906, 1; Charles P. Squires, "Observations," *Las Vegas Age*, May 30, 1941, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Daly, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.

<sup>6</sup> Squires, "Observations," *Las Vegas Age*, May 30, 1941, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Findlay, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Daly, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.

<sup>9</sup> "Goldie Gets Gay," *Las Vegas Age*, February 12, 1910, 1.



**Figure Two.** The Arizona Club ca. 1920. This photo shows the second story and new façade that Al James added to the building after 1909. UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.

In its early decades, Block 16, like the town itself, was not segregated. The 1910 U.S. Census shows at least one African-American proprietor, James Franklin, with four African-American women working for him.<sup>10</sup> The women ranged in age from 21 to 38 and were all born in southern states.<sup>11</sup> Two adjacent saloons were operated by white men and housed three white prostitutes. In 1912, a county grand jury reported that black, white, and Hispanic women were all working as prostitutes in the district, in some cases within the same brothel.<sup>12</sup> This caused the grand jury some alarm, but the red-light district remained a site of relative integration for decades. African-American women disappeared from the block's brothels soon after the grand jury's report, but white and Hispanic women were both present in the block into the early 1940s.

<sup>10</sup> 1910 United States Census, Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada.

<sup>11</sup> Three were from Missouri, as were James Franklin and his wife Emma Franklin. One was from Louisiana. Though they did not self-identify as prostitutes, I am inferring that they were because of their residence in the establishments of the red-light district.

<sup>12</sup> "Report of Grand Jury," *Las Vegas Age*, November 30, 1912, 1.

In the 1910s, Pilar Santa Cruz, a recent immigrant from Mexico, opened the Red Front Saloon on the block; in 1920, five women worked as prostitutes in her establishment, two of whom had been born in Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

The City Commission unofficially sanctioned and regulated the red-light district. The women were required to live on the block and remain there during business hours. Restricting prostitution to one specially designated block was crucial to its acceptance among citizens; those who found the practice morally repugnant could easily avoid it by simply staying away from the block. Prostitutes were not only restricted to the block, but the brothels themselves served as a barrier to their presence in the community. A survey of conditions in the city in 1930 reported that the police would not allow the women to solicit for business in the street or in other bars or resorts.<sup>14</sup> Only during the hottest summer months did the city allow the women to spend their leisure time outside, on the sidewalks in front of the resorts. Most of Block 16's resorts were only one story, with the notable exception of the Arizona Club. The prostitutes' living quarters were in the back of the buildings, accessible from the alley that ran behind the block. The women worked as independent contractors; they rented their rooms at a weekly rate and kept all of their earnings.<sup>15</sup> During its peak popularity in the late 1920s and early 1930s, between twenty and forty women worked on the block at any given moment.<sup>16</sup> In addition to physically restricting the area in which such businesses could operate, the city also attempted to regulate the trade by requiring regular health checks among the women who practiced it. Block 16's prostitutes received weekly examinations from a local doctor, who then issued them a certificate if he found them in good

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<sup>13</sup> 1920 United States Census, Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada. As before, these women did not identify themselves as prostitutes to the census taker, but their residence on Block 16 implies that they most likely were.

<sup>14</sup> Walker R. Young, "Complaint as to conditions in Las Vegas, Nevada- Boulder Dam- Colorado River," August 25, 1930, 12, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, "General Administrative and Project Files, 1930-1945, Colorado River Project," record group 115, box 218, file 090.21, National Archives and Records Administration, Rocky Mountain Region, Denver (hereafter cited as Bureau of Reclamation).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 11.

health.<sup>17</sup> Women without a certificate were not allowed to work in the district; the police regularly verified that the examinations were being done.

The laws of Nevada did not forbid prostitution, in keeping with the state's tradition of allowing the counties and cities the authority to create such laws for themselves. During the height of the Progressive movement in America, Nevadans "consistently resisted" any attempt to impose statewide moral reforms.<sup>18</sup> Brothels, gambling halls, and saloons had all been socially and economically important in the state's nineteenth-century mining towns, and twentieth-century Nevadans continued that tradition despite efforts to close these establishments. The state legislature made some minor concessions to reformers; they passed laws forbidding a brothel from operating within 800 yards of a school or church or on a "principal street."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the state outlawed gambling in 1910, though the law was almost never enforced and the ban was lifted in 1931.<sup>20</sup> When Prohibition began in 1919, communities throughout the state resisted vigorously, and speakeasies and bootlegging operations flourished throughout the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> Most Nevadans seemed to agree with Reno mayoral candidate Edwin E. Roberts, who told voters he would happily allow a barrel of whiskey to be placed on every street corner and concluded, "You can't legislate morals into people."<sup>22</sup>

In its early years, Las Vegas resembled the boomtowns that had periodically dotted the state since the 1840s, and its attitudes toward gambling, alcohol, and prostitution mirrored its predecessors. Gambling continued in backrooms in Las Vegas' clubs throughout the statewide ban, and local law enforcement officers flatly refused to enforce the federal ban on alcohol.<sup>23</sup> A 1912 county grand jury noted that the brothels of Block 16 were less than 800 yards away from a

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<sup>17</sup> Young, "Complaint as to Conditions," 12, Bureau of Reclamation.

<sup>18</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52-53; "Grand Jury," *Las Vegas Age*, May 20, 1911, 1.

<sup>20</sup> James W. Hulse, *The Silver State: Nevada's Heritage Reinterpreted*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 198.

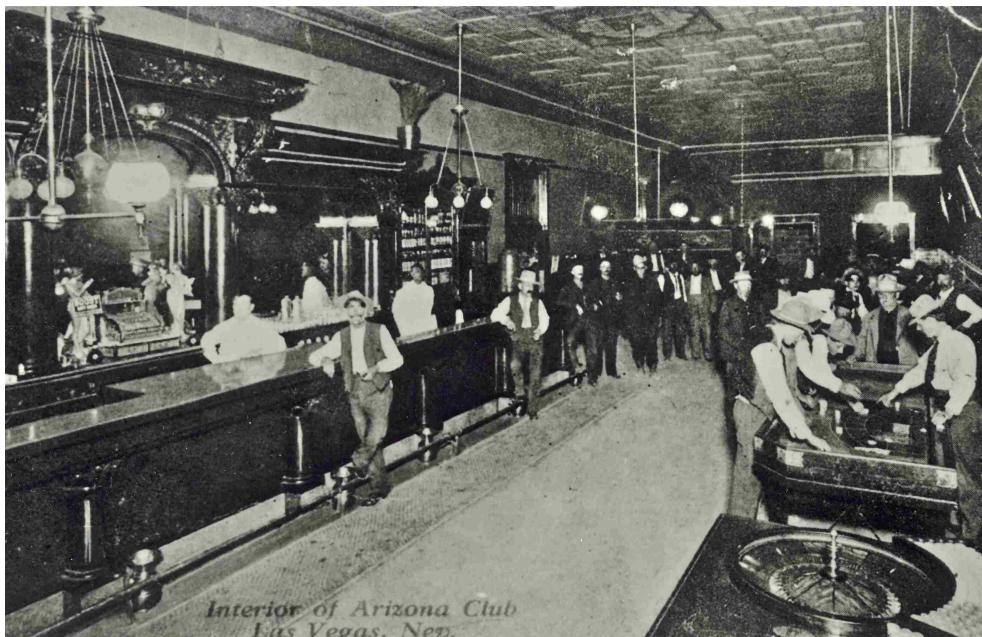
<sup>21</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 56; Hulse, 199.

<sup>23</sup> Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 48.



church, as forbidden by the legislature, and recommended that the city consider moving the district, though the city did not acknowledge this recommendation at all.<sup>24</sup> During the 1920s, the federal government did not have a strong presence in Southern Nevada. When federal officials paid attention to vice conditions in Las Vegas, they were typically more concerned with the city's flagrant disregard for the country's Prohibition laws. From 1905 until the late 1920s, while Las Vegas remained a small railroad town, Block 16 seemed to be an integral part of the community. Among its earliest clientele were ranchers from the surrounding area and railroad workers, which gave it a working-class atmosphere. The first time it came under scrutiny from outsiders was as the federal government made plans for a massive reclamation project that established its ability to shape both the physical and moral geography of the southwest.



**Figure Three.** Postcard featuring Wyatt Earp posing at the bar of the Arizona Club in 1908. Images like this were used to promote a frontier image for early Las Vegas. UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.

### **The First Challenge**

In the late 1920s, Southern Nevada became the focus of a proposed federal project to create a major hydroelectric dam on the Colorado River, overseen by the Bureau of Reclamation

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<sup>24</sup> "Report of Grand Jury," *Las Vegas Age*, November 30, 1912, 1.

within the Department of the Interior. In preparation for the population boom the town would soon experience, the Treasury Department proposed building a post office in Las Vegas, which the locals excitedly called “the federal building.” In exchange for the new post office, the City Commission donated the land for the new building, a lot on Stewart Street less than two blocks from Block 16. Because of this proximity, the city also promised that it would clear the prostitutes out of Block 16 before the federal building’s completion.<sup>25</sup> The City Commission proposed relocating the vice district to a lot in the original townsite, on the western side of the railroad tracks across from Clark’s Las Vegas Townsite. The proposed lot was a 40 acre parcel of land known as Buol’s Addition, located to the northwest of the Union Pacific Stockyards.<sup>26</sup> The total abolishment of the district was not even suggested. In fact, the City Commission carefully assured the property owners on Block 16 that they would only have to move once construction actually started, allowing them several months to continue business uninterrupted.<sup>27</sup>

The Commission’s proposal was met with immediate resistance from homeowners in Buol’s Addition and from the residents of Block 16. The homeowners of Buol’s Addition argued that moving the restricted district to their neighborhood would harm their property values, and that it was inappropriate to move it to a residential area with families.<sup>28</sup> The property owners of Block 16 complained that the City Commission had promised the proposed new district to a “Los Angeles syndicate,” pushing them out of the business in favor of outsiders.<sup>29</sup> Agnes McLaughlin angrily told the Commission that their proposal favored “newcomers who would take the cream” after citizens had worked for decades to build up their establishments and contribute to the local

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<sup>25</sup> “2 New Buildings Announced, Start Soon,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 1, 1930, 1.

<sup>26</sup> “First Step in Moving Block 16 is Taken by City,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 29, 1930, 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> “City Fathers Hear Protests on Removal of Block Sixteen,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 31, 1930, 1; City Commission of Las Vegas, minutes, January 30, 1930, volume 3, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>29</sup> “City Fathers Hear Protests,” *Review-Journal*, January 31, 1930, 1.

economy.<sup>30</sup> They requested that the Buol's Addition proposal be abandoned while they secured a new location for themselves. Faced with opposition on all fronts, the City Commission voted to delay the decision indefinitely.<sup>31</sup>

The issue had to be faced again, however, as the federal government drew closer to beginning its massive construction project at the dam. In July 1930, Congress authorized federal funds to begin both the city's new downtown federal building and the Boulder Dam in the same appropriations bill.<sup>32</sup> As construction on the post office began in the summer of 1931, the Commission again opened a public debate over where the red-light district should be moved. *Las Vegas Review-Journal* editor A.E. Cahlan summarized the situation for readers in his column in June.<sup>33</sup> The City Commission's original proposal to the Treasury Department included several specific promises, he explained, including the removal of the red-light district. However, this letter did not constitute a legal agreement; the city was therefore morally obligated to fulfill its promises, but not legally required to do so. City officials maintained that they were working on a plan that could be implemented as soon as the Treasury Department pressed them on the issue.<sup>34</sup> That moment came sooner than the Commission probably anticipated; in July, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Perry Heath contacted Mayor Ernie Cragin to remind him of the city's pledge and encouraged him to take steps to fulfill it immediately.<sup>35</sup>

Again the Commission proposed Buol's Addition for the new restricted district, and again different groups of citizens vehemently opposed. Residents of the original townsite filed a petition with the city, objecting to the idea that the proposed location would lay directly in the

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<sup>30</sup> "City Fathers Hear Protests," *Review-Journal*, January 31, 1930, 1. Neither the *Review-Journal* nor the City Commission minutes specified whether McLaughlin was an owner or a manager on Block 16, only that she lived there.

<sup>31</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, March 14, 1930, volume 4.

<sup>32</sup> Senator Tasker L. Oddie to Governor Frederick B. Balazar, telegram, July 4, 1930, Governor Frederick Balazar Manuscript Collection, box 0055, "Colorado River Commission" folder, Nevada State Archives, Carson City, Nevada.

<sup>33</sup> A.E. Cahlan, "From Where I Sit," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 13, 1931, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Editorial, "No Cause for Alarm," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 2, 1931, 10.

<sup>35</sup> "Treasury Asks City Remove Resorts of Block 16 to Make Way for U.S. Building; Board to Act," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 6, 1931, 1.



path of homeowners walking to the downtown business district and children walking to school.<sup>36</sup> The Block 16 property owners again promised to select a new location and carry out the move of their own accord “when it becomes necessary.”<sup>37</sup> A third group of citizens came forward in this latest round to make a new complaint. Property owners along Main Street felt that the proposed move to the west side of town was designed to divert traffic to North Fifth Street.<sup>38</sup> The location of the restricted district was important to many citizens because of its effect on property values, its ability to draw tourist business, and because its property owners were longtime residents and loyal taxpayers. Unable to satisfy these competing interests, the City Commission was again stymied; no proposal was accepted and no action undertaken. The Commissioners instructed City Clerk Viola Burns to write a letter to Assistant Secretary Heath assuring him that the district would be moved “as promptly as the circumstances and conditions of the funds of this City will permit.”<sup>39</sup> This vague promise allowed the city to continue delaying the move indefinitely. Despite the city’s failure to move the restricted district construction of the new federal building moved forward, and the Treasury did not pressure the city again.<sup>40</sup>

The debate instigated by the construction of the federal building seemed to be an acknowledgement of the continued presence of prostitution, gambling, and liquor in Las Vegas, combined with an effort to make it less visible in everyday life. Block 16 was in a central location in the town, and the scrutiny of federal officials seemed to awaken a sense of propriety among some of Las Vegas’ citizens that had been dormant when the town was just a tiny railroad stop. For years, ordinary citizens were aware of the activities in the block, and its central location

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<sup>36</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, July 13, 1931, volume 3. This petition specifically identified prostitution as the cause for concern, not the gambling or drinking that was also concentrated in Block 16. “We the undersigned citizens of Las Vegas hereby make a vigorous protest to your council and request you not to sanction in any way, manner or form, the removal of *the women* of said Block No. 16 to said Block No. 1 in the original townsite of Las Vegas.” (emphasis added)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “City Debates Block 16 Move; Fireworks Pop,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 14, 1931, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, July 13, 1931, volume 3.

<sup>40</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 19, 1932, volume 3.

meant its residents were not isolated from civic life. For example, Frank Ryan, a future state senator, and Jack Irish, the owner of the block's Pastime Club, appeared together before the City Commission in 1931 to protest debts the city was incurring in making street improvements.<sup>41</sup> A clerk from the city's J.C. Penney Department Store remembered the women of the Block coming in to shop and described them as "some of the nicest customers that we had."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the debate over the federal building revealed that the owners and operators of the block's saloons and brothels were considered respected citizens, for their opinions were held in equal esteem with the residents of Buol's Addition. In both instances when the owners of the block addressed the City Commission's concerns, in 1930 and again 1931, they emphasized their long residences in the town and their statuses as taxpayers and property owners. To most Las Vegans, Block 16 was an accepted, unquestioned part of the city during its first three decades. Even as Las Vegas became more connected to the rest of the country through population growth and improved communication and travel, the City Commission continued to tolerate the red-light district in the heart of town and even sought to protect it.

### **Boulder Dam and the Block**

While local officials faced the immediate challenge presented by the proposed federal building, the federal presence in southern Nevada was vastly expanding as construction began on the dam. When the project was announced in 1929, thousands of unemployed men flooded into the tiny town hoping to obtain work on the new project. In 1920, the population stood at around 2000; at the height of the 1929 rush, around 7000 people were living in and around Las Vegas.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, January 9, 1931, volume 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ida Harris, taped interview with Melanie Real, May 5, 1976, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>43</sup> Las Vegas Tribune Publishing Co., "Las Vegas Statistics," *Directory of Las Vegas and Vicinity, 1943-1944*, 1943, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Young, "Complaint as to Conditions," 3, Bureau of Reclamation.

The population briefly fell after the initial speculation and excitement, but when construction began in 1930 over 6000 people were living in the city.<sup>44</sup>

Across the country, people looked to Las Vegas and the dam as a potential source of hope in the depths of the Great Depression. For the first time, Las Vegas came under the scrutiny not just of federal officials but also ordinary citizens outside Nevada. In July 1930 a Los Angeles man, Albert Randall, started inquiring about the possibilities of work in Las Vegas. When he was told that Las Vegas was an unrestrained “Den of Iniquity” he was sufficiently moved to voice his concerns in a letter to President Herbert Hoover.<sup>45</sup> Las Vegas was a “bootleggers’ paradise,” he told the president, where dishonest racketeers charged exorbitant prices for rooms and meals, and where a veritable army of “288 lewd women” were preparing to begin working as prostitutes.<sup>46</sup> Randall’s letter was referred to the Department of the Interior, and the Boulder Dam’s chief engineer Walker A. Young made a thorough study of conditions in the city to allay Randall’s suspicions and the federal government’s fears.

Young’s survey found that while Randall’s claims were undoubtedly exaggerated, liquor and prostitution were openly tolerated in the city. The state of Nevada, Young reflected, was “a country of ‘wide open spaces,’” and equally open morals.<sup>47</sup> The town contained several saloons and brothels, but city officials monitored and controlled them closely, so that when Interior Department officials visited Las Vegas “the speakeasies and men’s clubs are inoperative and the ‘painted ladies’ are not in evidence.”<sup>48</sup> Young further reported that Nevadans steadfastly resisted Prohibition, and local officials accordingly refused to enforce it. In fact, the inability to collect the fees for liquor licenses was considered a great hardship for the local government. It was common knowledge that the police department and the local saloons had a gentlemen’s agreement in the

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<sup>44</sup> Young, “Complaint as to Conditions,” 3, Bureau of Reclamation.

<sup>45</sup> Albert A. Randall to President Herbert Hoover, July 14, 1930, Bureau of Reclamation Collection.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Young, “Complaint as to Conditions,” 2, Bureau of Reclamation.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

absences of these licenses, wherein the police periodically cited the establishments for selling illegal liquor, and the saloon owners paid the fines to continue operating.<sup>49</sup> Local officials' attitude toward prostitution was similar. The Chief of Police matter-of-factly told Young that he "would rather have the restricted district under strict City control than to have the thing spread all over town."<sup>50</sup> Young was impressed by the city's control over its vice industries and did not recommend any federal action to clean up the city ahead of the dam's construction. In fact, Las Vegas struck him as a fairly orderly and law-abiding town, and Block 16 was not a particular source of crime or low morals. "It is said that a woman has never been insulted on the streets of Las Vegas," he wrote.<sup>51</sup>

Though Young's report revealed that the Department of Interior did not intend to take drastic action to improve conditions in Las Vegas, other federal officials did attempt to apply gentle pressure on the city. In early 1930, Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Elwood Mead wrote to Mayor Hesse requesting the city's assistance in working toward "sobriety and a clean moral atmosphere" for the thousands of workers moving to the area and crafting a favorable impression of the project for the many visitors who would visit the dam site during its construction.<sup>52</sup> Las Vegas officials were conscious of how the town's reputation might affect the federal spending in the area. As early as 1922, when federal officials were investigating potential locations for the dam, the Las Vegas Board of Commissioners issued a proclamation urging citizens to prepare a "proper reception" for a visiting official.<sup>53</sup> Two years later the local Chamber of Commerce announced its intent in "trying to mould [sic] public opinion for the best results" in

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<sup>49</sup> Young, "Complaint as to Conditions," 9, Bureau of Reclamation.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>52</sup> Elwood Mead, Memorandum to the Secretary [of the Interior], April 26, 1930, Bureau of Reclamation.

<sup>53</sup> Las Vegas Board of Commissioners, proclamation, March 15, 1922, Las Vegas Board of Commissioners Manuscript Collection, #85-88, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

regards to the Boulder Dam project.<sup>54</sup> In the East, where the decisions were being made, many shared the opinion of a *New York Times* reporter, who wrote in 1930, “Nevada is the one State in the Union which refuses to admit that the old West ever died.”<sup>55</sup>

These city officials’ fears were well-founded; Las Vegas’ reputation for tolerating vice did affect the federal government’s actions in Southern Nevada. Though federal officials visited Las Vegas and urged the City Commission to prepare for an influx of workers, privately they had no intention of allowing government workers to live in the city.<sup>56</sup> In 1929, the Bureau of Reclamation announced that it would build a town near the construction site to house the dam workers and attempt to keep them away from the lures of Las Vegas’ resorts. This town, Boulder City, was established as a federal reservation where liquor, gambling, and prostitution were strictly forbidden. The *New York Times* quoted a release from the Department of the Interior, contrasting the proposed town with Las Vegas: “Instead of a boisterous frontier town, it is hoped that here simple homes, gardens with fruits and flowers, schools and playgrounds will make this a wholesome American community.”<sup>57</sup> This statement implied that despite its homes, schools, churches, and ordinary businesses, the presence of Block 16’s saloons and brothels meant that Las Vegas was *not* considered a wholesome American community in the minds of the federal officials.

Despite this blow, Las Vegas did receive a tremendous economic and population boost as construction began. Seizing the nation’s fascination with the modern engineering marvel, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce began advertising the city as the “gateway to Hoover Dam,” and hundreds of thousands of visitors stopped in Las Vegas on their way to see the dam over the next

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<sup>54</sup> Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, minutes, January 29, 1924, Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce Manuscript Collection, #96-07, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>55</sup> Duncan Aikman, “New Pioneers in Old West’s Deserts,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1930.

<sup>56</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> “Law Abiding Town Planned at Boulder Dam; Government Leases Will Bar Bootleggers,” *New York Times*, July, 29, 1929, 1.

several years.<sup>58</sup> To local residents like Ida Harris, who had lived in Las Vegas since 1921, when construction on the dam began “it seemed like the crowds came in overnight.”<sup>59</sup> Though they had been barred from living in town, the dam workers flocked to the resorts on Block 16 on paydays.<sup>60</sup> The prostitutes became so familiar with dam workers as clients that they began to accept federal scrip as payment, which was only redeemable in Boulder City company stores.<sup>61</sup> The resorts of Block 16 offered alcohol, gambling, and women in one convenient location, and the area became a favorite spot for dam workers in town on their days off.

City officials were well aware of Block 16’s economic significance as it drew the dam workers into town. The vice industries created jobs and their customers patronized other local businesses while in town, creating a ripple effect of growth throughout the town. When the debate surrounding the district’s proximity to the federal building subsided with the resorts left firmly in place, the city even worked to protect the block’s economic interests. In March 1932, a male associate of one of the block’s prostitutes, probably her pimp or boyfriend, severely beat a dam worker from Boulder City during a disagreement. The beating touched off a string of violent reprisals from dam workers who felt they had been treated poorly recently by the girls of Block 16 and their male “hangers-on.”<sup>62</sup> In response to this outbreak of hostilities in the block, the city announced a campaign to drive out the block’s male procurers, the objects of the dam workers’ ire.<sup>63</sup> City officials and law enforcement officers recognized the importance of prostitution to the city’s economy and immediately acted to appease the dam workers and therefore keep their money flowing into town.

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<sup>58</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Harris, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Wilson, interview in *Building Hoover Dam: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, Andrew J. Dunar and Dennis McBride, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001), 241; Daly, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.

<sup>61</sup> Tex Nunley, interview in *Building Hoover Dam*, 240.

<sup>62</sup> “Dam Workers Open War on Block 16 Men,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 14, 1932, 1.

<sup>63</sup> “Block 16 Clean-Up Planned,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 17, 1932, 1.

The city's protection of Block 16 also included working to eliminate its competition. Just as the population boom initiated a flurry of new buildings and businesses throughout the valley, enterprising prostitutes were soon found operating independently or in brothels outside the restricted district. Prostitutes began to congregate in hotels outside the block, particularly along Fremont Street. At the same time that law enforcement was trying to clear the block of the male "hangers-on" that had offended the dam workers, they also began a drive to crack down on the spread of prostitution into "up-town rooming houses" and "local residences."<sup>64</sup> This was seen as a cause for alarm, not only because it violated the strict segregation that made the practice of prostitution acceptable to normal citizens, but also because these prostitutes were "operating in competition" with the women of Block 16, posing a threat to the city's economic interests in a well-defined resort district.<sup>65</sup>

An example of the spread of prostitution outside of Block 16 during the early years of dam construction occurred in 1931, when police raided a private residence found to be housing two young prostitutes.<sup>66</sup> The house was located on Main and Fifth Streets, on the other end of town from Block 16. The stated intent of the raid was to uncover illegal liquor being kept on the premises by the two women, because of the laws allowing only hotels with proper licenses and the resorts in Block 16 to sell liquor. However, it seems that the police selectively enforced this law, particularly when bootleggers were operating throughout the city and its outskirts, and this raid indicates law enforcement's complicity in maintaining the economic integrity of Block 16's prostitution and liquor establishments.

Another area that saw a rise in the establishment of illicit houses was along the highway between Las Vegas and Boulder City, commonly known as the dam highway. In 1931, prostitutes set up cabins or "cribs" just off the highway behind the newly-built Railroad Pass Club, just

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<sup>64</sup> "Block 16 Clean-Up," *Review-Journal*, March 17, 1932, 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> "2 Local Women Land in Police Net Last Night," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 27, 1931, 6.

beyond the boundary of the federal reservation that surrounded the dam site.<sup>67</sup> Another spot on the highway, a small area known as Four Mile after its approximate distance to the Las Vegas city center, also developed a reputation for such establishments. This area included a cluster of buildings on the dam highway about four miles from the center of town, a considerable distance from the residential and business districts and well outside the city limits. During the drive in 1932 to eliminate prostitution outside the confines of Block 16, the county District Attorney announced his intention to support the city's efforts and eliminate the "Hell hole in the Four Mile area."<sup>68</sup>

In addition to depriving the city of the revenue that Block 16 provided, the expansion of prostitution to this area had an unsettling effect on the citizens of Las Vegas. Being outside the bounds of the strictly regulated Block 16, it seemed to be outside the bounds of safety and stability as well. Law enforcement officials described instances when the resorts in this area led to the corruption of local youth, far from the center of town and therefore the watchful eyes of their parents and other concerned citizens.<sup>69</sup> An editorial in the *Las Vegas Age* refuted the extent of the spread of prostitution along the highway, and decried the rumors of its spread as a "slur upon the mothers and daughters who ... live along the Boulder Highway."<sup>70</sup> One of the dangers of the spread of prostitution outside the boundaries of Block 16 was that it made prostitutes indistinguishable from other women.

In an effort to quell the spread of prostitution and to give more power to law enforcement officers, in November 1932 the City Commission passed Ordinance 194, commonly known as the vice ordinance or the rooming house ordinance.<sup>71</sup> Based on an ordinance passed in Los Angeles, it prohibited solicitation in public streets and rooming houses and explicitly made prostitution

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph E. Stevens, *Hoover Dam: An American Adventure*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 226.

<sup>68</sup> "County Joins War on Undesirables," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 5, 1932, 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Editorial, *Las Vegas Age*, August 4, 1933, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, October 19, 1932, and November 8, 1932, volume 3.



illegal in the city of Las Vegas for the first time.<sup>72</sup> This law was not enforced within Block 16, but was instead intended to be used to eliminate prostitution anywhere else it occurred in the city. Following the passage of this ordinance the *Review-Journal* praised the city's efforts to curb the spread of illegal liquor joints in recent months, and then continued, "The next step is to rid the city of these numerous party houses and force the inmates back into the area set aside for this purpose, where they belong."<sup>73</sup> The city's new vice ordinance was a response to the general sentiment in the city that there was a proper place for the practice of prostitution, and it was not in the city's rooming houses and hotels.

The influx of workers and visitors from around the country also resulted in less tolerance for African-American prostitutes in the city. By the 1930s, Block 16 housed white and Hispanic prostitutes, while the saloons and resorts on the nearby Block 17 were known to be the base of operations for African-American prostitutes. As part of the city's drive to eliminate "party house" outside Block 16, four African-American women were arrested "on charges of prostitution" in April 1932.<sup>74</sup> This incident clearly indicated that prostitutes outside Block 16 would not be tolerated, and African-American prostitutes seemed to be particularly targeted. Three of the women were arrested on North Second Street, Block 17.<sup>75</sup> Again in 1934, three women were arrested as prostitutes on Block 17. Municipal Judge Frank McNamee admonished the women for soliciting customers in the streets, when "respectable citizens" had to walk down the block to get to the post office.<sup>76</sup> When delivering their sentences, McNamee implied that African-American prostitutes were especially unwelcome in the city. "We've rid the city of the colored bootleggers," he told them, "and now we're going to start in on you girls."<sup>77</sup> Recognizing that African-American prostitutes would continue to ply their trade in town despite these admonitions, the City

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<sup>72</sup> Legal notice, *Las Vegas Age*, November 9, 1932; "L.A. Vice Ordinance in Effect Today," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 16, 1932, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Editorial, "Follow Through," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 16, 1932, 10.

<sup>74</sup> "Police Open War on Undesirables," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 4, 1932, 1.

<sup>75</sup> The other was arrested on Stewart Street, nearby.

<sup>76</sup> "City Judge Warns Colored Girl Vags," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 27, 1934, 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Commission moved to regulate and control them by creating a “colored annex” to Block 16 in the alley that ran behind the resorts.<sup>78</sup> A liquor license was issued to W.H. Garrett at the Idle Hour, and with it a tacit acceptance of prostitution occurring therein.<sup>79</sup> Like the city’s drive against “party houses,” establishing the Idle Hour was intended to keep prostitution controlled in area and regulated with frequent health checks.

Even as the Hoover Dam increased the federal government’s presence in the area and drew thousands of tourists from across the nation, Las Vegans maintained a libertarian view of the practice as a necessary evil to be contained and controlled for public health and safety and a source of revenue for the city. Another *Review-Journal* editorial emphasized restriction over abolishment: “For many years it has been an established policy, backed up by a definite public sentiment, to restrict this type of establishment to the district set aside for it when the city of Las Vegas was first laid out.”<sup>80</sup> The author summed up the feelings of most Las Vegans when he concluded, “This is not a plea for a closed town. Rather for one properly districted in which home owners can be protected from invasion by the underworld.”<sup>81</sup> Long-time residents echoed the idea that prostitution itself was acceptable as long as it was regulated and restricted in area, stating that it never “hurt anything while it was here,”<sup>82</sup> and “it never was a problem.”<sup>83</sup> The local press and average citizens recognized the importance of prostitution to the local economy and respected its long tradition in the community. The absence of a popular movement among local residents to abolish the red-light district indicates that most Las Vegans accepted its place in the community or at least remained apathetic toward it. As the city grew and became more connected to the rest

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<sup>78</sup> “Colored Annex to Restricted District,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 9, 1934, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, October 8, 1934, volume 3.

<sup>80</sup> Editorial, “A Move in the Right Direction,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 22, 1932, 6. Note: In this editorial, the author is responding to the proposed ordinance, which was formally adopted several weeks later.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Robert H. Barrett, taped interview with Robert Grzywacz, February 22, 1975, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>83</sup> Betty and Gus Ciliax, taped interview, March 16, 1981, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

of the country, they were careful to allow it to continue only as long as it remained controlled and out of their immediate sight. The building of Boulder Dam marked a transition point for the city as it started shedding its image as America's "last frontier town" catering to working-class visitors and began growing into a modern city and a significant tourist destination.

### **Opposition Grows**

Construction of the dam was completed in 1936, and while many workers stayed in the area, Las Vegas' future suddenly seemed uncertain as the presence of the federal government faded. Citizens of Las Vegas began to consider how the city's reputation for celebrating vice might impede its economic prospects when it had to compete for visitors, residents, and businesses with modern western cities. Legalized gambling, easy divorces, and the nascent wedding industry provided much of the city's draw to tourists, but without the sustaining influence of the federal government, Las Vegas' growth slowed. Against this backdrop, the first serious campaign to permanently eliminate prostitution in the city began in 1936, when Fannie Ryan, the wife of State Senator Frank Ryan, lodged a formal complaint against the resorts of the district with the City Commission.<sup>84</sup>

Mrs. Ryan owned property near the block that she intended to rent out to tenants, and her complaint explained that the unsavory reputation of the block was harming her financial interest in regard to her property. Her argument pointed out the proximity of churches to the brothels, reminded the City Commission of its earlier promise to remove the district when the post office was built, and concluded that the businesses constituted "a public nuisance" as defined in the city charter.<sup>85</sup> Though Mrs. Ryan may have had moral objections to the practices of the residents of the block, her letter to the city commission emphasizes her financial interests in the area and also

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<sup>84</sup> "Abatement of Block 16 Resorts is Demanded by Mrs. F. M. Ryan," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 4, 1936, 1; Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 4, 1936, volume 3.

<sup>85</sup> "Abatement," *Review-Journal*, December 4, 1936, 1.

the proximity of the block to residential areas. Because she had to walk down the street to get to or from her property, she was constantly reminded of the imposition of this deviant expression of sexuality on the public space of the city.

Mrs. Ryan's complaint highlights the importance of physical and psychological segregation of the vice district in the city; she was a respectable woman forced to share public space with the "fallen" women of Block 16 because of the district's central location in the city. While the city remained small, women like Mrs. Ryan could simply avoid the district, and it was tolerated. The building of the nearby post office building and the tremendous growth in the surrounding blocks spurred by the dam meant that by the mid-1930s, Block 16 was directly in the middle of the town's downtown business district. The blurring of the physical division between the respectable and the unsavory resulted in Mrs. Ryan's complaint and the heightened focus on abatement that would come in the years to follow. Like the women who had been slurred by allegations of prostitution along the dam highway, Mrs. Ryan was concerned about the potential damage to her reputation she might suffer by proximity to Las Vegas' prostitutes.

The City Commissioners considered their legal obligations to respond to Mrs. Ryan's complaint and responded in a letter, which stated that they had instructed the chief of police to "zealously suppress any and all existing institutions of prostitution" anywhere in the city, including the resorts on Block 16.<sup>86</sup> They made no serious attempts to abate the brothels, however. Instead, the police encouraged the owners to keep the prostitutes hidden as much as possible. Each of the resorts installed a thin wooden partition between their saloons and the prostitutes' rooms and required them to remain off the streets and out of sight.<sup>87</sup> Antonio Matucci, owner of the property on which the Jazz Club stood, proposed that a wooden fence be constructed around the entire block, with a guarded entrance on one end. A similar structure surrounded Reno's red-light district, the Stockade. The fence in Las Vegas was never built, though the

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<sup>86</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, January 4, 1937, volume 3.

<sup>87</sup> "Stockade is Now Planned for Block 16, Said," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 18, 1936, 1.

prostitutes did agree to remove themselves from public view for a time. By July 1937, however, the stifling summer heat drove them out of the closed-up rooms and back into the parlors and streets.<sup>88</sup> The *Review Journal* hailed the return of Las Vegas’ “number two tourist attraction,” though it speculated that the women would not be allowed to “bask in the gleam of the over-amorous eyes of prospective customers and the awe-struck gaze of the curious tourists” for very long.<sup>89</sup> (See Figure Four)



**Figure Four.** Prostitutes relaxing in front of the Arizona Club in the 1930s. This photo was taken during a period when city officials were tolerating the brothel workers’ presence on the streets and sidewalks in front of the resorts. UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.

The *Review-Journal*’s prediction was only partially correct; Mrs. Ryan soon launched a new assault on the block, but this time the city did not make even a cursory attempt to meet her demands. Mrs. Ryan renewed her campaign for abatement in April 1938, reiterating the reasons for requesting the removal of the district that she had first put forth two years before.<sup>90</sup> The City

<sup>88</sup> “Las Vegas’ Number Two Tourist Lure Reblooms in Full Glory,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 9, 1937, 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, April 25, 1938, volume 4.

Commission gave her renewed complaints an even more tepid and half-hearted response than they had in 1936. New mayor Henry Marble told her he believed her complaint to be a legal issue and beyond the jurisdiction of the city commission, an administrative body.<sup>91</sup> He concluded, “We have gone as far as we can go.”<sup>92</sup> Mrs. Ryan left the meeting without another word. For the moment, the City Commission and the mayor were content to maintain the status quo. Though Mrs. Ryan had appeared before the City Commission alone and no citizens groups were organizing in 1938 to follow her lead, her challenges to Block 16 marked the first time a Las Vegan had requested the block’s abatement. The subsequent city administration, headed by Mayor John L. Russell, elected in 1939, initiated the first challenge to the block from a local governing body.

### **New Challenges to the District**

In June 1938, the Jaycees Club, known as the “Junior Chamber of Commerce” of the city of Las Vegas, met to discuss issues they felt needed to be addressed by the community. These prominent citizens and local business owners turned their attention to Block 16. Dr. Stanley L. Hardy expressed concern that the prostitutes were becoming a public safety hazard. He stated that the medical examinations required by the city were not being regularly enforced. He declared, “The people of Las Vegas think that ‘block 16’ is being controlled, but they are wrong... [The prostitutes] are never cured and they are never safe.”<sup>93</sup> He concluded with an especially harsh reproach of the prostitutes’ place in Las Vegas civic life: “They should be ‘black-balled’ from all

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<sup>91</sup> “Campaign to Remove Block 16 Renewed Before City Fathers,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 26, 1938, 1. At the time of Mrs. Ryan’s complaint, Marble was acting mayor. The previous mayor L. L. Arnett left the city in February 1938 after a feud with the commissioners. When he never returned, the City Commission declared the office vacant in early May, and Marble was sworn in. See Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 98.

<sup>92</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, April 25, 1938, volume 4.

<sup>93</sup> “Vegas Jaycee ‘Beef’ Meeting Brings Many Constructive Ideas,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 10, 1938, 3.

activity and not allowed the privileges of other citizens.”<sup>94</sup> The tone of the public debate over prostitution was shifting. As events in Europe caused many Americans to contemplate the prospect of another World War, Las Vegas again began to consider how prostitution in the city might affect the federal government’s decisions there.

Dr. Hardy’s diatribe probably represented a minority opinion; evidence indicates that many Las Vegas believed that the health checks were being done regularly and that the Block posed no significant public health hazard. When asked to describe the prostitution in the city, longtime resident Betty Ciliax described it as “very much legalized and controlled... Health-wise, and in area.” Her husband even identified the physician who performed the examinations: Dr. Mildren, on South Second Street.<sup>95</sup> Dam worker Bob Parker similarly reported that he believed the women of Block 16 underwent regular check-ups “either once a week or once a month.”<sup>96</sup> Another long-time resident stated that “VD was laid low for the simple reason that those girls were compelled to go to the doctor once a week.”<sup>97</sup> Despite this widespread belief that the health regulations were working, the critics’ charge that Block 16 was a source of disease began to gain traction in the public debate.

One of the forces in this change in thinking was the State Department of Health, which began assessing the impact of prostitution in southern Nevada in 1939. Previously, the State Department of Health had been a small operation, based in Carson City and concerned primarily with conditions in the northern cities. As the population of Las Vegas swelled to make it the second most populous city in the state, however, the State Department of Health began to pay more attention to its health issues. From 1936 to 1939, nurse Carole Miller had directed public health programs in Clark County. Her program for controlling venereal diseases consisted of public lectures and films encouraging venereal disease sufferers to seek prompt medical

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<sup>94</sup> “Vegas Jaycee ‘Beef’ Meeting,” *Review-Journal*, June 10, 1938, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Betty and Gus Ciliax, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.

<sup>96</sup> Bob Parker, interview in *Building Hoover Dam*, 244.

<sup>97</sup> Barrett, taped interview, Lied Library Special Collections.



attention.<sup>98</sup> In 1938, Dr. J.A. Norton of the State Department of Health approached the County Commission about building a Venereal Disease Clinic in Las Vegas.<sup>99</sup> The federal government would provide \$3000 for the building if the county would offer just \$563 to assist; the county declined. The state's presence and influence in southern Nevada's health policies grew considerably in 1939, however, when the state legislature reorganized the Department of Health, which included creating the Division of Venereal Disease Control.<sup>100</sup> Under the direction of Dr. Byron H. Caples, the Division began providing a sustained focus on prostitution in southern Nevada for the first time.

At the same time, new mayor John L. Russell initiated an unprecedented reform agenda against prostitution in the city. In 1939 the city officially took up the Jaycees' call to clean up the district. Their initial focus was on so-called "bar-flies", women scattered throughout the city who operated in competition with the women of Block 16.<sup>101</sup> The persistent presence of these women in resorts outside the restricted district was considered harmful to Las Vegas' growing reputation as a tourist destination. The mayor then turned his focus to the Block 16 resorts themselves, charging seven owners or operators with serving alcohol without a license.<sup>102</sup> The era when Block 16 seemed the exception to every rule was over; Mayor Russell had just delivered the first major

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<sup>98</sup> Carole Miller, R.N., "Summarizing the County Health Program 1936 to 1939," ca. 1939, 6, Governor Edward Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0105, folder 22, Nevada State Archives, Carson City, Nevada.

<sup>99</sup> "No Need for Venereal Disease Clinic in Las Vegas, Reported," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 16, 1938, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Edward E. Hamer (State Health Officer), "Nevada State Department of Health, Annual Plan for U.S. Public Health Service and Special Venereal Disease Control Funds from July 1, 1939 to June 30, 1940", June 23, 1939, 3, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0105, folder 22, Nevada State Archives.

<sup>101</sup> "Russell Pleads Co-operation at Jaycee Meet," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 8, 1939, 1.

<sup>102</sup> "Vegas Mayor Leads Drive on Block 16," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 14, 1939, 1. There were eight resorts on the block; the eighth owner, Pilar Santa Cruz of the Red Front, presumably escaped arrest by having her licenses in order.



salvo in a battle between the city and the resort owners of Block 16 that would continue for two years.<sup>103</sup>

The owners and operators of the block were vocally displeased with the new mayor's agenda. When the five women and two men appeared before Municipal Judge Gus Blad, several of them made sure the reporters present would have snappy quotes to publish the next day. Earl Noon of the Arizona Club, as large as a "college fullback," pled not guilty and then angrily challenged Mayor Russell—"I'm ready for trial any time the city is," he sneered.<sup>104</sup> Bessie Williams of the Arcade, her bright red hair "flashing like a stop signal on Hollywood boulevard" as she strode through the courtroom took umbrage when the judge asked if she was "all right" with her trial being pushed back to June 21. "It ain't all right with me," she snapped, "but if [Mayor Russell] wants it, there ain't nothing we can do about it."<sup>105</sup> Babe Roan of the Honolulu Inn and Jack Irish of the Pastime refused to accept the trial being moved back. "I'm as busy as Johnny and I want my trial tomorrow," Irish told the judge, referring familiarly to the mayor.<sup>106</sup> In the Mayor Russell's haste to strike at the owners, he had failed to follow regular legal procedures. The cases against all seven operators were dismissed when it was discovered that no charges had actually been filed against them.<sup>107</sup> The owners defiantly returned to the block and business proceeded as usual, particularly after Mayor Russell was removed from office in early 1940.<sup>108</sup>

The following year the focus turned again to the health risks perceived to be a product of prostitution. Dr. Caples of the Division of Venereal Disease Control was working diligently to expand his department's efforts throughout the state, including announcing plans for a VD Clinic

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<sup>103</sup> "Jack Irish and Babe Roan are Released for Lack of Record," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 17, 1939, 1; "5 More Block 16 Defendants are Freed by Court," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 22, 1939, 1.

<sup>104</sup> "Madams, Masters of Block 16 are Taken to Court," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 15, 1939, 1.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "5 More Block 16 Defendants," *Review-Journal*, June 22, 1939, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 31. Russell applied his brash demeanor to the City Commission as well as the owners of Block 16. After months of political squabbles, the Commissioners voted to remove him from office, and local businessman Howell Garrison was appointed as mayor.

in Las Vegas whether the county wanted it or not.<sup>109</sup> County authorities were also taking more notice of venereal disease in the area. In November 1940, District Attorney Roland Wiley issued a statement announcing a concerted crackdown on the sanitary conditions of the district. He ordered the city police to ensure that all women working as prostitutes in the city meet two conditions: obtaining a certified health examination by a city health officer by December 1, and remaining strictly within the confines of Block 16.<sup>110</sup> The following month, the City Commission called a public meeting with a panel of local health officials and other experts to discuss the examinations required of local prostitutes.<sup>111</sup> Led by Dr. C. W. Woodbury, a member of the Nevada state board of health, the panel declared the examinations too expensive for most prostitutes to regularly afford, and therefore infrequently administered. They urged the city to create a plan to make it easier for the women to get regular check-ups.<sup>112</sup>

Seizing on the slowly changing attitudes toward the prostitution built on the perceived public health hazard of the vice district, a figure emerged in opposition to the block who would prove to be its most persistent enemy. For years, local attorney J.R. Lewis had been purchasing real estate throughout the valley; in early 1941, he purchased the Arizona Club.<sup>113</sup> Almost immediately after this purchase, Lewis began calling publicly for the closure of the resorts on Block 16. In April 1941 he filed a formal complaint with the County Commission against the businesses on the street, urging that they be closed as “public nuisances.”<sup>114</sup> Lewis backed up his demands by threatening to pursue legal action against the Commissioners if they failed to enforce

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<sup>109</sup> Hamer, “Annual Plan”, June 23, 1939, 12, Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>110</sup> “District Attorney Moves in Upon Battle on Block 16 Sanitation,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 27, 1940, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 9, 1940, volume 4.

<sup>112</sup> “Doctor Condemns Block 16 Routine,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 10, 1940, 3.

<sup>113</sup> “Abatement of Houses on Block 16 is Requested,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 10, 1941, 1. I could not determine why Earl Noon sold his club to Lewis. Lewis’ first large real estate venture, an autocourt on Highway 91, was destroyed in 1937; see “Vegas Woman Saved as Attempts to Rush into Certain Death in Fire,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 10, 1937, 1.

<sup>114</sup> “Abatement of Houses,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 10, 1941, 1.

local laws.<sup>115</sup> This method of attack was seen as “an innovation” among the local legal community.<sup>116</sup> The County Commissioners felt they had to accede to his demands, and the District Attorney issued an abatement order against the brothels. The owners of Block 16 immediately countered by challenging the county’s authority to enforce its laws within city limits; they were granted a preliminary injunction halting the abatement while the jurisdiction issue was settled.<sup>117</sup>

The *Review-Journal* reported that there was only one way that the abatement might be prevented. The city charter allowed the City Commission to license houses of prostitution within city limits, and if the Commissioners did so, the authority of the county would be superseded. Aware that Lewis might threaten them next, the City Commission held a secret meeting at the home of Mayor Garrison on July 2, 1941 to consider their options.<sup>118</sup> City Attorney Paul Ralli proposed a solution; since prostitution in Block 16’s bawdy houses violated Ordinance 194, the Commission could pass a new ordinance explicitly allowing the licensing of such businesses within the confines of Block 16. Up to this point, prostitution had existed in a semi-legal limbo. The City Commission, with the police department, openly acknowledged its presence in Block 16 and worked to regulate it by requiring health certificates. However, the brothels were not licensed as such; officially they were licensed only as saloons or taverns. The Commission was aware that if they went forward with passing an ordinance allowing the licensing of brothels, their actions “would make Las Vegas the first city to legalize by license, prostitution, in the United States.”<sup>119</sup>

This proposal failed to get a unanimous vote among the Commission members, which they had privately decided they needed in order to make the proposal public. The following day Mr. Ralli

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<sup>115</sup> “Knell of Block 16 Rings More Loudly Today; Deadline April 17,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 14, 1941, 1.

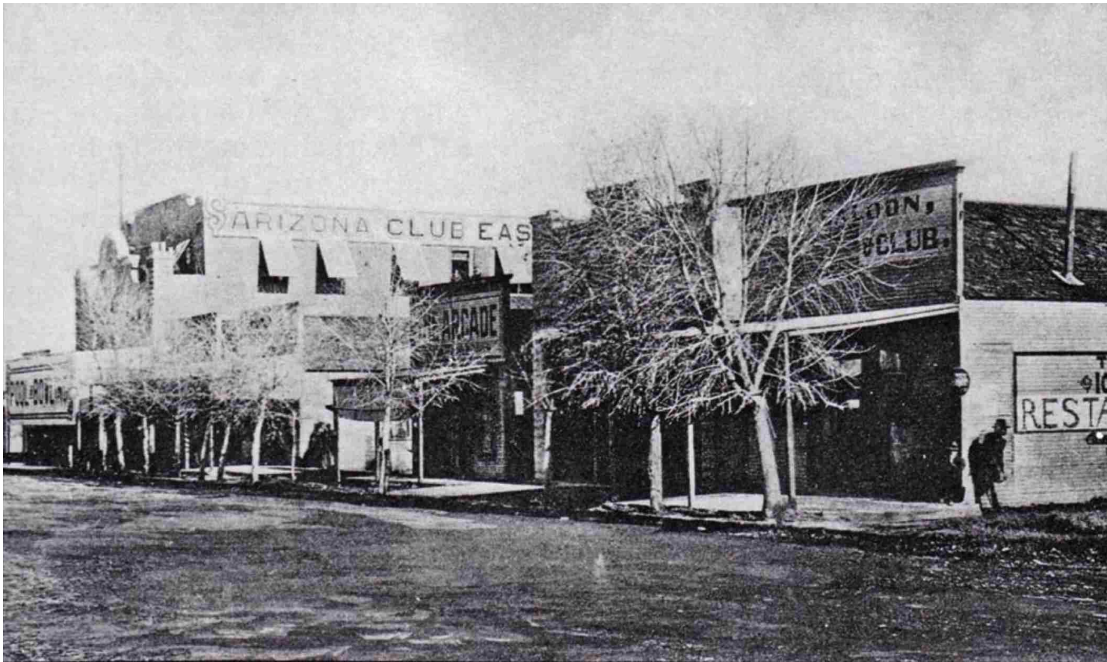
<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> “Injunction Given in Fight to Save Block 16 Houses,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 17, 1941, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 16, 1941, volume 4. Note: On this date a letter by Commissioner Smith was entered into the record detailing the events the Commission had taken over the last several months.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

changed his position, pointing out that the brothels violated the state law forbidding such buildings within a set distance from a church. The state law could be used to override any emergency ordinance the Commission could pass, meaning Block 16 would continue to be assailed regardless of the Commission's actions. The Commissioners resigned themselves to proceed with abatement orders against the block if Lewis pressed the issue with them, which he very shortly did.<sup>120</sup>



**Figure Five.** Block 16 as it appeared when J. R. Lewis began his attacks on it. From left to right, the resorts featured in this photo are the Arizona Club, the Double O (obscured by trees), the Arcade, the Pastime, and the Red Front. UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.

### **The End of Block 16**

On July 11, the City Commission brought charges related to prostitution against five of the owners and operators on the block.<sup>121</sup> Soon the injunction against the county's abatement

<sup>120</sup> "Lewis Demands Seven Block 16 Arrests Be Made," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 10, 1941, 1.

<sup>121</sup> "Four Block 16 Operators are Haled to Court," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 11, 1941, 1; "Fifth Arrested in Block 16 Case," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 12, 1941, 3. Though they were charged by the city, the charge was violating the state ordinance forbidding a brothel within a certain distance from a church.

order was lifted, and the city and county both moved forward in shutting down the brothels.<sup>122</sup> Lewis, impatient with the slow responses from both the city and the county, filed another formal complaint with the City Commissioners, pointing out that the city was obligated to enforce its own rooming house ordinance in the block.<sup>123</sup> Mayor Garrison released a statement emphasizing that his actions were motivated by the threat of being removed from office if he did not comply. “It is my belief that the closing of Block 16 will bring about an undesirable situation in Las Vegas,” his statement read. “Were it within my legal power to do so I would not approve the closing order.<sup>124</sup> With no remaining options, the Commission ordered the chief of police to enforce the closing order.<sup>125</sup>

The idea that the complete abatement of prostitution was not effective was still prominent, and the city proposed establishing a new red-light district to replace Block 16. City Attorney Paul Ralli determined that the city’s authority to license and regulate houses of prostitution applied not only within city limits but also in a one-mile radius around the city.<sup>126</sup> The Commission selected the Meadows, an area on the Boulder Highway just outside city limits, where the Meadows Club had recently begun operating as a brothel under the management of a Californian, Eddie Clippinger.<sup>127</sup> Immediately, homeowners in the Meadows area organized to protest the city’s new proposal.<sup>128</sup> At a meeting of the local Taxpayers’ Association, Mayor Garrison acknowledged that the consensus among Las Vegas was that a restricted district should be created somewhere, but that no location was garnering the majority of citizens’ support. The

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<sup>122</sup> “Legal Cloak is Dimming Lights of Block Sixteen,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 30, 1941, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, October 10, 1941, volume 4.

<sup>124</sup> “Closing of Block Again Runs into a Legal Tangle,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 11, 1941, 3.

<sup>125</sup> “City Dads Decide Vegas Be Clean,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 17, 1941, 1.

<sup>126</sup> “Ordinance to Regulate Bawdy Houses Within Mile of Vegas to be Drawn,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 23, 1941, 1.

<sup>127</sup> The history of the Meadows Club is treated in more detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>128</sup> “Prostitution is Discussed Last Eve at Meeting,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 25, 1941, 2.

*Review-Journal* chided its readers for remaining largely apathetic on the subject, urging them to contact the City Commission with potential solutions.<sup>129</sup>

Meanwhile, J. R. Lewis continued buying up the Block 16 properties as they became available. He announced plans to remodel the Arizona Club, turning the upstairs brothel into a “respectable” hotel and turning the saloon into a movie theatre.<sup>130</sup> In August, the elderly and ailing Jack Irish sold his properties on the block, the Pastime, the Honolulu Club, and the Arcade, to Lewis and his business partner Edwin J. Miller.<sup>131</sup> Lewis’ economic motives for the drive against the block did not escape the notice of *Review-Journal* editor A. E. Cahlan, who noted sarcastically in July 1941 that the drive to close down Block 16 could not possibly be motivated “by any incentive other than righteous indignation that such things are going on within 400 yards of two churches.”<sup>132</sup> Echoing early concerns about a “syndicate” pushing locals out of the prostitution business, Cahlan speculated that the move to abolish Block 16 will benefit a “new location just outside city limits,” which was undoubtedly a reference to the Meadows. It seems that Lewis did not in fact have any connection to Clippinger, but both men certainly benefited financially from Block 16’s demise.

The operators of Block 16 vigorously resisted Lewis’ continual legal onslaught. Together they hired the law firm of Morse and Graves to organize the legal challenges to the city’s and county’s abatement orders. After the injunction against the county’s first abatement order was reversed, Morse and Graves next sued the city for failing to enforce the rooming house ordinance against the Meadows as they had against Block 16.<sup>133</sup> This temporarily worked; the Meadows was

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<sup>129</sup> Editorial, “What’s the Answer?,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 27, 1941, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Squires, “Observations,” *Las Vegas Age*, May 30, 1941, 1.

<sup>131</sup> “Lewis, Miller Buy Block 16 Building,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 8, 1941, 2; “Battle of Block is in Reverse, Madames in Suit,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 9, 1941, 3.

<sup>132</sup> Cahlan, “From Where I Sit,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 14, 1941, 8.

<sup>133</sup> “Battle of Block 16 Moves Further in Tortuous Ground,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 22, 1941, 1.



ordered to cease its brothel operations while the case was pending.<sup>134</sup> Two of the block's madams, Babe Roan and Bessie Williams, also sued Lewis, his business partner, and Jack Irish for being unfairly evicted from the properties where they had lived and acted as managers for years.<sup>135</sup> The block's most astonishing act of self-defense, however, was submitting a petition to the City Commission requesting that Ordinance 194 be amended to formally establish Block 16 as the city's designated restricted district. Over 650 Las Vegas residents signed the petition, including most of the remaining operators and prostitutes on the block, but overwhelmingly average citizens with no direct connection to the district.<sup>136</sup> Though this petition represented only a small proportion of the population, it demonstrated that many Las Vegans not only accepted the district's presence but openly supported it. The petition did not sway the City Commission, however; it is not even mentioned in the Commission's official minutes.

While legal proceedings ground torturously on, the brothels both in the Meadows and on Block 16 continued operating, which City Commissioner A.P. Rubidoux publicly decried at the November Taxpayers' Association meeting.<sup>137</sup> Rubidoux's accusation prompted Police Commissioner M.C. Tinch to order an early morning raid of the resorts on Block 16. Police arrested twenty-two women on December 1, and they were booked into the city jail and charged with violating the rooming house ordinance.<sup>138</sup> All charges against the women were dropped, however, when City Attorney Ralli pointed out that Rubidoux's statements did not constitute

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<sup>134</sup> "Enjoin Meadows From Operation of House of Ill Fame," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 25, 1941, 1.

<sup>135</sup> "Battle of Block is in Reverse," *Review-Journal*, October 9, 1941, 3. Irish owned the Pastime, where Roan acted as manager, and the Arcade, where Williams acted as manager. When Lewis bought the properties, he immediately evicted them.

<sup>136</sup> Petition to Las Vegas City Commission, October 3, 1941, Vertical File, "Prostitution-Las Vegas," Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The city's population the previous year, in 1940, was 8422, so the petition represented approximately 7% of the population. From Las Vegas Tribune Publishing Co., *Directory of Las Vegas and Vicinity, 1943-1944*, 1943.

<sup>137</sup> "Prostitution is Discussed," *Review-Journal*, November 25, 1941, 2.

<sup>138</sup> "Block 16 is Closed Today after Raid Last Night by Vegas Police," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 2, 1941, 1.

legal evidence.<sup>139</sup> As the women passed the *Review-Journal's* reporter as they exited the courtroom, one of them wondered aloud whether “this isn’t something of a football game, with us used as the football.”<sup>140</sup> Though the women were free to return to the block, the final blow against the resorts was imminent.

On December 16, 1941, the City Commission passed Emergency Ordinance 263, a variation of the rooming house ordinance declaring prostitution illegal anywhere within the city’s jurisdiction except at the Meadows.<sup>141</sup> This move signaled that the city was serious about closing Block 16 for good. In January 1942, the city revoked the slot machine and beer licenses of the resorts on Block 16 that remained in operation.<sup>142</sup> Without the means to draw in customers and with law enforcement strenuously enforcing these restrictions, the remaining resorts quickly folded. Over thirty years after prostitutes first moved into the block, the red-light district on North First Street was abolished.

### **The Block after the Brothels**

Over the next few years, Block 16’s brothels were converted into “low-rate” rooming houses.<sup>143</sup> At least two of the brothel managers utilized their years of experience to become rooming house managers. The Double O Saloon reopened as the Double O Lodgings, under the management of Bessie Williams who had previously operated the Arcade.<sup>144</sup> Pilar Santa Cruz, who had owned and operated the Red Front Saloon for over twenty years, converted her property

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<sup>139</sup> “Block 16 Girls Emulate Famous Mr. Finnegan; They’re Out Again,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 4, 1941, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, January 4, 1942, volume 4; “Meadows Resort Now Sole Spot for Bawdy Houses,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 17, 1941, 3.

<sup>142</sup> “Beer, Slot Mill Licenses Refused to Block 16 Joints,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 6, 1942, 3.

<sup>143</sup> “Unsafe Lodging Places Marked by Fennessey,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 17, 1946, 1.

<sup>144</sup> Las Vegas Tribune Publishing Co., *Directory of Las Vegas and Vicinity, 1943-1944*, 1943.



into a boarding house called Liberty Lodgings.<sup>145</sup> Lewis converted the Arizona Club into the Arizona Hotel and the Honolulu Inn into the Basic Hotel, and although designating them “hotels” rather than “lodging houses” implied that Lewis intended them to be classier than their neighbors, they were in fact equally shabby.<sup>146</sup> After his successful campaign to push the prostitutes out of the area, Lewis continued to lobby the City Commission to regulate the area for his own financial gain. In 1943, he led a group of property owners in the area in petitioning the City Commission to stop issuing gambling and liquor licenses to the African-American business owners on First Street directly opposite Block 16.<sup>147</sup> Approximately 250 defense workers from the nearby Basic Magnesium plant lived in the block’s rooming houses during World War II. “They are forced to live there because they cannot get any place else,” Lewis told the Commission. “That is to my financial benefit.”<sup>148</sup> In 1946, City Manager Tom Fennessey condemned the Double O and Liberty Lodgings and ordered their demolition. Fennessey instructed Lewis to make dramatic repairs to his two hotels or face a similar fate.<sup>149</sup> The *Reno Evening Gazette* called Lewis a “realtor,” implying that his legal career was abandoned after his spectacular foray into real estate speculation on the block.

The owners and operators of the block did not last much longer than the brothels they had run. Jack Irish passed away in November 1941, shortly after selling his properties to J.R. Lewis.<sup>150</sup> By 1943, Ruby Riley, Babe Roan, Kittie Walsh, and Alice Mitchell had apparently left town; they are not listed in the city directory for that year.<sup>151</sup> In 1947, Pilar Santa Cruz passed away at the age of 65.<sup>152</sup> She left behind a sizeable estate, bequeathing \$50,000 in Las Vegas real

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<sup>145</sup> “Unsafe Lodging,” *Review-Journal*, January 17, 1946, 1.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> “Lewis Protests Negro District on North First,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 5, 1943, 10.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “Unsafe Lodging,” *Review-Journal*, January 17, 1946, 1; “Flop-houses Hit by City Official,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, January 19, 1946, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Obituary, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 29, 1941, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Las Vegas Tribune Publishing Co., *Directory of Las Vegas and Vicinity, 1943-1944*, 1943.

<sup>152</sup> Obituary, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 6, 1947, 2.

estate to her brother and nieces and a house in Los Angeles to her friend Concha Ruiz.<sup>153</sup> In 1952, a woman named Bessie Williams was working as a maid at the El Rancho Hotel; it is unclear whether this was the same Bessie Williams who had been operating the Arcade at the time of its closure, but if so she was the only operator of the block who remained in Las Vegas at that time.<sup>154</sup>

Though the available sources make it difficult to fully understand the block's significance in the lives of the men and women who lived and worked there, it is possible to glean some details about their lives. For the prostitutes, working on Block 16 had both positive and negative aspects. It certainly allowed them a measure of economic independence, because they worked as independent contractors, paying for their rooms but keeping all their earnings. This system was certainly not available to the brothel prostitutes who worked in the valley after Block 16's closure; these women paid a weekly rent *and* delivered half of their earnings to the brothel owner.<sup>155</sup> Block 16 also allowed women an opportunity to establish themselves as entrepreneurs, as owners or managers of the brothels. In 1941, women were running seven of the nine resorts on the block. Pilar Santa Cruz provides an especially intriguing example of the opportunities the block afforded women. She owned and operated her own establishment, the Red Front, for at least twenty years and was considered a "pioneer Las Vegas resident" at her death in 1947.<sup>156</sup> The significant estate she left behind indicates the financial success she enjoyed as a brothel owner on the block. On the other hand, life on the block was at times difficult and dangerous. The brothel quarters were undoubtedly cramped and uncomfortable, and newspaper articles periodically described assaults, murders, or suicides among the block's prostitutes.<sup>157</sup> It is difficult to

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<sup>153</sup> "Probate Will," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 17, 1947, 8.

<sup>154</sup> Redwood Publishing Co., *Las Vegas Area Directory*, 1952, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>155</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>156</sup> "Probate Will," *Review-Journal*, January 17, 1947, 8.

<sup>157</sup> "Brute Slayer Murders Girl in Vegas with Miner's Hammer," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 23, 1931, 1; "Mystery, Love, Death on Block Sixteen," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 22,

determine if, on the whole, legalized prostitution on Block 16 was beneficial or harmful to the city's prostitutes.

Over its almost forty-year history, Block 16 had a significant impact on Las Vegas' economy and culture. It was widely recognized as a draw to visitors from the 1910s through the building of the Hoover Dam. That local officials recognized its economic significance was apparent in the City Commission's attempts to protect it from competition in the early 1930s. Its cultural impact shifted over time, revealing larger trends in Las Vegas' cultural history. When Las Vegas proudly called itself the "last frontier town," Block 16 served as a symbol of the freedom and independence that the city embraced. Indeed, when the Old West imagery briefly came into vogue again in the early 1940s, the Hotel Last Frontier acquired Block 16's famous mahogany bar to appropriate its reputation as a symbol of the Old West.<sup>158</sup> As the city transitioned to the "Gateway to Boulder Dam," the red-light district began to fall from favor. The dam inaugurated an era of tremendous growth for the city, and Las Vegans began envisioning their community less as a wild railroad town and more as a modern city with national significance. As Las Vegas became more reliant on tourists coming to see the dam, to enjoy Nevada's legalized gambling, or to obtain a quickie marriage or divorce, the block's downtown location made it more valuable as a site for hotels, a fact that J. R. Lewis realized and seized for his own benefit. Tradition kept the block in place for years after the dam was completed, but the momentum toward its end clearly began in that first moment of federal intervention in southern Nevada. As World War II approached and federal influence in the region again expanded, public sentiment had largely turned against the district. Though many citizens still supported legalized prostitution on Block 16, or were at least willing to keep looking the other way, the tide had turned. City boosters became more interested in luring middle- and upper-class tourists to Las Vegas instead of the

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1935, 1; "Almost Suicide," *Las Vegas Age*, January 8, 1910, 1; "Beating," *Las Vegas Age*, April 1, 1932, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Ralph J. Roske, *Las Vegas: A Desert Paradise*, (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1986), 63. When the Last Frontier was remodeled in 1955, the bar was misplaced and has never been recovered.

working-class visitors for whom Block 16 had been a primary draw. The brothels of Block 16 had thrived when local conditions supported them, and their end came as a result of these larger national trends.

## Chapter 2

### Prostitution without a Red-Light District

After the closing of Block 16 in January 1942, federal pressure, precipitated by World War II, soon ended the city's decades-old tradition of tolerating prostitution. The federal presence in Clark County dramatically expanded with the establishment of the Las Vegas Air Gunnery School a few miles north of Las Vegas, and the Army immediately asserted its authority to enforce sexual norms in the nearby community by launching a formal complaint against the city's newly formed red-light district at the Meadows. During the remainder of the war, federal, state, and local officials colluded in aggressively policing prostitution in southern Nevada, resulting in widespread violation of suspected prostitutes' civil rights. Community leaders supported this policy in order to keep the servicemen at the Air Gunnery School spending large portions of their paychecks in local casinos and to encourage further defense spending in the area. Just as they had during the era of Block 16, local officials were motivated by economic concerns in their approach to prostitution, but the federal government's more forceful stance on the issue had shifted the balance toward abatement.

As the federal presence in Nevada receded after the war, political maneuvering, public reaction, and the limits of the laws regarding prostitution shaped the various responses of local officials and law enforcement officers to the constantly shifting centers of vice in Clark County. Municipal and county leaders accused each other of failing to address prostitution adequately, and the local press' coverage stoked the fires and inspired public outcry. City, county, and state laws concerning prostitution were vague, ineffective, and at times in conflict with one another. While streetwalkers and call girls quietly set up operations in Las Vegas' downtown casinos and the new resort hotels springing up on the Strip, brothels on the edge of the metropolitan area drew the spotlight and the community's ire. From 1947 until 1954, the dramatic raids of these bordellos constituted the public face of Las Vegas' attitude toward prostitution.

## The Meadows and the May Act

Despite the tenacious opposition by J.R. Lewis and the potential conflict with the Army's new Air Gunnery School north of the city, Las Vegas officials were reluctant to outlaw prostitution in the valley outright. Having lost the battle to preserve Block 16, however, the City Commission attempted a compromise by passing an emergency ordinance allowing prostitution within the Meadows area, centered on the Meadows resort, which was already operating as a brothel.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure Six) This ordinance did not name the Meadows directly, but authorized the City Commission to "suppress, prohibit, regulate and proscribe the location of houses of prostitution" in the city and within a one-mile radius of city limits.<sup>2</sup> In practice, this gave the Commission the authority to designate the Meadows as the community's new restricted district without formally establishing it through a zoning law or other legal recognition. This decision faced fierce opposition immediately; it passed despite protests by a citizens' group earlier in the meeting.<sup>3</sup> Homeowners from the unincorporated Sunrise Addition near the Meadows Resort appeared before the Commission to lodge their complaints. The leader of this informal group, C.B. Henderson, admonished the Commission to consider how legal prostitution in the Meadows area would affect their property values. "Put one of those places in your own back yard, and see

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<sup>1</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 16, 1941, volume 4; "Meadows Resort Now Sole Spot," *Review-Journal*, December 17, 1941, 3. For a history of the Meadows establishment before Clippinger assumed management, see Patrick Gaffey, "Pico, Frankie and the Meadows," scheduled for publication in the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 16, 1941, volume 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; "Meadows Resort Now Sole Spot," *Review-Journal*, December 17, 1941, 3.

how you like it,” he heatedly told them.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure Six.** The Meadows circa 1934, before Eddie Clippinger began running it. UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.

While citizens and officials in Clark County argued about the Meadows, federal authorities were also focusing on prostitution at the national scale. In July 1941, Congress passed the May Act, which prohibited prostitution within a “reasonable distance” of an Army or Navy base or station.<sup>5</sup> If invoked by the Secretary of War or the Secretary of the Navy, the May Act made prostitution near a military installation a Federal offense, which would be prosecuted by the Department of Justice.<sup>6</sup> Though these consequences were fairly severe, the War Department’s guidelines for suppressing prostitution near Army installations made it relatively difficult to invoke the May Act.<sup>7</sup> These guidelines stressed to base commanders that every effort to have local authorities enforce the suppression should be made before resorting to Federal enforcement.

In December 1941, Lieutenant General J.L. DeWitt, the commander of the Army’s Western Defense Command, wrote to the governors of the western states requesting their complete cooperation in suppressing prostitution near Army establishments.<sup>8</sup> Nevada Governor Edward P. Carville responded by calling for a conference of local, state, federal, and military

<sup>4</sup> “Meadows Resort Now Sole Spot,” *Review-Journal*, December 17, 1941, 3. C.B. Henderson has no connection to the city of Henderson in Clark County.

<sup>5</sup> Public Law 163, 77<sup>th</sup> Congress, Chapter 287, 1<sup>st</sup> Session. H.R. 2475. Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>6</sup> Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, Federal Security Agency, “The Program of Division of Social Protection,” ca. 1941, 1, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>7</sup> G.C. Marshall (Chief of Staff, Secretary of War), War Department Circular No. 170, August 16, 1941, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22

<sup>8</sup> Lt. Gen. J. L. DeWitt to Gov. E. P. Carville, December 18, 1941, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

officials to discuss the state's plans to comply with the Army's request.<sup>9</sup> In 1940, the War and Navy Departments, the Federal Security Agency (FSA), and representative from the country's various State Health Departments agreed to a nationwide policy of suppression of prostitution for the prevention of venereal disease among service members.<sup>10</sup> Just the year before, the Nevada state legislature created the Division of Venereal Disease Control within the State Department of Health.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the war, its first director, Dr. Byron H. Caples led a statewide campaign for "social hygiene" that included calls for the complete abatement of prostitution in the state.

Upon receipt of Lt. Gen. DeWitt's letter, Governor Carville asked the State Attorney General's office to summarize his authority to regulate prostitution in the state. Deputy Attorney General Alan Bible responded with a memo that concluded that the state had virtually no authority to regulate or outlaw prostitution.<sup>12</sup> Aware that the power to comply with the Army's request lay with the various municipal and county authorities of the state, Governor Carville called for a conference on the subject on January 10, 1942.<sup>13</sup> Las Vegas' Mayor Garrison attended this conference and told the assembled representatives from the military, the FSA, and the State Department of Health that the city had successfully closed Block 16; however, he apparently did not make reference to the Meadows.<sup>14</sup>

The Las Vegas Air Gunnery School was built in the northern end of the Las Vegas Valley in 1941. While J.R. Lewis was pushing the brothels out of Block 16 in the final months of 1941, the Air Gunnery School was just beginning operations. After its official opening in October,

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<sup>9</sup> Gov. E. P. Carville to Lt. Gen. J. L. DeWitt, January 12, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>10</sup> "An Agreement by the War and Navy Departments, the Federal Security Agency, and State Health Departments on Measures for the Control of the Venereal Diseases in Areas Where Armed Forces or National Defense Employees are Concentrated," adopted May 7-13, 1940, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>11</sup> Hamer, "Annual Plan," June 23, 1939, 3, Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>12</sup> Deputy Attorney General Alan Bible to Governor E. P. Carville, December 31, 1941, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>13</sup> Edwin James Cooley to Governor E. P. Carville, January 8, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>14</sup> Cooley, "Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada," March 14, 1942, 2.



hundreds of servicemen were sent to the school over the next several months. By May 1942, around 4000 servicemen men were completing the training course every six weeks.<sup>15</sup> Because the Air Gunnery School's beginning came just as Block 16 ended, the Meadows was the first brothel Army officials in Las Vegas pointed to as a problem. On January 8, a letter from the commanding officer of the Air Gunnery School, Colonel Martinus Stenseth, caused Mayor Garrison to reverse the Commission's position and order the Meadows to close immediately.<sup>16</sup> Later that month, the Commission passed Emergency Ordinance 268, which immediately revoked Ordinance 263 and explicitly prohibited prostitution in the city of Las Vegas.<sup>17</sup> The one-mile radius rule was revoked as well, leaving the Meadows in Clark County's jurisdiction. County Sheriff M.E. Ward told the *Review-Journal* he intended to comply with the Army's request immediately. "This is war, and the sooner we all realize it the better," he said. "If the army says close the Meadows, you can be sure the sheriff's office will cooperate to the fullest extent."<sup>18</sup> Despite the professed support by the City Commission and the County Sheriff, however, the Meadows continued its operation uninterrupted.<sup>19</sup>

In the following months, city and county leaders repeatedly clashed with representatives of the Army and the Federal Security Agency who contended that enforcement was not consistent or thorough. In March, Lt. Gen. Bell initiated the first steps toward invoking the May Act in Las Vegas by requesting a special inquiry into vice conditions in the area.<sup>20</sup> Completed by the Regional Supervisor of the Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, a division of the FSA, the report indicated that despite "repeated, direct and specific requests" to local authorities, prostitution was flourishing in Clark County.<sup>21</sup> The Meadows still employed between eight and

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<sup>15</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> "Governor May Close Meadows," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 8, 1942, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, January 20, 1942, volume 4; "City Repeals Rule on Bawdy Houses Near Las Vegas," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 21, 1942, 1.

<sup>18</sup> "City Repeals Rule," *Review-Journal*, January 21, 1942, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cooley, "Survey of Commercialized Prostitution," 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

sixteen prostitutes, with more employed on weekends and paydays. Though Block 16 was now clear of prostitutes, the report continued, prostitutes were now frequently found in the bars and casinos around Fremont Street.<sup>22</sup> Community officials' responses to the Army's request amounted to no more than "lip service." "It is apparent," the report concluded, "that local officials... are willing to gamble that no direct action will be taken by the U.S. Army or the Federal Government."<sup>23</sup>

Despite mounting pressure from the military and the FSA, city, county, and state officials all remained hesitant to take more drastic action. Though the FSA's report was not made available to local officials at the time, Field Representative Jane Christians warned local officials that the Federal Government was preparing to invoke the May Act if conditions did not improve quickly.<sup>24</sup> The County Sheriff did not take action against the Meadows for two more months, however.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was putting pressure on Governor Carville to do more to abate prostitution in his state. In a letter dated March 18, 1942, Knox praises Carville for his efforts to reduce venereal disease thus far, then politely notes that forty-seven of the forty-eight states had laws prohibiting prostitution; only one was "cooperating through local regulations."<sup>26</sup> Carville graciously thanked him for his kind words and simply responded to Knox's subtle jab by stating that in Nevada, local authorities had the "right" to suppress prostitution themselves, which he was actively encouraging them to do.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, throughout the war Carville did actively encourage local authorities to cooperate with the

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<sup>22</sup> Cooley, "Survey of Commercialized Prostitution," 3.

<sup>23</sup> Cooley, "Survey of Commercialized Prostitution," 4.

<sup>24</sup> "Federal Government Threatens LV with the May Act," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 19, 1942, 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Meadows Warned to Remain Closed," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 19, 1942, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Secretary Frank Knox to Governor E. P. Carville, March 18, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>27</sup> Governor E.P. Carville to Secretary Frank Knox, March 24, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

military's policies on prostitution, but he never made any attempt to push for statewide legislation to abolish or regulate the practice.<sup>28</sup>

The County's raid on the Meadows occurred in the same week that the FSA's special report was finally made public.<sup>29</sup> Sheriff Ward and his deputies arrested eleven women at the resort, and District Attorney Roland Wiley charged them with vagrancy.<sup>30</sup> In a statement to the *Review-Journal*, D.A. Wiley complained that the absence of a statewide ban on prostitution meant that vagrancy was the only charge available. Edwin Cooley was following the raid closely. He reported to Governor Carville that although the County's recent action showed some attempt to cooperate with the Army and the FSA, the Sheriff, D.A., and County Commission were not working together effectively to eliminate vice in the county.<sup>31</sup> FSA agents recommended to D.A. Wiley that the brothel could easily be closed under existing laws prohibiting public nuisances, but Wiley had expressed doubt that this was possible, to Cooley's consternation.

Though the County's efforts at the Meadows seemed lukewarm, it did not re-emerge as a source of concern for local, state, or federal officials after the May raid. In July the local newspapers quietly reported that the county sheriff had closed the establishment for good.<sup>32</sup> Instead, officials next turned their attention toward non-brothel prostitution throughout the valley. The Las Vegas City Commission called a special meeting on May 22, 1942, asking all "tavern keepers, hotel operators, gambling houses, taxi drivers, auto courts and rooming house operators"

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<sup>28</sup> Cooley also encouraged Carville to push for a state law abolishing prostitution. Carville's response does not even reference this suggestion. See Edwin James Cooley to Governor E.P. Carville, May 15, 1942, and Governor E.P. Carville to Edwin James Cooley, May 20, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>29</sup> "U. S. Moves to Invoke May Act in Las Vegas as Laxity Charges are Lodged," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 20, 1942, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Note: Two additional women were arrested the day after the initial raid, making a total of thirteen women from the Meadows. Further research is needed to determine the outcome of these arrests.

<sup>31</sup> Edwin James Cooley to Governor E. P. Carville, May 21, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0101, folder 22.

<sup>32</sup> "Meadows Closed by Sheriff Ward," *Las Vegas Age*, July 24, 1942, 1.

in the city to work with law enforcement to keep prostitutes out of their establishments.<sup>33</sup>

Commissioners emphasized to the businessmen in attendance that the May Act might have dire consequences for the community. If it went into effect in Las Vegas, servicemen from the Air Gunnery School would not be allowed to spend their leisure time in the city's taverns and casinos, and the economic loss would be devastating.<sup>34</sup>

### **“Forced Isolation”**

After the Meadows faded from headlines, no brothel emerged as a community threat until after the war. Instead, during the next several years, community leaders, state officials, and representatives of the Army and the FSA focused on the unorganized or “clandestine” prostitution that occurred in motels, rooming houses, bars, and on the street.<sup>35</sup> In coordination with the State Health Department and using guidelines provided by the FSA, Clark County and Las Vegas law enforcement officers systematically arrested women suspected of engaging in prostitution and incarcerated them until a doctor could verify that they were free of venereal disease. The Army officers at the Air Gunnery School pushed no further for the enforcement of the May Act, seemingly satisfied with the community's efforts to control prostitution and venereal disease by isolating suspect women.

The Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services clearly outlined its goals and preferred methods when it was created in 1941. Venereal disease was one of the most significant problems facing the armed forces, it stressed, and prostitution was almost entirely responsible for the spread of venereal disease in the U.S.<sup>36</sup> Its mission was to protect not only the soldier, sailors,

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<sup>33</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, May 22, 1942, volume 4.

<sup>34</sup> “Business Groups Warned to Wipe Out Prostitution,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 26, 1942, 1.

<sup>35</sup> “An Agreement by the War and Navy Departments,” May 7-13, 1940, Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, “The Program of Division of Social Protection,” ca. 1941, 1, Carville Manuscript Collection. Note: the venereal diseases that concerned the FSA at this time were specifically syphilis and gonorrhea.

and defense workers who constituted “the citizens of tomorrow,” but also the young women who might fall into lives of disrepute if prostitution was not fully suppressed.<sup>37</sup> While it acknowledged that some officials might be motivated by their morals in the fight against organized prostitution, the Federal Government would promote it as a public health measure only, because of “the almost universal resistance of the citizenship of this country against governmental supervision of morality.”<sup>38</sup> This was an apt observation particularly in Nevada, where even the governor resisted pressure to challenge the autonomy of the counties and cities to regulate or suppress prostitution themselves. Mindful of these guidelines by the Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, however, Dr. Byron Caples and the representatives of the State Department of Health found some success gaining community cooperation in the suppression of vice by emphasizing its importance as a public health measure and avoiding the moral dimensions of the mission.

With the stated goal of protecting the public health, and particularly the health of the military personnel stationed in the state, the Nevada State Department of Health worked with local law enforcement officers throughout the state to establish a program of arresting women suspected either of prostitution or of carrying a venereal disease. Given the state’s traditional stance of allowing local control over moral issues, this policy represented an unprecedented level of intervention by the state government. The guidelines established by the Department of War, the Department of the Navy, and the FSA called for “[r]ecalitrant infected persons” to be “forcibly isolated” until they were either cured or found to not be carrying venereal disease.<sup>39</sup> Dr. Caples appointed a “VD Investigator” for Clark County to assist in identifying potentially infectious women for the local law enforcement agencies.<sup>40</sup> The investigator encouraged servicemen or civilians coming to the county’s VD Clinic or “prophylactic station” to name the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, “The Program of Division of Social Protection,” ca. 1941, 1, Carville Manuscript Collection, 3.

<sup>39</sup> “An Agreement by the War and Navy Departments,” May 7-13, 1940, Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>40</sup> Division of Venereal Disease Control, “Activity Report, Fiscal Year 1942-1943,” June 4, 1943, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 9.

woman they suspected to be the source of their infection. City police or sheriff's deputies routinely "rounded up" women at the VD Investigator's request and incarcerated them in the city jail to await a doctor's clearance.<sup>41</sup> For the next few years, *Review-Journal* routinely reported both white and African-American women being picked up throughout the county and held together in the jail's tiny "Pink Room" for days at a time.<sup>42</sup>

Almost immediately, the city jail proved inadequate to house the scores of women the VD Investigator identified as potential carriers of disease. Conditions in the women's quarters were cramped and uncomfortable; Caples estimated that the "Pink Room," as the city jail's women's quarters was known familiarly, could be used to isolate and detain only sixteen women at a time.<sup>43</sup> In his annual proposal for the Division of Venereal Disease's activities for 1943-1944, Dr. Caples recommended to state officials that a "Detention Home" should be built in Clark County to relieve the conditions in the city jail.<sup>44</sup> This recommendation was especially dire, Caples wrote, because the limited space in the city jail was discouraging local police from arresting all the women it probably should. Instead, the police had adopted the policy of "giving the unwanted and infected individual a bus ticket to the next town."<sup>45</sup> Governor Carville was acutely aware of the inadequacy of the state's facilities for detention and treatment; he asked the FSA's Edwin Cooley if the federal government might fund the construction of a "Rapid

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<sup>41</sup> B. H. Caples, "Proposed Activities for the Fiscal Year 1943 and 1944: Clark County Health Unit Report," June 4, 1943, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 9; "8 Women Nabbed as Prostitution Suspects Here," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 5, 1944, 2.

<sup>42</sup> "Prostitution Cases Delayed Last Eve," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 19, 1943, 2; "8 Women," *Review-Journal*, June 5, 1944, 2; "Arrest Five Women," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 10, 1944; "13 Women Held in City Jail While Investigation Made," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 12, 1944, 2; "Vice Round-up," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 26, 1945, 3.

<sup>43</sup> State Board of Health, "State of Nevada Biennial Report of the State Board of Health for the Period July 1, 1942 to June 30, 1944, inclusive," ca. July 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 11.

<sup>44</sup> Caples, "Proposed Activities for the Fiscal Year 1943 and 1944," Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Treatment Center” in Nevada to relieve some of the burden.<sup>46</sup> In July of 1944, Dr. Caples succeeded in obtaining additional space for detentions at the County Hospital, a temporary structure on hospital grounds.<sup>47</sup> Despite this expansion of facilities, the city jail remained full to capacity with women waiting for treatment or clearance.

The suspected prostitutes who were incarcerated in these periodic round-ups did not always cooperate patiently with law enforcement and Health Department officials. In a meeting in January 1944, a representative of the State Health Department related an incident in Reno at the Washoe General Hospital that provides a glimpse of how these women resisted the federal, state, and local regulation of their sexualities and their bodies. The fire department informed the hospital staff that it was illegal to lock the women inside the building, and upon discovering this, several of the women simply walked out and left the premises.<sup>48</sup> Others began to wander throughout the hospital outside the area set aside for their isolation. Worst of all, it seemed to the hospital staff, they refused to be polite or docile. “The language was extremely objectionable,” the hospital employee told the State Health Department’s representatives.<sup>49</sup> The suspected prostitutes of Clark County showed similar resistance to their detentions. The close quarters in the city jail must have been especially uncomfortable during the hot summer months, and it was perhaps these conditions that motivated several women to stage an escape from the “Pink Room” in July of 1944.<sup>50</sup> Standing on their bunk beds, the inmates tore a hole in the plywood ceiling

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<sup>46</sup> Edwin James Cooley to Governor E. P. Carville, February 8, 1943, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 9. Cooley advised him that the state could apply for federal funds for such a center, but it does not appear that Governor Carville followed through in applying.

<sup>47</sup> Caples, “Activity Report for the Month of July, 1944,” Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 12; Nevada State Department of Health, minutes, July 11, 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 12.

<sup>48</sup> State Board of Health, meeting transcript, January 10, 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Six in Pink Room Attempt Escape,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 10, 1944, 5.

with their hands; two women then crawled through a hole in the tin roof and escaped before the jailbreak was discovered.<sup>51</sup>

### **Discrimination in Enforcement along Gender and Racial Lines**

Gender clearly informed the state policy of “forced isolation”. Though men can obviously carry and spread venereal diseases, and the Federal Government’s guidelines called for the detainment of infected “persons,” in practice only women were targeted as potential disease vectors. Of the sixty-one people the *Review-Journal* specifically identified between 1943 and 1945 as being isolated for public health reasons, none of them were men.<sup>52</sup> Dr. Caples explained this disparity in a 1944 meeting of the State Department of Health. An arrest was predicated upon the accusation of a person who had come to the County VD Clinic for treatment, he explained, and the vast majority of these accusations came from men.<sup>53</sup> The gendered enforcement of the state’s policy meant that men with venereal disease were treated at the local outpatient clinic, while women received treatment in the local jail. In Clark County, the VD Investigator’s duties reflected this double standard. He was responsible for “case-holding” and “case-finding”; assisting the local police with the arrests of “infected prostitutes” and finding “delinquent” patients of the County Clinic.<sup>54</sup> Even though discontinuing treatment early constituted definitive proof that a man was infected, the VD Investigator would simply invite him back to the clinic rather than ask the police to “forcibly isolate” him.

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<sup>51</sup> Albert E. Wile to George Thompson, ca. 1944, Albert E. Wile Manuscript Collection, #T54, Lied Library Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

<sup>52</sup> In January 1943, three men were arrested for “procuring” for prostitutes. They were not subjected to medical examination, however, and the *Review-Journal* did not report if they went to trial for the charges. “Prostitution Cases Delayed,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 19, 1943, 2.

<sup>53</sup> State Board of Health, meeting transcript, January 10, 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection. Dr. Caples also reported at this meeting that at the time only four men had been forcibly isolated in the state.

<sup>54</sup> Caples, “Proposed Activities for the Fiscal Year 1943 and 1944,” Carville Manuscript Collection.



In addition to disproportionately punishing women, the State Department of Health and local law enforcement seem to have singled out African American women in their system of round-ups. Of the 78 arrests that appeared in the *Review-Journal* or the records of the Division of Venereal Disease Control during the war, 42 are identified as African American.<sup>55</sup> Both Governor Carville and Dr. Caples expressed the opinion that the Westside, Las Vegas' black neighborhood, was a source of particular concern for public health.<sup>56</sup> While the Clark County VD Clinic prided itself on treating patients "without regard to race, creed, colour or residence," the enforced quarantine policy was clearly not applied so evenly.<sup>57</sup> As described in Chapter 1, African-American prostitutes were briefly targeted during the building of the Hoover Dam, when the federal presence in southern Nevada was particularly strong. The concern about African-American prostitutes was again heightened when the federal presence increased during the World War II period. After the war, neither race nor ethnicity was explicitly referenced in any newspaper article about prostitution. The sudden spike in references to African American prostitutes during wartime was a reflection of community tensions that arose from the sudden influx of African-Americans to the valley to work in the defense industry. Before the start of the war, only 178 African-Americans lived in Clark County; three years later, over 3000 lived just in the segregated Westside neighborhood.<sup>58</sup> In an atmosphere of rising tensions, most businesses in Las Vegas began refusing to serve black customers, and the police actively worked to keep black residents and servicemen confined to the Westside by closing businesses that remained

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<sup>55</sup> This number was determined by multiple articles in the *Review-Journal* between 1942-1945 and Caples, "Activity Report for the Month of November, 1944," Carville Manuscript Collection. Four women are identified specifically as white, while 32 did not have their race specified.

<sup>56</sup> State Board of Health, meeting transcript, January 10, 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection; Caples, "Activity Report for the Month of November, 1944," Carville Manuscript Collection.

<sup>57</sup> Caples, "Annual Narrative Report and Plan for the Fiscal Year 1945," June 30, 1944, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 12.

<sup>58</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 177.

integrated.<sup>59</sup> The periodic round-ups of Westside women were clearly part of the city's policy to control and isolate its black residents.

The wartime treatment of suspected prostitutes presents an especially troubling chapter in the history of Southern Nevada's relationship to prostitution. Even if one accepts the tenuous justification that the round-ups were necessary to safeguard the public health, it seems that many women who were detained were not even carrying venereal diseases. The process whereby these arrests were made was obviously questionable and likely prone to error. The police required no greater evidence than the VD Investigator's list of women who had been named by patients of the County VD Clinic. Perhaps to justify the extreme measures the policy of "forced isolation" required, State Health Department officials routinely referred to the women targeted in these round-ups as "infected." Although whether these women were indeed carrying venereal diseases could not be determined until *after* their arrests and detentions, by calling them "infected" at the time of their arrests the State Health Department implied that these women were inherently dangerous just by drawing suspicion. There is unfortunately no way to calculate how many women who were arrested in Clark County over the years were not carriers of venereal disease, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it may have been a large proportion. In November 1944, Dr. Caples reported to the Governor that seventeen women had been arrested during the month and detained for examination.<sup>60</sup> Only ten were found to have either syphilis or gonorrhea. That meant that seven women had been arrested, incarcerated, and subjected to a medical examination against their wills for no reason at all.

Though research in the early years of the war showed that "victory girls" or "pickups" were responsible for the overwhelming majority of cases of venereal disease among U.S. soldiers, prostitutes continued to serve as a symbol of danger and were specifically targeted and

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<sup>59</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 177-178.

<sup>60</sup> Caples, "Activity Report for the Month of November, 1944," Carville Manuscript Collection.

punished.<sup>61</sup> This was certainly true in Nevada; the records of the Division of Venereal Disease Control refer to pick-up girls only once, briefly, in 1943.<sup>62</sup> Otherwise, it treated the elimination of venereal disease and the abatement of prostitution as virtually synonymous. As a result, women who were targeted in the police round-ups were assumed to be prostitutes and publicly described as such in the *Review-Journal*, sometimes even after being identified by name. The round-ups were part of a wartime shift in the cultural construction of female sexuality; promiscuity was subsumed under the category of prostitution to create an ill-defined version of femininity that was understood only as deviant and undesirable.

Many, or perhaps most, of the women picked up in the round-ups were probably not prostitutes at all. In a 1944 article, the *Review-Journal* tellingly describes the round-ups as an effort by local police, the military, and Health Department officials to “control prostitutes and *other women*.”<sup>63</sup> Though the FSA, the War Department, the State Health Department, local officials publically maintained the argument that prostitutes were the leading source of venereal disease, and the local newspaper routinely described arrested women as “suspected prostitutes”, the Health Department’s records indicate that very few of the women treated for venereal disease during the war had been active prostitutes. In fact, though their records are incomplete, a summary of “actual cases” compiled in 1946 reported that in four years, only ten women identified as “contacts” had been specifically named by their accusers as prostitutes.<sup>64</sup> The *Review-Journal* listed many women charged with vagrancy or prostitution-related charges by

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<sup>61</sup> See Clements, 242-247, and Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 166-167. “Victory girls” and “pickups” were young women who had sex with servicemen out of a sense of adventure, excitement, or patriotic duty. Clements reports that in New York City in 1944, 32 percent of venereal disease cases among soldiers were transmitted by “friends,” 62 percent from casual pickups, and only 6 percent from prostitutes.

<sup>62</sup> Division of Venereal Disease Control, “Activity Report, Fiscal Year 1942-1943,” June 4, 1943, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0121, folder 9. The report states: “This division is cooperating with hotels, restaurants, clubs and bars to help eliminate solicitation by prostitutes and pick-up girls; and is working to improve sanitary conditions and regulations.”

<sup>63</sup> “8 Women Nabbed,” *Review-Journal*, June 5, 1944, 2. Italics added.

<sup>64</sup> Nevada State Department of Health, “Report of Actual Cases,” ca. 1946, Governor Vail Pittman Manuscript Collection, box 145, folder 11, Nevada State Archives, Carson City, Nevada.

name between 1942 and 1945, but there are no references in the newspaper during the war years to any subsequent convictions. It is possible that their trials were simply not reported, but this pattern is markedly different from the period both before and after the war when the *Review-Journal* frequently reported on both the arrests of suspected prostitutes and their trials days or weeks later. The absence of convictions lends further weight to the argument that the majority of the women forcibly incarcerated during the war were not actually prostitutes.

Not only were these women unfairly stigmatized by being publicly named as prostitutes or informally associated with the practice, their detentions constituted significant violations of their civil rights. Women might wait in the city jail or the county hospital for days waiting for a doctor to examine them. If they needed treatment, they could be detained for weeks while the treatments were administered, instead of being allowed to receive outpatient treatments at the VD Clinic as men were. These incarcerations must have been financially devastating for young women who worked to support themselves or their families. Given the fragmentary nature of the surviving sources and the way that the categories of “prostitutes” and “bad women” became confused during the war, it is unclear exactly how many women rounded up in Clark County in the war years were practicing prostitutes, pick-up girls, or neither. However, what is clear is that for several years federal, state, and local officials cooperated in an effort that incarcerated hundreds of women who had not been found guilty of any crime. Though the federal involvement in local prostitution policy receded after the war, this period demonstrated how dramatically the government’s power had grown since it had unsuccessfully requested the closure of Block 16 in the early 1930s.

### **Abatement vs. Regulation**

After the war, with the threat of the May Act removed, local law enforcement suspended its “forced isolation” policy, and the Las Vegas community again began thinking about

prostitution as a local issue.<sup>65</sup> Governor Carville and other state leaders had successfully resisted the federal government's pressure to pass a statewide ban on prostitution during the war. This meant that as the threat of federal enforcement receded, the county and municipal governments of Southern Nevada again asserted the autonomy to regulate or outlaw prostitution within their own jurisdictions. In early 1946 community leaders briefly debated whether an official red-light district should again be established. Representatives of the Las Vegas Hospital Association, the school district, and other civic organizations met with the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce to argue against the return of legalized prostitution.<sup>66</sup> At least one prominent civic group, the Junior Chamber of Commerce (the Jaycees), met separately to discuss the issue, and voted to re-establish a regulated vice district.<sup>67</sup>

The idea that restricting prostitution to a designated area and requiring regular health checks was the best solution for controlling the practice was a tenacious one in the valley. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, the majority of the community accepted "segregated" prostitution for the many decades that Block 16 remained in operation. During the war, the FSA endeavored to divest Nevadans of this idea. Citing medical studies and years of experience, the FSA argued that "segregation does not segregate" and that routine medical checks would not prevent prostitutes from spreading venereal disease.<sup>68</sup> The FSA's views on the matter were in line with the American Medical Association's. In 1942, the AMA released a statement decrying regular medical inspection of prostitutes as "untrustworthy and inefficient," and pointing out that a doctor who

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<sup>65</sup> The policy still remained in place in 1946, but the local VD Investigator position was suspended due to budget cuts. Without this individual to request arrests, "forcible isolation" was no longer enforced. See Clark County Health Department, "Narrative of Activities of Clark County Health Department, July 1, 1945- December 31, 1945," ca. December 1945, Pittman Manuscript Collection, box 145, folder 1.

<sup>66</sup> "Citizens Rise Against Legalized Prostitution," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 5, 1946, 1.

<sup>67</sup> "Vegas Jaycees Approve Controlled Prostitution After Extended Debate," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 28, 1946, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, "The Program of Division of Social Protection," ca. 1941, 3, Carville Manuscript Collection.

provided such a service was aiding an illegal activity.<sup>69</sup> Because prostitution was not explicitly illegal in Nevada, this latter admonition was not true in the state, which is perhaps why the State Health Department did not spend much effort during the war trying to convince Nevadans of the inefficacy of medical inspections.

In fact, the argument that complete abolishment of prostitution and strenuous enforcement were the only ways to stop the spread of venereal disease faced widespread resistance in Nevada. The Mayor of Ely surely spoke for many Nevadans when he wrote to Governor Carville to protest the state's request to abate the city's red-light district. Closing the district would "scatter occupants all over the City," he wrote, and if the city could not enforce medical examinations, venereal diseases would spread quickly.<sup>70</sup> Even the State Health Department was divided on the subject during the early years of the war. Dr. Edward Hamer, the State Health Officer, wrote to the physicians in the state after the governor's request for abatement asking for their cooperation but expressing his own misgivings that the decision would result in the spread of venereal disease instead of its curtailment.<sup>71</sup> In a 1943 editorial, the *Review-Journal* praised local officials' efforts to curb prostitution while the May Act threatened the city's autonomy, but acknowledged that most Nevadans still firmly believed that "controlled prostitution" was the only practical solution to the problem of venereal disease.<sup>72</sup> It is not surprising then that when community leaders contemplated how prostitution might be addressed after the war's end, the Jaycees represented a vocal minority who urged the return of legalized, segregated prostitution.

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<sup>69</sup> American Medical Association, "Resolution on the Control of Venereal Disease," June 8, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 121, folder 009. W. T. Harrison, the Medical Director of the U.S. Public Health Service (a division of the FSA), sent this resolution to Governor Carville in 1943, presumably to sway the governor toward a statewide ban.

<sup>70</sup> Mayor J. H. Gallagher to Governor E. P. Carville, January 9, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 101, folder 22.

<sup>71</sup> Hamer, Letter template to the physicians of the state, January 13, 1942, Carville Manuscript Collection, box 0106, folder 3.

<sup>72</sup> Editorial, "The Recent Vice Raid," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 20, 1943, 10.

Years of protests by Army and FSA officials seemed to have persuaded the majority of Southern Nevadans that regulation was not acceptable, however. City health officials testified at the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce meeting that the rates of venereal disease had fallen dramatically in the city since Block 16 had officially been shut down. Marjorie Gaston, representing the State Department of Health, read aloud from an FSA-published booklet to convince those assembled that medical inspection was not an effective method of control. In an even more inflammatory critique of sanctioned prostitution, Clark County school superintendent Maude Frazier declared that since the Block's closure venereal disease had disappeared among local high school students.<sup>73</sup> These arguments proved effective; the Las Vegas City Commission took no official action, which left the city-wide ban on prostitution in place. Describing the January Chamber of Commerce meeting and the City Commission's subsequent decision, Dr. Caples delightedly told the State Board of Health that a remarkable change was "taking place in the hearts and minds" of Las Vegas citizens.<sup>74</sup> An editorial in the *Review-Journal* described the rationale behind the community's change of heart. "Tradition had built up the aura of legitimacy around prostitution," the editorial explained, "and most of the people in this state accepted it as more or less of a necessary evil."<sup>75</sup> Health concerns played a significant role in the shift in thinking, the editorial continued, but the larger concern was economic.

As the sustaining economic support of federal projects in Southern Nevada waned immediately after World War II, Las Vegas began to reposition itself as a tourist destination that would appeal to the growing middle class across the nation. The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce hired a major ad agency, J. Walter Thompson, to create a national campaign promoting the city almost as a commodity itself.<sup>76</sup> The post-war was a period of "transition,

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<sup>73</sup> "Citizens Rise," *Review-Journal*, January 5, 1946, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Caples, "Nevada State Department of Health, Division of Venereal Disease Control, Activity Report for the Month of February 1946," Pittman Manuscript Collection, box 145, folder 11.

<sup>75</sup> "A Welcome Move," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 7, 1946, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 66.

reorganization, and modernization” for Las Vegas.<sup>77</sup> Over the next several years, the city began to distance itself from the Wild West aesthetic from its early decades and repositioned itself as a glamorous desert paradise. An officially sanctioned red-light district fit well into the “last frontier town,” but had no place in the sleek, classy resort city that local boosters wanted to build.<sup>78</sup> The *Review-Journal*’s 1946 editorial argued that the Chamber of Commerce’s nationwide advertising campaign would have been less effective if the city openly condoned a practice that the rest of the nation condemned.<sup>79</sup> The city’s new post-war image also signaled a new direction in its approach to prostitution. From 1946 until 1955, a series of brothels throughout the county drew the community’s attention and ire, while high-priced call girls quietly moved into the swanky new resorts on the Las Vegas Strip.

### **The Return of Brothel Prostitution**

Though Las Vegas officials had taken a hard stance on prostitution within city limits in 1946, Clark County officials did not take a definitive stand. It was not long before brothel prostitution re-emerged in the community, but always on the outskirts of town, usually on unincorporated county land or in emerging suburbs. Indeed, the Chamber of Commerce meeting in January 1946 had been prompted by reports that a brothel was preparing to open in the Four Mile area of the county.<sup>80</sup> It was just the first of the brothels that drew the community’s focus in the years after the war. In 1947, the brothel at the Kassabian Ranch on Las Vegas’ southern outskirts became the first high-profile post-war raid. The town of Searchlight, about sixty miles south of Vegas, came under scrutiny in 1951. The following year, the city of North Las Vegas

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<sup>77</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 72.

<sup>78</sup> In 1947, the Chamber of Commerce replaced the J. Walter Thompson agency with West-Marquis, who returned to the western aesthetic. For example, West-Marquis created the now iconic “Vegas Vic” character. However, in 1948 the Chamber of Commerce moved to a new agency again, Steve Hannegan and Associates, who abandoned the frontier aesthetic in favor of glamour and luxury as J. Walter Thompson had. See Moehring, *Resort City*, 66-67.

<sup>79</sup> “A Welcome Move,” *Review-Journal*, January 7, 1946, 10.

<sup>80</sup> “Citizens Rise,” *Review-Journal*, January 5, 1946, 1.



became the center of the war on vice. The area known as Four Mile showed up in the headlines again and again during this period, however. Though numerous brothels appeared in Southern Nevada over the next several years, the brothel at Four Mile, the Roxie, ultimately defined the community's understanding of and attitudes toward prostitution after Block 16.

The first of these high-profile post-war raids occurred in January 1947, when Las Vegas police arrested two men and two women for allegedly operating a bawdy house at the upscale Kassabian Ranch (sometimes called the Shangri La Ranch) on the southern outskirts of the city.<sup>81</sup> The police identified Marline Harriet Compton as the madam of the small bordello, with her husband Paul Miloglav assisting in running the operation.<sup>82</sup> George Martin was accused of being a procurer for his wife Lillian Ingram, having talked her into coming to the ranch to go to work as a prostitute.<sup>83</sup> Compton and Miloglav continued to maintain their innocence, claiming that Martin and Ingram were employed to assist them with the ranch's operations.<sup>84</sup> Martin and Ingram turned against their employers in court however, testifying that Compton had offered Ingram a job in her house for which she would receive half the money she obtained from her clients.<sup>85</sup> During the trial the prosecution produced a customer of the Kassabian Ranch to testify about the type of business that occurred there.<sup>86</sup> In the end, Compton and Miloglav pled guilty to a reduced charge of "being idle, lewd, and dissolute persons" and sentenced to a \$300 fine or 150 days in jail, and \$100 fine or 50 days in jail, respectively.<sup>87</sup> Ingram was sentenced to fifteen days in jail

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<sup>81</sup> "Prostitution Charged in Raid at City Limits Luxury Ranch," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 13, 1947, 1. The name Shangri La appears to be the ranch's actual designation, but it was known popularly as the Kassabian Ranch because the property was owned by Dr. L. G. Kassabian, an absentee landlord living in Los Angeles.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> "Prostitution Charged," *Review-Journal*, January 13, 1947, 1.

<sup>84</sup> "Vice Case in Court," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 21, 1947, 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> "Blad Assesses Fines in Vegas Vice Raid," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 22, 1947, 2.

on reduced charges, while Martin was sentenced to thirty days and then turned over to federal authorities in Reno to stand trial on white slavery charges.<sup>88</sup>

The coverage of the events surrounding the Kassabian Ranch raid illustrates how the *Review-Journal* shaped public opinion through the crafting of their reports and as a platform for local officials to address the community. Through accounts of the trial, Marline Compton emerged as a colorful character. Shortly after her arrest, Compton was quoted as saying, “I intended to raise melons. All of this talk about a ‘house’ is outrageous.”<sup>89</sup> When questioned about the testimony of the ranch’s client, Compton stated that she had merely let him into the house because it was cold. She continued, “I also invited the cab driver in, and I invited the police in when they came, too.”<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, local officials were eager to use the platform to express their commitment to the continuing “war on vice”.<sup>91</sup> City Manager Tom Fennessy, for instance, issued a statement specifically intended for publication in the *Review-Journal* praising the city police’s handling of the case and highlighting his role in the raid: “When this office received a tip three weeks ago from a citizen that such an operation was in progress at the Shangri-La ranch, and had the tip confirmed, the police chief was ordered to investigate and if evidence warranted, to make the necessary arrests.”<sup>92</sup> Fennessy and the *Review-Journal* pointed to the raid as an example of the effectiveness of the city’s policy of prosecuting prostitution as it was discovered.

The incident at the Kassabian Ranch represents the first example of a pattern that was repeated many times in the next several years. City police or sheriff’s deputies would raid an establishment, arrest the proprietor and any prostitutes on the premises, and charge them with

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.; “George Martin Gets 3 Years in Vice Case,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 26, 1947, 2. White slavery was a federal offense under the Mann Act, which prohibited the transportation of a person across state lines for the purpose of prostitution. Martin’s white slavery charges were unrelated to his actions in Las Vegas.

<sup>89</sup> “Prostitution Charged,” *Review-Journal*, January 13, 1947, 1.

<sup>90</sup> “Vice Case in Court,” *Review-Journal*, January 21, 1947, 1.

<sup>91</sup> “Police Chief to Continue War on Vice,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 15, 1947, 1.

<sup>92</sup> “City Manager Endorse Fight on Prostitution,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 16, 1947, 3.

violating the rooming house ordinance or operating a “public nuisance.” No customers were apparently ever found in these raids. Local newspapers emphasized the sensational aspects of the raids and often peppered their reports with tongue-in-cheek humor. They also happily provided a public platform for city or county officials who used each raid as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement or criticism of their opponents. The persistent repetition of this pattern represents how the community continually tried to position itself on the “right” side of prostitution as the longtime libertarianism of the area came into conflict with a new desire among some members of the community to become more connected to the rest of the country.

### **The Roxie Under Fire**

Perhaps eager to be seen as part of Las Vegas’ movement to stamp out prostitution, Clark County officials moved to take action against the Roxie soon after the Kassabian Ranch trial had concluded. In March 1947, the County Commission and County Sheriff announced their intentions to shut down the Roxie Motel.<sup>93</sup> This was the first official attempt to close the brothel, but certainly not the last. The brothel in Four Mile had opened in 1946 under the management of Eddie Clippinger and his wife Roxie, for whom he affectionately named his establishment. Clippinger was a former brothel operator from San Bernardino who had moved to Las Vegas in the early 1940s to run the brothel at the Meadows.<sup>94</sup> Roxie had worked as a prostitute at the Meadows; it was probably there that the two met. At the time, Clippinger was still married to his first wife, Lillian, though they separated around 1943 and divorced in 1946.<sup>95</sup> It is not clear when Eddie and Roxie were married, but they were already in business together by 1945, when the property at the Four Mile was leased to the two of them.<sup>96</sup> The property consisted of a central

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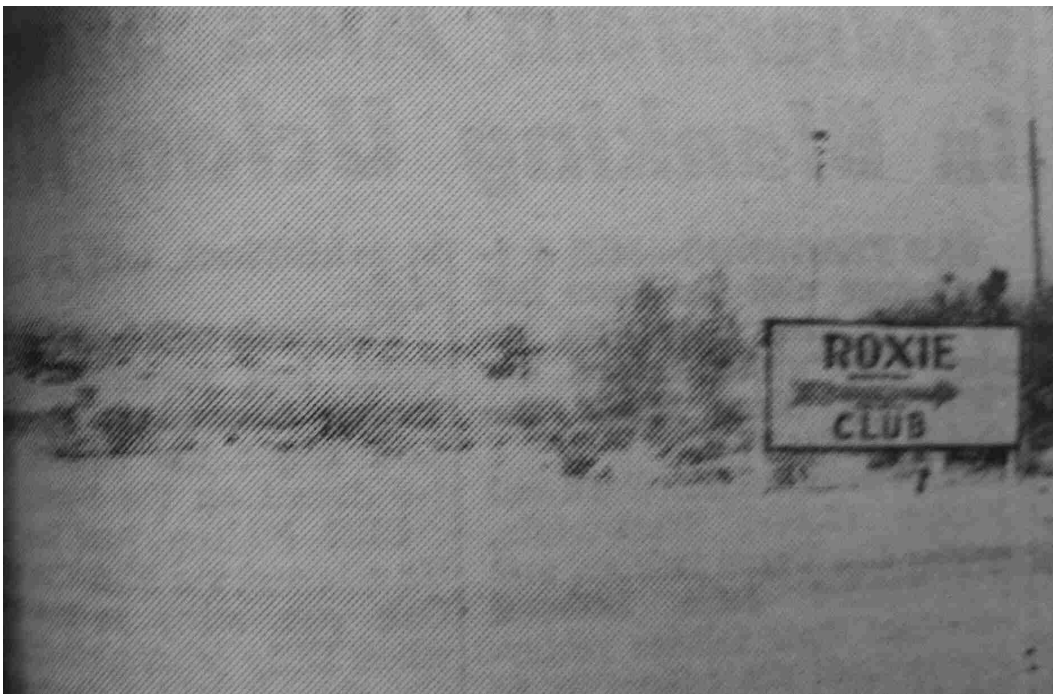
<sup>93</sup> “County Orders Sheriff to Close Roxie Motel,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 7, 1947, 1.

<sup>94</sup> “Meadows Troubles Move Further Along Jurisprudence Trail Today,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 31, 1941, 1.

<sup>95</sup> “Eddie Clippinger Granted Divorce,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 17, 1946, 3.

<sup>96</sup> “Barbee Denies He’s Tied Into Roxie Operations,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 25, 1949, 1. This article states that “R. Stovall” was on the lease with Eddie Clippinger. During their

motel and several auxiliary structures set among a stand of cottonwood trees near the Boulder Highway, four miles from Las Vegas' downtown. (See Figure Seven) The Four Mile area had a long history of harboring vice, frequently coming under fire as a source of illegal liquor during Prohibition. The Roxie itself had even previously operated as a brothel; in the 1930s, it was known as the Blue Heaven.<sup>97</sup> Under the Clippingers' management, the Roxie enjoyed a reputation as one of Las Vegas' worst-kept secrets. Despite periodic attempts to close it, the Roxie stayed in business almost continuously until 1955.



**Figure Seven.** This sign directed visitors to the brothel in the late 1940s to the correct place to turn off the Boulder Highway. This photo illustrates how remote the Roxie was from the rest of town. Garside—Review-Journal Photo, March 24, 1949.

Soon after Las Vegas officials publicized their great success in eliminating the brothel at the Kassabian Ranch, County Sheriff Glen Jones informed the *Review-Journal* that he pledged to

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1954 federal trial, Roxie revealed that she sometimes used the alias “Roxie Stovall.” In 1947, Sheriff Jones told the County Commission that the Roxie’s liquor license was issued to “Ray Stovall.” (“County Orders Sheriff,” *Review-Journal*, March 7, 1947, 2.) However, I believe that the majority of the evidence at hand indicates that the “R.Stovall” who leased the Roxie in 1945 is indeed Roxie Clippinger, and that the sheriff was either mistaken or being deceptive.

<sup>97</sup> “County Joins War,” *Review-Journal* April 5, 1932, 1; “Roxie’s in Ruins after Roaring Fire,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 8, 1956, 1.

close any known house of prostitution in his jurisdiction.<sup>98</sup> The County Commission similarly proved their commitment to the war on vice by promising to revoke the liquor licenses of any such establishment.<sup>99</sup> A month later, when questioned at a meeting of the county liquor board, Sheriff Jones asserted that the Roxie was now free of vice. “They’d better be pure,” he told the board members, “we’ve been after them ever since the order was given my office to see that prostitution was not to be allowed.”<sup>100</sup>

Just a few months after the county’s first attempt to close it, the Roxie was reportedly enjoying an increase in business. This was due in part to a new publicity push: small white business cards distributed throughout the city bearing the motel’s new slogan, “Come out and see us some time.”<sup>101</sup> District Attorney Robert E. Jones launched a new investigation of operations at the motel, but publicly admitted that enforcement was difficult. “There is neither a county ordinance nor a state law prohibiting prostitution,” he said, “and until adequate laws are passed there is no way to prosecute effectively those operating outside the limits of incorporated cities.”<sup>102</sup> In November, the County Commission attempted to thwart the operators of the Roxie by suspending the establishment’s gambling, liquor, and slot machine licenses, believing this would shut the motel down immediately.<sup>103</sup> If the Roxie closed at all in this instance, it was back in business by early 1948, when Sheriff Jones was called out to the motel after four armed men robbed Ed Clippinger and three unnamed “employees”.<sup>104</sup> No action by county authorities seemed to have any lasting effect on the motel.

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<sup>98</sup> “County Orders Sheriff,” *Review-Journal*, March 7, 1947, 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> “Roxie Motel Free of Vice, Sheriff Says,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 9, 1947, 4.

<sup>101</sup> “Roxie Motel Has New Sign,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 4, 1947, 3.

<sup>102</sup> “District Attorney Explains Roxie Motel Investigation,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 9, 1947, 5.

<sup>103</sup> “Roxie Motel Licenses Suspended by County,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 7, 1947, 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> “Bandits Collect \$200 in Holdup at Roxie Motel,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 6, 1948, 3.

The county tried threats from the sheriff, investigation by the district attorney, and suspension of the motel's liquor and gambling licenses to close the establishment. In June 1948, a customer of the Roxie filed a complaint with the sheriff against the motel's bouncers; they had physically thrown him off the property after he had tried to purchase more of a brothel worker's time with a check.<sup>105</sup> This incident, indicating that the prostitution occurring at the Roxie was being perceived by its customers at least to be perfectly legal, prompted the District Attorney's office to again seek a way to close the place for good. Assistant DAs Harry Claiborne and Roger Foley recounted to the *Review-Journal* that the only laws applying to houses of prostitution were a state statute which prohibited them within 400 yards of a school or church or fronting on a main highway, and a county ordinance which would force closure if they were deemed a public nuisance through a lengthy petition process that must be initiated by the citizens residing in the area.<sup>106</sup> The Roxie fit neither of the first two criteria, and as no citizens had organized to begin the latter process, it seemed that the brothel would continue to operate in a legal "twilight zone" indefinitely.<sup>107</sup>

While local officials continually attempted new ways to shut down the Roxie, business at the motel continued at a steady pace. The distribution of the motel's business card-sized advertisements contributed heavily to its continued success; these cards were so prevalent that one even found its way into the hands of County Commissioner Frank Gusewelle who displayed it in a commission meeting as evidence of the county's need to act against the motel.<sup>108</sup> Local taxi drivers also played a significant role in keeping the customers flowing out of Las Vegas to the Boulder Highway resort. The County Commission alleged that one of the taxi companies charged a dollar for each trip to or from the Roxie, a significant source of revenue.<sup>109</sup> This deal with the Roxie proved to be a powerful incentive to the local taxi drivers. The *Review-Journal*

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<sup>105</sup> "L'Affaire Roxie Club Again Plagues Sheriff," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1948, 3.

<sup>106</sup> "L'Affaire Roxie," *Review-Journal*, June 18, 1948, 3

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> "Roxie Motel Licenses," *Review-Journal*, November, 7, 1947, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 2.

reported that a “recent visitor complained that every time he took a taxi to see the new Elks stadium or Paradise Valley, the driver always tried to end up at the Roxie.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Federal, State, and County Pressures**

Though the county had reached an impasse with the Roxie in 1948, events at the national and state levels soon sparked fresh debates about the role of prostitution in the county. After temporarily ceasing operations in 1946, the Air Gunnery School was reactivated as the Las Vegas Air Force Base and resumed training pilots in 1949.<sup>111</sup> Military officials again turned to the State Department of Health to monitor vice conditions and the rates of venereal disease in the community near the base. The American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), a national organization dedicated to eliminating both prostitution and the venereal diseases, aided them in this effort by periodically conducting undercover studies of brothels and by coordinating the efforts of military, state, and local officials.<sup>112</sup>

Meanwhile, the state government was finally considering taking an official stance on prostitution. In March 1949, the case against Mae Cunningham, a Reno madam, reached the Nevada Supreme Court which ultimately ruled that brothels always constituted a public nuisance, and could therefore be closed on those grounds without the difficult petition process.<sup>113</sup> Rural counties that depended heavily on the revenue of their local brothels were alarmed by the decision, and State Senator Aaron V. Tallman of Winnemucca introduced a bill that would allow each county to outlaw or license and regulate brothels within its own jurisdiction, a process known colloquially as the local option. Backed by the majority of the representatives from the

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<sup>110</sup> “L’Affaire Roxie,” *Review-Journal*, June 18, 1948, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Patrick Kelly, “Field Report, Reno and Carson City, Nevada, March 8 to 10, 1949,” March 11, 1949, American Social Hygiene Association Manuscript Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (hereafter cited as ASHA Manuscript Collection). See also Moehring, *Resort City*, 40.

<sup>112</sup> ASHA’s field reports in Nevada from 1949-1951 are available in the University of Minnesota’s Social Welfare History Archives; they make frequent reference to a series of undercover reports, but I have not at this time located these reports, if they still exist.

<sup>113</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 67.



rural counties, the bill passed easily.<sup>114</sup> Democratic governor Vail Pittman vetoed the bill, however, explaining that he wanted to keep Nevada “synonymous with personal liberty, but not with licentiousness.”<sup>115</sup>

In early 1949, ASHA field representative Patrick Kelley met with representatives of the State Department of Health to discuss how they might shape the ongoing discussion surrounding the Cunningham decision and the local option.<sup>116</sup> Dr. Byron Caples was still the director of the Division of Venereal Disease Control; Kelley was immediately struck by the “single-hearted zeal” with which he had pushed for reform throughout the war.<sup>117</sup> Kelley was largely optimistic that the Cunningham decision would allow county DAs throughout the state to finally end prostitution permanently, but he also expressed some concerns that Nevada was an unusual state. ASHA and the State Department of Health would have to work closely with local religious or civic groups, he noted, because Nevadans consistently resented “outsiders” pushing reform efforts on them.<sup>118</sup> State officials were themselves not wholly cooperative. Newly appointed State Health Officer Dr. Charles Blankenship expressed open contempt for Edwin Cooley and the FSA’s interference in Nevada during the war. Even the stalwart Dr. Caples seemed hesitant to embrace ASHA’s guidance wholeheartedly; he urged Kelley to discontinue ASHA’s undercover reports in the state, because their findings were common knowledge to the locals anyway.<sup>119</sup> Kelley’s misgivings in the March 1949 meeting foreshadowed the tensions between local, state, and national authorities that would continue for the next several years.

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<sup>114</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 70.

<sup>115</sup> “Prostitution Measure Vetoed,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 22, 1949, 1. The rural counties who wished to keep their brothels responded by passing local ordinances that stated explicitly that a brothel was not a public nuisance. Ultimately the confusion over authority and enforcement led the state legislature to pass a bill in 1971 that bans brothels in counties with a population over 200,000 (later amended to 400,000), and granting the rural counties the “local option” they had been using all along. For more information, see Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 70-75.

<sup>116</sup> Kelly, “Field Report, Reno and Carson City, Nevada, March 8 to 10, 1949,” March 11, 1949, 1, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>117</sup> Kelly, “Field Report, March 8 to 10, 1949,” 1, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



This state-wide debate, coupled with a newspaper report of a 19-year-old boy being served liquor at the Roxie and subsequently being arrested for drunk driving, caused Clark County officials to turn their attention again to the Roxie.<sup>120</sup> Again county officials publicly declared their intention to close the establishment.<sup>121</sup> This time the county commission successfully passed an order of abatement as a public nuisance, which required the motel to cease operations within five days.<sup>122</sup> As the community's attention focused on the brothel, the *Review-Journal* sent a reporter out to Four Mile to investigate how the residents of the Roxie were reacting to the news.<sup>123</sup> He found young working women and male customers still enjoying business as usual. One of the prostitutes told him, "All this publicity is a lot of nonsense. Besides, if we did close, it would only be for a few days. That would be until all this excitement died down."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the abatement order went into effect on March 28; operations resumed just two days later.<sup>125</sup>

The prospect that the Roxie might close permanently inspired some reflection and speculation in the community, however. Roxie owner Eddie Clippinger was quoted in the newspaper explaining the consequences of closing his establishment: "I employed eight girls. These girls had, among other obligations, three families, three mothers and nine children who were dependent on them."<sup>126</sup> Economic need drove them into their line of work, and the closing of the Roxie had not relieved that need. Instead, Clippinger supposed that the women were going

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<sup>120</sup> "County Board Undecided on Brothels," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 21, 1949, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Clark County Commission, minutes, March 23, 1949, microfilm, Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division, Las Vegas, Nevada; "Aroused Vegans Demand Closing of Roxie Club," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 22, 1949, 1; "Official Action to Close Roxie Now Under Way," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 23, 1949, 1.

<sup>122</sup> "Business Booms at Roxie Club—Pardon, Tavern," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 24, 1949, 1.

<sup>123</sup> "Business Booms at Roxie," *Review-Journal*, March 24, 1949, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Clark County Commission, minutes, March 28, 1949; "Roxie's Crew Awaits Sundown," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 28, 1949, 1; "Much Maligned Roxie Motel to Close; Girls to Depart," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 22, 1949, 1.

<sup>126</sup> "Mr. D. A. Uneasily Ponders Future of 'Girls' as Highway Bagnio Closes," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 29, 1949, 1.

to “shift for themselves... in the resort hotels.”<sup>127</sup> During discussions in Carson City over the local option bill, Governor Vail Pittman staunchly decried the practice in any form in the state, but he had acknowledged that many of the state’s “finest citizens sincerely believe that recognition and segregation are the most practical methods of minimizing the age-old problems raised by prostitution.”<sup>128</sup> In alarmist tones, the *Review-Journal* informed its readers that local prostitutes had moved “out of the bordellos and into the bars.”<sup>129</sup> Under the headline, “Barkeeps Say Babes are Busy, Business Booms,” the newspaper quoted local bar owners who reported a sudden surge in the number of “professional girls” frequenting their establishments all over town.<sup>130</sup>

Reports of Roxie girls fanning out over the city were probably exaggerated, particularly considering that the motel re-opened only two days after complying with the county’s abatement order. By the end of May 1949 county officials were aware that it was back in business and again made public threats to close the place down permanently.<sup>131</sup> Clippinger announced his intention to leave Las Vegas by June 1 with his employees in tow. Local real estate developer C. H. Elstner publicized his intention to acquire the property and turn it into a private club for well-to-do members of Vegas society.<sup>132</sup> At this news, the *Review-Journal* optimistically reported that “[t]he saga of ‘that little retreat in the cottonwoods’ appeared to be near an end.”<sup>133</sup> In reality its saga was far from over, though it did fall out of the spotlight for over a year.

Out of the public eye, ASHA continued its efforts to coordinate a statewide attack on organized prostitution. In July 1949, another ASHA field representative, John Hall, met with Las Vegas-based representatives of the State Health Department and the military at the Las Vegas Air

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Prostitution Measure Vetoed,” *Review-Journal*, March 22, 1949, 1.

<sup>129</sup> “Barkeeps Say Babes are Busy, Business Booms,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>130</sup> “Barkeeps Say,” *Review-Journal*, March 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>131</sup> “Much Maligned Roxie,” *Review-Journal*, May 22, 1949, 1.

<sup>132</sup> “Roxie Shedding Soiled Garments; Dons Shiny Robes,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 10, 1949, 1.

<sup>133</sup> “Much Maligned Roxie,” *Review-Journal*, May 22, 1949, 1.

Force Base.<sup>134</sup> Though the head of the base's medical staff reported that there was a very low rate of venereal disease among the 1800 men stationed there, Hall still expressed alarm at the evidence of prostitution in the valley.<sup>135</sup> Hall reported a rumor that call girls were available in "some if not all" of the local hotels, particularly at the El Cortez, which had for years been known as a center for organized prostitution.<sup>136</sup> The Roxie drew his attention the most, however. Writing to his superiors at ASHA headquarters, he reported that the Roxie had re-opened not long after the abatement order the county had passed in March. He recommended that ASHA conduct one of its signature undercover studies of the Roxie to convince local officials of the severity of the problem.

Hall also reported his concerns about the conditions in Las Vegas directly to the State Department of Health. The state VD Investigator told him he was well aware of the situation at the Roxie, as well as the call girls in the Las Vegas hotels and a few brothels operating in the small town of Searchlight.<sup>137</sup> Hall found that Dr. Caples continued to work toward the complete suppression of prostitution throughout the state, though he was less impressed than his colleague Kelley had been. Hall was incredulous of Caples' reluctance to endorse ASHA's undercover studies. Hall dubbed his opposition a "rather peculiar stand" and noted with a touch of sarcasm that Caples' reasoning was that "he does not want to be a party to what he says is underhanded spying on the houses."<sup>138</sup> Though ASHA remained unsatisfied with Nevada's efforts to quell prostitution in the state, like the local newspapers they did not return to the subject for over a year.

### **A "Self-styled Crusader"**

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<sup>134</sup> John Hall, "Field Report, Las Vegas, Nevada, Las Vegas Air Force Base, July 10-11, 1949," July 13, 1949, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>135</sup> Hall, "Field Report, July 10-11, 1949," 2, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>137</sup> Hall, "Field Report, Reno, Nevada, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1949," July 20, 1949, 2, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 1.

Momentous national events like the Kefauver hearings and the Korean War dominated newspaper headlines in 1950, and the ongoing debates about prostitution temporarily ceased. Though the local press was not reporting on it, business continued as usual for the valley's prostitutes. In February 1951, the *Review-Journal* printed a story from a Pennsylvania newspaper about two men on trial there for federal white slavery charges.<sup>139</sup> The two men were charged with forcing two young women to come to Las Vegas to work in the Roxie motel. The two young women testified that they arrived at the Roxie the previous August, indicating that although it was not appearing in headlines, the motel had been operating throughout 1950.

The election of Roger D. Foley as District Attorney truly reignited the community's concerns about prostitution. The young attorney's father, Roger T. Foley, was a federal court judge who had gained respect in the community as a former municipal court judge and District Attorney.<sup>140</sup> Foley's election to the office formerly held by his father seemed to many to be a natural step for a prominent and well-regarded family. Foley made the war on vice one of his top priorities immediately upon assuming office in early 1951. Within months, he met with ASHA field representative John Hall to enlist his assistance in closing the county's brothels. Hall was extremely pleased with Foley's enthusiasm; he described the new DA as "young, energetic, and apparently anxious to do the right thing, both for the credit of his office and for its own sake."<sup>141</sup> Foley also relied on the local press to support and publicize his campaign against vice. In 1950, a reform-minded newcomer to Las Vegas, Hank Greenspun, launched the *Las Vegas Sun* as a rival to the *Review-Journal*.<sup>142</sup> Both newspapers lauded Foley's war on vice and provided ample space for his statements and actions over the next year and a half.

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<sup>139</sup> "Girls Tell of Shame in Vegas Motel," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 12, 1951, 1.

<sup>140</sup> "Foley, Roger D." in *Who's Who for Nevada*, (Portland: Capitol, 1949).

<sup>141</sup> Hall, "Field Report, Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, Nevada, May 25-26, 1951," May 26, 1951, 3, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>142</sup> For more information on Greenspun and the role his editorial rivalry with the *Review-Journal* had in the community's attitudes toward prostitution, see Chapter 3.

With Foley and the local newspapers again directing the community's attention to prostitution in Southern Nevada, the town of Searchlight became a target in the war on vice for the first time in 1951. The state VD Investigator had mentioned a few brothels in Searchlight to ASHA's field representative in 1949, but it was not until Foley's concerted war on vice that any action was taken against them. Upon receipt of a protest letter signed by thirteen residents of Searchlight alleging that "open and organized prostitution" was occurring in the town, Foley obtained an abatement order against four clubs in the small community.<sup>143</sup> Almost immediately a counter-petition signed by seventy-six Searchlight residents was sent to the County Commission, the DA, and the sheriff, requesting that the previous protest letter be ignored and arguing that the charge had been made "through spite and lack of knowledge."<sup>144</sup> Foley pressed on undaunted, and three of the club operators were found guilty of operating a house of prostitution within 400 yards of a school and in a building fronting on a public highway. They were given fines of \$50 each.<sup>145</sup>

Out of the public eye, Foley continued working with ASHA and the State Department of Health to expand his efforts to stamp out prostitution in his jurisdiction. In a May 1951 meeting at the nearby military base, now renamed Nellis Air Force Base, ASHA's field representative John Hall found that Foley was almost alone in his concern about local vice conditions.<sup>146</sup> He applauded Foley's recent success in closing the brothels in Searchlight and his continued

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<sup>143</sup> Citizens of Searchlight to Clark County Commissioners, May 17, 1951, vertical file, "Prostitution," Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division; Clark County Commission, minutes, May 21, 1951; "Searchlight Bawdy Houses Get Orders to Shut Doors," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 23, 1951, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Petition to the County Commissioners, May 22, 1951, vertical file, "Prostitution," Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division; Clark County Commission, minutes, June 5, 1951; Searchlight Town Council Minutes, May 22, 1951, microfilm, Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division. Two of the signatures on the counter-petition belonged to Inez and Harry V. Reid, the parents of Senator Harry Reid. Senator Reid later recounted that his mother worked as a laundress in the town's brothels during his childhood. Despite this background, Reid announced in February 2011 that he believed Nevada's legal brothels should be closed. Benjamin Spillman, "Lawmakers Lukewarm, Brothel Owners Seethe Over Reid's Call to Outlaw Prostitution," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 22, 2011. See Conclusion for more information.

<sup>145</sup> "Scratch Searchlight; Roxie's May be Next," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 30, 1951, 3.

<sup>146</sup> Hall, "Field Report, May 25-26, 1951," 1-2.

attention to the Roxie, but the military officials were less enthusiastic. Captain J. E. Finney, the Provost Marshal of the base, reported that in his 24 years of experience Las Vegas had lower VD rates and fewer problems with prostitution than any place he had been.<sup>147</sup> The Roxie refused to admit servicemen, the officials told Hall. The *Review-Journal* published a photo in 1949 that corroborated this point; at the entrance to the Roxie property a sign clearly announced, “Off Limits to Servicemen—In or Out of Uniform.”<sup>148</sup> (See Figure Eight) Furthermore, the Air Force Base officials told Hall they had no reports of servicemen visiting Searchlight at all. The Assistant Provost Marshal, a former Las Vegas policeman, even told Hall he supported a return to the controlled prostitution of the Block 16 era, which Hall disgustingly dismissed as the usual “hackneyed arguments.”<sup>149</sup>



**Figure Eight.** Although ASHA was concerned that servicemen from the nearby airbase were patronizing local brothels, the Roxie’s warning sign certainly indicated that it was attempting to avoid the attention and anger of federal authorities. Garside—Review-Journal Photo, March 24, 1949.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>148</sup> Photo, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 24, 1949, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Hall, “Field Report, May 25-26, 1951,” 2.

Hall even found the enthusiasm of the intrepid Dr. Caples to be waning in the summer of 1951. In a meeting in Reno in June, Hall brought Foley's actions against Searchlight to Dr. Caples' attention and asked if he believed similar action might be taken in counties throughout the state.<sup>150</sup> Caples told him he did not believe enough citizens could be mustered to file the initial complaint. The overwhelming protests against the original Searchlight petition seem to confirm Dr. Caples' suspicion, but Hall only expressed exasperation. "My impression was, just as two years ago when he told me this, that Dr. Caples has not tried very hard to get this kind of citizen cooperation," he concluded in his report on the meeting.<sup>151</sup> The State Department of Health was again supporting a policy of registering prostitutes throughout the state and requiring regular health checks, disregarding the position the Army, FSA, and ASHA had been championing for years that regulation did not work. "If this isn't a State Department of Health aiding, abetting and trying to regulate prostitution, I don't know what you call it," Hall wrote with frustration.<sup>152</sup>

### **Politics and the Pig Farm**

While ASHA unsuccessfully tried to spread Foley's reforms throughout the state, the new DA turned his attention to the city of North Las Vegas.<sup>153</sup> Shortly after the abatement of the brothels in Searchlight, the North Las Vegas Chief of Police, Roy Parrish, reported finding several displaced prostitutes from Searchlight in a local bar seeking to "open up shop" there.<sup>154</sup> Several months later, officials from Nellis Air Force Base declared the Edge o' Town Motel in North Las Vegas off-limits to active duty servicemen, sparking a public feud between DA Foley

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<sup>150</sup> Hall, "Field Report, Reno, Nevada, June 16, 1951," June 16, 1951, 2, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>151</sup> Hall, "Field Report, June 16, 1951," 2.

<sup>152</sup> Hall, "Field Report, Reno, Nevada, August 16, 1951," August 20, 1951, 1, ASHA Collection.

<sup>153</sup> Note: North Las Vegas was incorporated as a city in 1946. It was never part of the City of Las Vegas. See Moehring, *Resort City*, 39.

<sup>154</sup> "North Las Vegas Police Give 'Girls' Heave-Ho," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 31, 1951, 3.



and the North Las Vegas City Council.<sup>155</sup> (See Figure Nine) Foley declared himself “powerless” to act against the motel and accused city officials of “laxity” in working to eradicate the vice from their municipality.<sup>156</sup> Foley’s accusation, made public by the *Review-Journal*, incited a vicious dialogue between his office and North Las Vegas officials, the details of which were related to citizens by both the *Review-Journal* and the *Sun*.



**Figure Nine.** The Edge o’ Town Motel was the first brothel to bring North Las Vegas into the wider community’s “war on vice”. Sunfoto, October 15, 1951.

Public response played a pivotal role in the North Las Vegas City Council’s response. City Attorney George Franklin, Jr., responded to Foley’s comments by pointing out that using the rooming house ordinance to prosecute the women working in the motel would only result in their immediate replacement.<sup>157</sup> This line of reasoning did not satisfy North Las Vegans, and an “irate” group of citizens calling itself the Civic Improvement Association descended upon a city council meeting to demand official action.<sup>158</sup> Mayor Kenneth Reynolds conceded to their wishes and issued an abatement order against the motel predicated on the city’s rooming house ordinance.<sup>159</sup> Motel manager and brothel madam Maxine Short and her employees were forced to vacate the

<sup>155</sup> “NLV ‘Dads’ Seek Ways to Close up Sex Shops,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 13, 1951, 1; “Brothel in NLV Banned to Military,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 12, 1951, 1.

<sup>156</sup> “NLV ‘Dads’,” *Review-Journal*, October 13, 1951, 1.

<sup>157</sup> “NLV ‘Dads’,” *Review-Journal*, October 13, 1951, 1.

<sup>158</sup> “‘Crusaders’ Hit as Mayor Orders Brothel Closed,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 15, 1951, 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*



premises. Mayor Reynolds announced the ban at a press conference, during which he praised the city's police chief for his work in closing the brothel, and lashed out at the city's critics: "I suggest that public officials and self-styled crusaders, instead of meddling in matters which do not concern them, mind their own business and straighten out their own houses first."<sup>160</sup> This was most likely a jab at DA Foley, who had been unsuccessful in closing down the Roxie despite serving the owner with an abatement order earlier that summer.<sup>161</sup>

With the Edge o' Town closed, tensions reduced to a simmer until another high-profile raid in North Las Vegas in early 1952 reignited the feud. On January 31, a group of North Las Vegas housewives visited Foley's office to lodge a complaint about a house of prostitution operating out of an abandoned pig farm.<sup>162</sup> (See Figure Ten) Foley reported their complaint to the *Review-Journal*, which ran the story the following evening. He encouraged the women to put pressure on the City Council to enact more effective laws. City officials questioned by the *Review-Journal* staff replied that they were unable to act against the pig farm bordello unless they received a public nuisance petition from citizens.<sup>163</sup> The following day North Las Vegas Police Chief Roy Parrish reported having received the first complaint about the property only the previous day.<sup>164</sup> City Attorney Franklin's earlier warning proved prophetic; closing the Edge o' Town Motel on rooming house violation had merely displaced the problem to a new location. Maxine Short moved her operations into the three-bedroom ranch house not long after the Edge o' Town had closed, and in this case she found a way around the city's rooming house ordinance.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

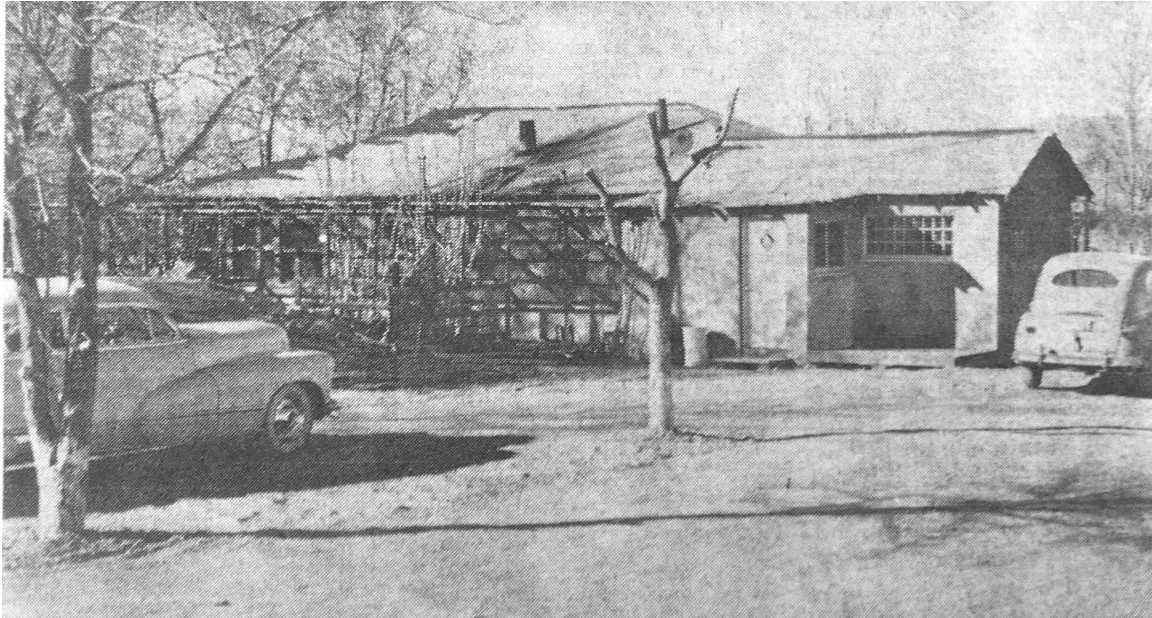
<sup>161</sup> "Operator of Roxie's Served Nuisance Order," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 7, 1951, 1; "Foley Mad as Bawdy Houses Reopen," *Las Vegas Sun*, December 17, 1951, 1.

<sup>162</sup> North Las Vegas City Council, minutes, February 4, 1952, computer database, Office of the City Clerk, North Las Vegas, Nevada; "Suspect Pig Farm is Bawdy House," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 1, 1952, 1.

<sup>163</sup> "Suspect Pig Farm," *Review-Journal*, February 1, 1952, 1.

<sup>164</sup> "NLV Receive First 'Complaint' of New Desert Brothel," *Las Vegas Sun*, February 2, 1952, 1.

As Chief Parrish pointed out to the *Sun*, the rooming house ordinance would not be applicable against Short's newest venture, as the farm was in fact a private residence.<sup>165</sup>



**Figure Ten.** After she was driven out of the Edge o' Town Motel, Maxine Short set up another small brothel in this structure, on a parcel of property that had formerly been operated as a pig farm. Sunfoto, February 4, 1952.

As the story of the pig farm bordello grew, the animosity between city officials and the District Attorney deepened. North Las Vegas Councilman Earl Webb told the *Review-Journal* that the city's police force was perfectly capable of handling the nuisance themselves, but "[i]f Foley... wants to make this his baby, let him go ahead."<sup>166</sup> Foley quickly fired back, sharing a "blistering" letter he sent to the Mayor and City Council with the *Review-Journal*, which happily printed it in full. "You gentlemen have the power and authority [to close the brothel], but I question whether or not you have the fortitude or desire to do your duty," Foley wrote.<sup>167</sup> Meanwhile, North Las Vegas Police Chief Parrish grew impatient with the both the City Council and the District Attorney. Asked for a comment on the situation by a *Review-Journal* reporter,

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> "Suspect Pig Farm," *Review-Journal*, February 1, 1952, 1.

<sup>167</sup> "Foley Blasts NLV Officials," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 5, 1952, 1.

Parrish refused to weigh in on the subject, concluding, “It’s only something to scream about in the papers.”<sup>168</sup>



**Figure Eleven.** These citizens gathered to request direct action from the North Las Vegas City Council to shut down the pig farm brothel. In the minutes for this meeting, the city clerk dryly noted that “considerable discussion was had” between the citizens and the council. (North Las Vegas City Council, minutes, February 4, 1952.) Sunfoto, February 5, 1952.

Pressured by the criticism of agitated citizens’ groups and the very public feud with the District Attorney being reported daily in the press, the City Council moved quickly to pass a more effective ordinance banning prostitution. On February 4 a group of angry citizens presented their complaints directly to the City Council, which approved the creation of an ordinance banning any house of prostitution within city limits.<sup>169</sup> (See Figure Eleven) Councilman Carey noted that without the cooperation of Las Vegas city officials and Clark County officials, the ordinance

<sup>168</sup> “Wives to Picket Bawdy House,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 2, 1952, 1.

<sup>169</sup> North Las Vegas City Council, minutes, February 4, 1952.



would amount to “merely moving prostitution from the back yard of North Las Vegas to the front door.”<sup>170</sup>

The County Commission, responding to Carey’s admonition and to the increased community-wide focus on prostitution, quickly moved to pass their own ordinance banning brothel prostitution.<sup>171</sup> Violation of the ordinance was a misdemeanor carrying a penalty of a fine of no more than \$500, a jail sentence of no more than six months, or both.<sup>172</sup> The county also moved quickly to arrange a joint meeting between themselves and the city councils of both Las Vegas and North Las Vegas. The meeting took place February 13, and the local officials, local law enforcement officers, and DA Foley all pledged their cooperation in removing houses of prostitution from the valley with the aid of the recently-passed ordinances in North Las Vegas and the county.<sup>173</sup>

With North Las Vegas and Clark County finally coordinating their efforts, the stage was set to finally eliminate the city’s brothel problem. On March 1, North Las Vegas police raided the pig farm bordello and arrested Maxine Short and three women working there as prostitutes.<sup>174</sup> At the time of the raid, the police found several customers in the house and allowed them to leave quietly and anonymously upon the orders of Councilman Carey.<sup>175</sup> With no witnesses to testify about the exact nature of business at the pig farm, charges against Short and her three employees were immediately dismissed.<sup>176</sup> The North Las Vegas ordinance banning prostitution did not

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<sup>170</sup> “North Vegas Ordinance Puts Ban on Prostitution,” *Las Vegas Sun*, February 5, 1952, 1.

<sup>171</sup> “County Outlaws Prostitution,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 8, 1952, 1; Clark County Commission, minutes, February 6, 1952.

<sup>172</sup> Clark County Ordinance No. 35, Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division.

<sup>173</sup> “Foley Lauds Red Light Control Law,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 14, 1952, 1;

“City, County, NLV Officials in Move on Organized Vice,” *Las Vegas Sun*, February 14, 1952, 1.

<sup>174</sup> “Raid North Vegas Bordello; Arrest 4,” *Las Vegas Sun*, March 1, 1952, 1; (headline unreadable) *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 2, 1952, 2.

<sup>175</sup> *Review-Journal*, March 2, 1952, 2.

<sup>176</sup> “Dismiss Rooming House Charges Against Women,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 3, 1952, 3.

officially go into effect until the next day.<sup>177</sup> Prior to 1952, both North Las Vegas and Clark County lacked ordinances that prohibited prostitution directly. With these laws finally in place, the stage was set for a final push against organized brothel prostitution in Clark County.

### **Foley's Four Mile Frustrations**

The county's repeated problems closing down the Roxie were a ripe source of political jabs during the North Las Vegas pig farm debacle. In addition to accusing DA Foley of theatrics, North Las Vegas councilmember repeatedly pointed to his inability to keep the Roxie closed during the first year of his very public crusade. Councilman Carey rhetorically asked reporters, "Could it be that the district attorney's alleged irritation caused by the alleged bordello in North Las Vegas actually stems from some other source? The Roxy [sic] operation does not seem to be such a thorn in his side."<sup>178</sup> Foley responded with a letter sent to the mayor and the city council and printed in the *Review-Journal* several days later.<sup>179</sup> In it, he pointed out that his only power in combating the vice occurring at the Roxie was to obtain the abatement order, which he had done, and that if vice continued to exist there it was the duty of County Sheriff Glen Jones to enforce the order. In fact, the inability to close the Roxie was increasingly frustrating and embarrassing to Foley, and his criticism of Sheriff Jones eventually swelled into another public feud enacted in the pages of the local papers.

After the successful abatement of the brothels in North Las Vegas, Foley turned his full attention back to the Roxie in 1952. Foley was publicly optimistic that the county's new rooming house ordinance would provide just the "weapon" he needed to finally close the Roxie.<sup>180</sup>

However, he was also painfully aware that his office could only prosecute violators if Sheriff

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<sup>177</sup> City of North Las Vegas Ordinance No. 65, Office of the City Clerk, North Las Vegas, Nevada; North Las Vegas City Council, minutes, March 3, 1952; "NLV Officially Bans Prostitution," *Las Vegas Sun*, March 4, 1952, 1; "NLV Prostitute Ban Approved," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 4, 1952, 3.

<sup>178</sup> "Wives to Picket," *Review-Journal*, February 2, 1952, 1.

<sup>179</sup> "Foley Blasts," *Review-Journal*, February 5, 1952, 1.

<sup>180</sup> "County Outlaws Prostitution," *Review-Journal*, February 8, 1952, 1.

Jones cooperated by investigating and arresting them first.<sup>181</sup> Jones publicly declared his intention to do everything in his power to close the Roxie, as he had repeatedly during his time in office. Though they appeared to be on the same side, Foley's frustration with the sheriff was growing stronger. Soon after Foley had taken office in early 1951, field representative John Hall had privately told him that ASHA believed Sheriff Jones was financially involved in the Roxie.<sup>182</sup> At that time, Foley told Hall that he did not believe the sheriff was directly involved, just apathetic and willing to overlook the Roxie as long as it caused no "obvious trouble."<sup>183</sup> ASHA had heard rumors of Jones' involvement at the Roxie as early as 1949, and its apparent invincibility seemed to confirm that it was being protected.<sup>184</sup> As his attempts to close the Roxie throughout 1951 continually failed, Foley's early optimism faded, and he began to agree with ASHA's suspicion that Sheriff Jones was protecting the brothel. By December 1951, Foley began calling attention to the sheriff's suspicious lack of cooperation in the local press.<sup>185</sup>

Foley again turned to ASHA for assistance in closing the Roxie. In May, new field representative Richard Warfield came to Las Vegas to meet with Foley and other local officials.<sup>186</sup> Foley told Warfield he would have to be more cautious going forward, because being labeled a "reformer" during the pig farm debacle had hindered his ability to garner support among the majority of Clark County residents.<sup>187</sup> He also relayed to Warfield his growing acceptance of the rumor that Sheriff Jones was protecting the Roxie; Warfield agreed to question the sheriff directly to try to determine his intentions. In his meeting with Warfield, Jones was "obviously ill

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<sup>181</sup> "Shut 'em Tight,' Sheriff's Edict in Bawdy House Ban," *Las Vegas Sun*, February 18, 1952, 1.

<sup>182</sup> Hall, "Field Report, May 25-26, 1951," 3, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Hall, "Field Report, July 10-11, 1949," 2, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>185</sup> "Foley Ask Action by Lawmen to Stamp Out Prostitution," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 17, 1951, 2; "Foley Mad," *Sun*, December 17, 1951, 1.

<sup>186</sup> R. D. Warfield, "Field Report, Nellis A.F.B. and Las Vegas, Nevada, May 18-21, 1952," June 2, 1952, 1, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

at ease,” and maintained that he had done everything he could help Foley.<sup>188</sup> Warfield encouraged him to work even harder to close the Roxie, and the sheriff readily agreed. Warfield was not convinced of his sincerity, however. “Needless to say, I do not expect much from his office,” he wrote in his report on the meeting.<sup>189</sup>

While Foley tried in vain to find a permanent solution for the problem at Four Mile, federal and state pressures on the community slowly faded. ASHA agreed to conduct another secret survey in September 1952, around the time the County Commissioners faced re-election, which Foley hoped would force them to pressure the sheriff to cooperate.<sup>190</sup> When the results were publicized, the *Review-Journal* reported that although prostitution continued at the Roxie and in the hotels Downtown and on the Strip, “organized vice does not exist in Las Vegas.”<sup>191</sup> Neither local newspaper reported any actions or statements by any local official as a result of this report. For the last few years, officials from the Air Force Base had periodically placed certain establishments “off-limits” to servicemen, but they consistently told ASHA that the rate of venereal disease on the base was very low and that they did not feel there was a serious problem with prostitution in the valley. By early 1952, the activities of the State Division of Venereal Disease Control had been suspended, and the new Chief of Preventive Medicine, Dr. L. R. Brigman, was vastly less concerned with prostitution than Dr. Caples had been.<sup>192</sup> To ASHA field representative Warfield’s great consternation, Dr. Brigman informed him that he supported legalized, regulated prostitution in the state. He stated that he would cooperate with the military if they requested that brothels near bases be closed, but when Warfield suggested he pre-emptively close those brothels, Brigman flatly refused. With both federal and state officials largely

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Warfield, “Field Report, May 18-21, 1952,” 2, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>190</sup> Warfield, “Field Report, Nellis Air Force Base and Las Vegas, Nevada, June 18, 1952,” June 30, 1952, 1, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>191</sup> “Prostitution, as Organized Vice, Nil in Las Vegas,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 19, 1952, 1.

<sup>192</sup> Warfield, “Field Report, Reno, Nevada, February 21, 1952,” March 6, 1952, 1, ASHA Manuscript Collection.

unconcerned with undertaking direct measures to end prostitution in Nevada, ASHA's influence in the state silently ended. Foley seemed to be the only voice for reform left in Southern Nevada, and he was forced to bide his time until the FBI raid on the Roxie in April 1954 initiated lasting changes in the county, including the ousting of Sheriff Glen Jones, the Roxie's long-time protector.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Even the *Sun* was uncharacteristically quiet on the subject of prostitution throughout 1953. The federal raid reignited Greenspun's attention to the situation dramatically. See Chapter 3.



## Chapter 3

### The End of “Southern Nevada’s most famous and tenacious house”<sup>1</sup>

Southern Nevada’s decades-long tradition of tolerating organized brothel prostitution ended abruptly in 1954 in the aftermath of a high-profile federal raid on the venerable Roxie Motel, the subsequent federal trial of its owners and operator, and the local political scandal that grew from the raid and trial. Although economic motivations played a smaller role in this chapter of Las Vegas’ history of brothel prostitution, like the earlier periods it was framed by federal action and local responses to that intervention. Despite local officials’ frequent attempts to close the Roxie during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the establishment operated almost continuously throughout that period. An FBI raid on the establishment in April 1954 and the federal trial of its owners Eddie and Roxie Clippinger, and their manager, Dick Kellogg, transfixed the Las Vegas community. Business may have continued as usual under new owners, however, without the influence of reform-minded publisher and editor Hank Greenspun, who used the attention to the issue instigated by the federal raid and trial to push for prostitution’s end in the community. A series of exposés published in Greenspun’s *Las Vegas Sun*, first in June 1954 and then an expanded version published beginning in October 1954, revealed that the Roxie’s longevity was due to a network of bribery and corruption between its owners and several local officials. This scandal ultimately made tolerance for brothel prostitution politically untenable, and the Roxie Motel closed in 1955 and never reopened as a brothel. The era of brothel prostitution in Clark County ended with its closure.

#### **Life at the Roxie**

The Roxie Motel had been in operation since the early 1930s, when it was known as the Blue Heaven.<sup>2</sup> Located in an area of the county known unofficially as Four Mile, just off the

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<sup>1</sup> “Roxie’s, Apparently, is Just a Memory Now,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 1.

Boulder Dam Highway, the Blue Heaven was one of the first brothels to open outside the city's semi-official red-light district, Block 16. In 1932, then-owner Bob Elam drew the community's ire for serving alcohol to minors and generally allowing the women in his employ to corrupt local youth.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear when the Blue Heaven reopened as the Roxie under its new owners, Eddie and Roxie Clippinger, but in 1954 the *Sun* reported that the Roxie had been in operation for over ten years.<sup>4</sup> The first time the Roxie was named explicitly in a local paper was in 1947.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, during his federal trial in 1954, Dick Kellogg testified that he had worked as a manager at the brothel since 1947.<sup>6</sup> It therefore seems likely that at the time of the 1954 raid, the Roxie had operated as a brothel under the same owners for seven to ten years.

Clippinger moved from Southern California to Las Vegas in the early 1940s and immediately staked a claim as a brothel owner. His first business venture in the valley was at the Meadows resort, the brothel that had briefly enjoyed the Las Vegas City Commission's blessing after Block 16's closure.<sup>7</sup> In December 1941, District Attorney Roland Wiley charged Clippinger with "maintaining a disorderly house" at the Meadows.<sup>8</sup> When the city and county closed the brothel at the Meadows in early 1942, Clippinger invested in a club on the Westside, that catered to an African-American clientele, the Harlem Club.<sup>9</sup> During the 1954 trial, prosecuting attorney Manuel Real reported that prior to his arrival in Las Vegas, Clippinger was a former policeman

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<sup>2</sup> "Roxie's in Ruins," *Review-Journal*, May 8, 1956, 3.

<sup>3</sup> "County Joins War," *Review-Journal*, April 5, 1932, 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Feds Continue Vice Roundup," *Las Vegas Sun*, May 1, 1954, 1.

<sup>5</sup> "County Orders Sheriff," *Review-Journal*, March 7, 1947, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bob Voigt, "Arguments in Clippinger Case Begin," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 29, 1954, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2 describes the history of the Meadows.

<sup>8</sup> Las Vegas City Commission, minutes, December 16, 1941; "Meadows Operators Named in Suit Today," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 9, 1941, 2.

<sup>9</sup> "Harlem Club Break of Closing Law Sifted," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 18, 1944, 2.

who had at one time operated a brothel in San Bernardino's D Street red light district.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1940s, Clippinger bought the property at Four Mile and named it after his wife, Roxie.

It is unclear when Roxie Clippinger came to Las Vegas or when she and Eddie were married, but she worked as a prostitute at the Meadows brothel under his ownership in the early 1940s.<sup>11</sup> In 1942, Clippinger was married to his first wife, Lillian.<sup>12</sup> Eddie and Roxie invested together in the new motel at Four Mile in 1945; the following year, Eddie divorced his first wife, and sometime after that married Roxie.<sup>13</sup> Theirs appeared to be a very loving relationship; Roxie openly wept as she was parted from her husband at the conclusion of their trial, and Eddie spent his years in prison petitioning for his wife's release instead of his own.<sup>14</sup> At the time of the federal raid in 1954, Eddie was 69 years old and Roxie was 42.<sup>15</sup> (See Figure Twelve) The Clippingers had a private apartment on the Roxie premises and a "fabulously luxurious" home in San Bernardino.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Voigt, "Suave Hollywood 'Agent' Says He Recruited Starlets for Roxies," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 21, 1954, 6; "Clippinger Old Pro in Red Light Game," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1954 trial, Roxie Clippinger testified that she had used the alias "Jean O'Day" in the past; see Jim Deitch, "Fate of Roxie Trio in Hands of Jury Today," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 30, 1954, 1. In 1942, "Jean O'Day" was arrested in a raid on the Meadows; see "Meadows Warned," *Review-Journal*, May 19, 1942, 1. I have concluded that this was indeed Roxie Clippinger, though it is remotely possible that it is a different woman using the same alias.

<sup>12</sup> "Eddie Clippinger Granted Divorce," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 17, 1946, 3.

<sup>13</sup> "Barbee Denies," *Review-Journal*, March 25, 1949, 1. At present, I have not located a marriage record or other source to clarify when they were married, but I believe it is likely that they were in fact married because Eddie took the trouble of obtaining the divorce, and because Roxie used the last name Clippinger for the rest of her life, including during the legal proceedings of the federal trial in 1954.

<sup>14</sup> "Clippingers Get 3 Years," *Las Vegas Sun*, August 20, 1954, 1; "Eddie, Roxie Clippinger Ask Appeal of Three-Year Terms," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 20, 1954, 1; E.V. Clippinger to Judge Ernest A. Tolin, October 25, 1941, Records of the District Court of the United States, Central District of California, "Criminal Case Files 1907-1969", record group 21, Case #23554, box 1444, folder 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Region, Perris, CA (hereafter cited as U. S. District Court, Central District of California).

<sup>15</sup> "Bordello Scuttled by Gov't; Sheriff 'Gets Into the Act'," *Las Vegas Sun*, April 30, 1954, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Deitch, "New Sheriff, D.A. Raid Roxie, but Nobody There," *Las Vegas Sun*, January 4, 1955, 2, describes their private apartment at the brothel; Reid, "County Payoff Deal Told," *Las Vegas Sun*, October 12, 1954, 8, describes their San Bernardino home.



**Figure Twelve.** Eddie and Roxie Clippinger in 1954. Associated Press, reprinted in the *Las Vegas Sun* July 24, 1954.

Through newspaper coverage of the raid, the federal trial, and the political scandal that played out through 1954, some details emerge about life at the Roxie in the early 1950s. The establishment consisted of several buildings grouped closely together, accessible from the Boulder Highway by a small private road.<sup>17</sup> The central building contained the brothel itself: sixteen furnished rooms, a bar, and a lounge or waiting room.<sup>18</sup> The main building also housed the Clippingers' private rooms and an office.<sup>19</sup> A two-story "barracks-type" building nearby

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<sup>17</sup> "Roxie's, Apparently," *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; Reid, "Unnamed Senator Among Protectors of Bordello Here," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 23, 1954, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Reid, "Expose Roxie Den as Sordid Political Conspiracy," *Las Vegas Sun*, June 1, 1954, 1.

contained twenty-four rooms to house the women who worked there.<sup>20</sup> Each floor of the dormitory had a bath and a kitchen. No men were allowed in this building under any circumstances; all business was conducted in the central building.<sup>21</sup> A similar building housed the permanent force of bodyguards who lived and worked on the premises.<sup>22</sup> Between ten and twenty women worked as prostitutes at the brothel at any given time, and up to twenty additional people were employed there in other capacities.<sup>23</sup>

Operations at the Roxie were remarkably organized and efficient. The women in the brothel worked for only a week or two at a time, then moving on to other cities in a rotation.<sup>24</sup> A doctor examined the women before they were allowed to work, similar to the medical examinations required on Block 16.<sup>25</sup> The brothel operated twenty-four hours a day by staggering the shifts the women worked.<sup>26</sup> Eight to fifteen women worked each shift.<sup>27</sup> When a customer arrived, via taxi or private car, a rubber “counter” laid across the private road leading to the bordello rang a bell inside the main building, alerting the women to prepare to greet him.<sup>28</sup> A “timing board” beside the cash register allowed the manager to ensure that no customer exceeded

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<sup>20</sup> “Roxie’s, Apparently,” *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 3; Reid, “Roxie Impressive as Smoothly-Run Enterprise in Sex,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 15, 1954, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Reid, “Roxie Impressive,” *Sun*, October 15, 1954, 12.

<sup>22</sup> “Roxie’s, Apparently,” *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Deitch, “Fate of Roxie Trio,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 30, 1954, 1; Reid, “Roxie Impressive,” *Sun*, October 15, 1954, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Voigt, “Roxie Doxie Tells of Big Earnings,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 23, 1954, 2; Reid, “Defense Blunder in Roxie Trial Aids Gov’t Case,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 24, 1954, 1. The federal trial did not reveal how this circuit was organized or by whom, though the *Sun*’s coverage of local corruption made it clear that the Clippingers and Kellogg were connected in some way to the major organized crime syndicates of the time.

<sup>25</sup> Reid, “Unnamed Senator,” *Sun*, July 23, 1954, 1; Hank Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, September 23, 1965, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, “Defense Blunder,” *Sun*, July 24, 1954, 1; Reid, “Roxie Impressive,” *Sun*, October 15, 1954, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Reid, “Defense Blunder,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 24, 1954, 1.

<sup>28</sup> “Roxie’s, Apparently,” *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 3; Reid, “Roxie Impressive,” *Sun*, October 15, 1954, 1.

the time he had purchased.<sup>29</sup> An electronic buzzer at the head of each bed alerted a guard if the prostitute encountered a problem with her customer.<sup>30</sup>

In 1952, a former employee met with a representative of ASHA and District Attorney Roger Foley to reveal some details of the brothel's operations. The unnamed employee was hired as a security guard, stationed at the entrance to the property. The manager gave him a shotgun and informed him that his job was to confront anyone who appeared to be conducting surveillance of the brothel, and to shoot them if they did not cooperate. He also reported that during his 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. shifts, between seventy and eighty cars entered the property. By surveying the license plates of these cars, he estimated that 75% of the brothel's clientele were from California, with very few locals patronizing the establishment.<sup>31</sup>

During the federal trial, prostitute Betty Sanders testified that the Roxie was known as a "\$5 house."<sup>32</sup> This minimum charge covered a fifteen-minute "trick" of the customer's choosing, though most customers paid for at least forty-five minutes of the prostitute's time.<sup>33</sup> The women turned over their customers' money to a manager who issued them tickets indicating the amount; at the end of each shift, the women turned the tickets back over to the manager to receive half of the money they had earned that day.<sup>34</sup> The managers also deducted \$8 a day from the women's earnings to cover their room and board.<sup>35</sup>

The prostitutes reported that they worked intermittently throughout the year, but made \$800 and \$1500 a month when working.<sup>36</sup> One of the women, Betty Marlowe, proudly asserted

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<sup>29</sup> Deitch, "New Sheriff, D. A.," *Sun*, January 4, 1955, 2.

<sup>30</sup> "Roxie's, Apparently," *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955, 3; Deitch, "New Sheriff, D. A.," *Sun*, January 4, 1955, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Warfield, "Field Report, May 18-21, 1952," ASHA Manuscript Collection.

<sup>32</sup> Reid, "Unnamed Senator," *Sun*, July 23, 1954, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Reid, "Roxie Impressive," *Sun*, October 15, 1954, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Reid, "Unnamed Senator," *Sun*, July 23, 1954, 1; Voigt, "Roxie Love Peddler Bares Life behind Bawdy Doors," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 22, 1954, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Reid, "Unnamed Senator," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 23, 1954, 5; Reid, "Roxie Impressive," *Las Vegas Sun*, October 15, 1954, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Reid, "Unnamed Senator," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 23, 1954, 5; Voigt, "Roxie Doxie Tells," *Review-Journal*, July 23, 1954, 2.

that her work at the Roxie allowed her to purchase a brand new gray Cadillac convertible for herself.<sup>37</sup> In 1954, Roxie Clippinger told a potential buyer of the property that the business earned over \$77,000 in an average month, which amounted to almost \$1 million annually.<sup>38</sup> These impressive earnings helped the Clippingers buy political protection in Southern Nevada, but their allies could not protect them from the FBI raid in the spring of 1954.

### **The Roxie Raid**

The FBI had been investigating Clippinger for years on suspicion of violating the Mann Act, the federal law that prohibited the transportation of women across state lines “for the purpose of prostitution, debauchery, and other immoral purposes.”<sup>39</sup> On April 28, 1954, the Clippingers and Kellogg were indicted for conspiracy to commit a federal crime and six individual counts of violating the Mann Act.<sup>40</sup> Warrants for their arrests were immediately issued, and federal agents moved quickly to apprehend the Clippingers at their San Bernardino home and Kellogg at the Roxie in Clark County.<sup>41</sup> Within hours of these arrests, Clark County Sheriff Glen Jones and his deputies arrived at the Roxie and arrested nineteen women suspected of prostitution and charged them under the county’s law against vagrancy.<sup>42</sup> (See Figure Thirteen)

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<sup>37</sup> Voigt, “Roxie Doxie Tells,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 23, 1954, 1; “Woman Tells of Big Earnings in Mann Act Case,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1954, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Reid, “Prostitution Cash Kept Sheriff Crooked, Happy,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 13, 1954, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Indictment, April 28, 1954, 1-2, box 1444, folder 3, U. S. District Court, Central District of California; “Trio Held After Motel Inquiry at Las Vegas,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1954, 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* Three of the counts involved the transportation of Betty Marlowe, two were for the transportation of Betty Sanders, and one for Teddy Blake.

<sup>41</sup> Warrant for Arrest of Defendant, Richard Kellogg, April 28, 1954, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California; “Bordello Scuttled,” *Sun*, April 30, 1954, 1; “Vice Ring Smashed by Raiders,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 29, 1954, 1; “Trio Held,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1954, 10.

<sup>42</sup> “Bordello Scuttled,” *Sun*, April 30, 1954, 1; “Vice Ring Smashed,” *Review-Journal*, April 29, 1954, 1.





**Figure Thirteen.** Sheriff's deputies instructing the prostitutes at the Roxie to gather their belongings, as they were being arrested. Sunfoto, April 30, 1954.

Foley found a welcome ally in Herman "Hank" Greenspun and the recently launched *Las Vegas Sun*. Greenspun moved from New York to Las Vegas in the late 1940s and quickly established a reputation as a maverick set on shaking up the status quo of Southern Nevada's power structure.<sup>43</sup> In June 1950, he purchased the International Typographical Union's small *Free Press* newspaper facilities and launched the *Las Vegas Sun*.<sup>44</sup> Immediately, Greenspun used the newspaper to challenge what he saw as corruption, writing in the *Sun*'s first issue, "I pledge that I will always fight for progress and reform, [and] never tolerate injustice or corruption."<sup>45</sup> He was motivated by a personal distaste for political machines that he had learned from witnessing Tammany Hall's dominance of New York firsthand in his youth. It was also in the best interest of

<sup>43</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Newspapers of Nevada, 1858-1958: A History and Bibliography*, (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1964), 137.

<sup>45</sup> Greenspun, "Where I Stand," *Las Vegas Sun*, June 21, 1950, 1.

his new business venture at the *Sun* to challenge his primary rival's integration into the Nevada political machine.<sup>46</sup> He openly criticized the *Review-Journal* and its managing editor, Al Cahlan, sparking what one commentator called the "liveliest and most vitriolic editorial duel" in recent memory.<sup>47</sup> Because Cahlan's regular column was titled "From Where I Sit," Greenspun named his own column, "Where I Stand."

Cahlan was a lifelong Nevadan and a key figure in the state's informal Democratic power structure, an ally of the powerful and influential Senator Pat McCarran and a dominant voice in Clark County politics. He had set the tone in the local press for decades as the editor of first the *Las Vegas Review* and then the *Review-Journal* when the paper merged with a fledgling rival in 1929.<sup>48</sup> By the 1940s, he was assisted by his brother John Cahlan and his sister-in-law Florence Lee Jones Cahlan. Florence's brother, Clifford Jones, was a partner in the Las Vegas law firm Jones, Wiener, and Jones, an investor in several casinos, and was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1947.<sup>49</sup> Between them, the Cahlan/Jones family was greatly influential in Las Vegas politics, business, and media. Greenspun wanted to challenge the dominance of the Cahlan/Jones family and their allies in the Democratic political machine, including Senator McCarran, and prostitution proved to be the perfect issue to use as a political and rhetorical weapon in that fight. Clark County Sheriff Glen Jones was not related to the Cahlan/Jones family, though he was certainly a political ally. Though both newspapers initially lauded DA Foley's new crusade against organized vice, over time Greenspun emerged as Foley's staunchest supporter in the local press.

The ongoing feud between Greenspun and the Cahlan/Jones family was apparent in the approaches the two warring newspapers took with the Roxie story. The *Sun*'s contempt for Sheriff Jones and the *Review-Journal* was evident in both the reporting and Greenspun's editorial

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<sup>46</sup> Denton and Morris, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Lingenfelter, 137. For a detailed study of the feud between Greenspun and the Cahlans, see Michael S. Green's "The Las Vegas Newspaper War of the 1950s," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 31 (Fall 1988), 155-182.

<sup>48</sup> Lingenfelter, 136.

<sup>49</sup> "Jones, Clifford," *Who's Who for Nevada, 1949-1950*.

column “Where I Stand.” The article described the *Review-Journal* as the “official organ of the sheriff’s office,” and pointed out that although Jones implied that the arrests made by his deputies had been in cooperation with the FBI, questioning by the *Sun* reporter forced him to admit that the two were wholly unrelated.<sup>50</sup> The *Review-Journal* described the raid in very different terms. While Greenspun poked fun at the sheriff and his deputies, the *Review-Journal* description of the event cast the men as heroes.<sup>51</sup> The article quoted Captain Bill Payton, who called the raid “extremely successful” and “well planned.”<sup>52</sup> Payton then gave a play-by-play recounting of the evening’s events, which painted the operation as dramatic and action-packed, an episode befitting the county’s ongoing “war” on vice. One group of deputies “invaded” the women’s living quarters, the article reported, while another “split into two squads to make a beachhead in the bagnio proper, one group crashing the front door and the other at the rear entrance.”<sup>53</sup> The Cahlans’ support for Sheriff Jones was as transparent as Greenspun’s hatred for him.

Greenspun’s editorial column on the raid was even more obvious in its incredulity than the accompanying article. Dripping with sarcasm, Greenspun wrote, “After a brief stakeout of only 10 years, the sheriff’s office amassed sufficient evidence to suspect that the Roxie was not on the list of the Automobile Association of America as one of the approved motels.”<sup>54</sup> It was clear that Greenspun was taking aim at Sheriff Jones, and prostitution was the key issue at the center of these attacks. His distaste for prostitution in the community established him as a reformer far removed from the traditional tolerance for the practice that still lingered in some sectors of the community. Just like the politicians who had publicly bickered during the community’s “war on vice” a few years previously, Greenspun used prostitution as a rhetorical tool to discredit his opponents. The final paragraph his column on the April raid was by far the most inflammatory of Greenspun’s jabs, however. “It isn’t pleasant to be continually engaged in

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<sup>50</sup> “Bordello Scuttled,” *Sun*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>51</sup> “Girls Bemoan Hard Life in Jailhouse,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, April 30, 1954, 1.

law enforcement for the County of Clark,” Greenspun wrote, “especially when the duties entail so heartbreaking a task as closing up one’s own joint.”<sup>55</sup>

The *Review-Journal* devoted many pages to the Roxie raid and the subsequent political fight between D.A. Foley and Sheriff Jones in the following days. “L’Affaire Roxie Sets Officials to Bickering,” the headline read the following day, seeming to revel in the drama of the situation.<sup>56</sup> Photos of Sheriff Jones and D.A. Foley were printed opposite each other, above articles outlining their positions. “The responsibility to close Roxie’s was clearly in Foley’s hands and he failed to act,” Jones told the *Review-Journal*.<sup>57</sup> “Glen Jones could have closed down Roxie’s long before this if he had wanted to,” Foley asserted.<sup>58</sup> Both articles outlined complex legal explanations for why the other was at fault.

The *Sun* continued its relentless assault on Sheriff Jones in the following days, typified by the article published on May 1 under the sub-headline “Sheriff in Attempt to Save Face.”<sup>59</sup> This article pointed out that the Roxie had operated openly for over ten years while Jones was sheriff. It described Jones’ recent action at the Roxie as a “token” raid meant to divert blame in the wake of the federal raid. As evidence, the article pointed out that sheriff’s deputies found no customers when they entered the brothel, implying that they had apparently been forewarned of the impending raid.<sup>60</sup>

The article also gave ample space to District Attorney Roger Foley to answer the insinuations against him that had been printed in the *Review-Journal*. Foley responded with counterattacks on both the sheriff and the *Review-Journal* itself. Foley pointed out that the raid came just weeks before the upcoming June primary election and implied that he believed

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<sup>55</sup> Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, April 30, 1954, 8.

<sup>56</sup> “L’Affaire Roxie Sets Officials to Bickering,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Jones Says: DA Office Failed to Cite Eddie for Contempt,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Foley Retorts: Jones Could Have Closed Down Bordello,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>59</sup> “Feds Continue Vice Roundup,” *Sun*, May 1, 1954, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

Greenspun's accusation of the sheriff's financial stake in the brothel by saying that Jones had "always shown himself to be interested in seeing that Roxie's remained open."<sup>61</sup> The *Review-Journal* was printing "deliberate falsehoods," Foley told the *Sun* reporter, surmised that the *Review-Journal*'s only interest was Jones' success in the upcoming primary, and concluded that the Cahlans' connection to the Roxie was obvious through the association of John Cahlan's brother-in-law Cliff Jones in the law firm of Jones, Wiener, and Jones with the Clippingers' attorney Louis Wiener.<sup>62</sup> Foley seemed to be forming an alliance with Greenspun just as Jones had with the *Review-Journal*.

The *Sun*'s assault on Sheriff Jones and his allies at the *Review-Journal* reached a new level on the morning of the Democratic primary, June 1, 1954. Greenspun had publicly endorsed Butch Leypoldt's challenge to Glen Jones, while the Cahlans had unsurprisingly endorsed Jones. The *Sun* waited until the morning of the election to drop its biggest bomb; "Expose Roxie Den as Sordid Political Conspiracy," the headline screamed across the top of the front page.<sup>63</sup> Though Greenspun's editorial column the day after the raid implied that Sheriff Jones was financially involved in the Roxie, this article stated that the *Sun* had irrefutable proof to that effect. Written by associate editor Ed Reid, who worked closely with Greenspun and shared his views on political corruption, the article stated that the *Sun* had evidence to prove that Eddie Clippinger had blackmailed county officials to provide political protection, that Sheriff Jones and unnamed county officials had received payoffs directly from Clippinger, that several high profile community leaders were frequent customers of the brothel, that the sheriff's deputies provided paid protection to prostitutes working throughout the county, and even that the Roxie's employees had committed vote fraud.<sup>64</sup> Greenspun's editorial column the same day urged Southern Nevada's Democrats not to vote for Jones in the primary, telling readers, "The sheriff's

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<sup>61</sup> "Feds Continue Vice Roundup," *Sun*, May 1, 1954, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Reid, "Expose Roxie Den," *Sun*, June 1, 1954, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Though the charges of bribery were substantiated in later investigations, the charges of officials visiting the brothel and the vote fraud perpetrated by its employees were never expanded upon.

office is permeated with graft and illegal law enforcement practices.”<sup>65</sup> Greenspun’s efforts apparently worked; Butch Leyboldt won the primary in a sudden upset.

### **The Clippings on Trial**

Over the next two months, the local newspapers kept their readers updated as the Clippingers’ trial neared. In early July, the *Sun* quietly reported that the Roxie had reopened for business to “an exclusive and trusted clientele.”<sup>66</sup> The *Review-Journal* gave its own spin on the events between the arrests and the federal trial. With tongue firmly in cheek, the paper followed the fate of the women who had been arrested by the sheriff that night: “Nineteen Roxies Doxies Freed After Posting Bail.”<sup>67</sup> The women were “paraded” through the court still wearing the lingerie they had been wearing at the time of arrest.<sup>68</sup> (See Figure Fourteen) The *Review-Journal* also reported on the quiet re-opening of the Roxie. Though they could not definitively confirm its re-opening, the news had been “circulated in taverns throughout Las Vegas.”<sup>69</sup> Both newspapers seemed eager for the trial to commence and provide outrageous details to keep the drama of the Roxie saga present in the minds of their readers.

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<sup>65</sup> Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, June 1, 1954, 1.

<sup>66</sup> “Grand Jury Foreman Denies Investigation of Prostitution is Begun,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 2, 1954, 4.

<sup>67</sup> “Nineteen Roxie Doxies Freed After Posting Bail,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 2, 1954, 1. “Doxy” is a now outdated slang term for a “prostitute” or “gangster’s woman.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> “Roxie Four Mile Catering Again to Love Seekers,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 22, 1954, 1.





**Figure Fourteen.** This photo shows the nineteen Roxie's employees arrested by the sheriff's deputy on charges of prostitution. As they waited to enter their pleas, the women tried to shield their identities from the newspapers' cameras. Sunfoto, May 1, 1954.

The trial began in Los Angeles on July 20, 1954 and lasted ten days. The conspiracy charge carried a potential penalty of five years imprisonment and up to a \$10,000, while each count of trafficking might also result in five years in prison and a fine up to \$5,000.<sup>70</sup> Judge Ernest Tolin presided over the trial, which was held in the United States District Court, Southern California District.<sup>71</sup> The prosecuting attorney was Deputy U.S. Attorney Manuel Real; the Clippingers and Kellogg were represented by Louis Weiner, their Las Vegas-based attorney, and California-based defense attorney Bernard Laven.<sup>72</sup> The government alleged that the conspiracy began in 1949, when the Clippingers first contacted procurer Joseph Sanchez in Los Angeles,

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<sup>70</sup> Memorandum of the Court, July 16, 1954, 6-7, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>71</sup> Minutes of the Court, June 25, 1954, box 1444, folder 3, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



who was listed as a co-conspirator in the federal indictment but was not charged with a crime.<sup>73</sup>

All three defendants pleaded not guilty.<sup>74</sup>

The prosecution's case rested primarily in the testimony of Joseph Sanchez and the three women who had allegedly been transported by the defendants in violation of the Mann Act. Sanchez was the first witness to take the stand.<sup>75</sup> The *Sun*'s Ed Reid described him as a "slick-looking, quick-witted Jack-of-all-trades."<sup>76</sup> In the *Review-Journal*, Voigt described him as "sleek" and "well-groomed."<sup>77</sup> Before the judge, jury, and apt spectators, Sanchez described how he recruited women in the Los Angeles area to work at the Roxie. The Clippingers called him when they were looking for a new employee, and occasionally he called them when he found a particularly promising young woman. They first contacted him in 1949, according the FBI's investigation.<sup>78</sup> Betty Sanders first put the Clippingers in touch with Sanchez during a stint at the brothel that year.<sup>79</sup>

The ongoing editorial feud in Las Vegas was reflected in the two newspapers' varying tones as they began their trial coverage. The *Review-Journal* account of Sanchez's testimony focused on the facts of the case, dispassionately recounting his narrative. The *Sun*'s portrayal of Sanchez's testimony described "the cold-blooded process used in the trade in women."<sup>80</sup> The *Sun* article highlighted two particular elements of Sanchez's testimony that seemed especially chilling: young women with light hair were referred to as "light material" in his conversations

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<sup>73</sup> Memorandum of the Court, July 16, 1954, 2, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes of the Court, June 25, 1954, box 1444, folder 3, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>75</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 21, 1954, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California; "Trial of Three Opens in Motel Mann Act Case," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1954, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Reid, "'Singing' Panderer Star at Roxie White Slave Trial," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 22, 1954, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Voigt, "Suave Hollywood 'Agent'," *Review-Journal*, July 21, 1954, 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*; "Man Admits Sending Girls to Las Vegas," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1954, 19; Memorandum of the Court, July 16, 1954, 1-2, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>79</sup> "Women Testify in Mann Act Trial of Three," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1954, 21.

<sup>80</sup> Reid, "'Singing' Panderer," *Sun*, July 22, 1954, 1.

with the Clippingers, and Eddie Clippinger had once returned a young woman to Sanchez with the simple statement that she was “inadequate.”<sup>81</sup> To the Clippingers, Reid implied, these women were mere objects to be traded or returned like merchandise in a store. Perhaps the most telling example of the way the *Sun* was using the trial to draw its readers’ attention to local corruption was in the way it emphasized one of Sanchez’s statements. During one of their first meeting, Sanchez testified, Clippinger assured him that the operation was protected by a political official “higher than the FBI.”<sup>82</sup> The next day the newspaper made this revelation impossible to miss, printing its daily coverage of the trial on the front page under the headline, “Unnamed Senator Among Protectors of Bordello Here,” an obvious allusion to Greenspun’s political foe, Senator McCarran.

Over the next two days, the prosecution worked to verify all the charges listed in the indictment by calling the three women identified as subjects of the trafficking to the stand. On July 22, the prosecution called prostitutes Teddy Blake and Betty Sanders as witnesses.<sup>83</sup> Teddy Blake, a “tall, well built prostitute with long dark hair,” testified that Sanchez gave her a plane ticket to Las Vegas in 1952, and Kellogg picked her up from the airport once she arrived.<sup>84</sup> She worked at the brothel only five days before being sent back to Los Angeles with the explanation that she did not meet the establishment’s requirements.<sup>85</sup> Next Betty Sanders took the stand and testified that Sanchez placed her at the Roxie in 1949.<sup>86</sup> Sanders, “a pretty olive skinned brunette with a retroussé nose,” later married Sanchez, and told the court that she retired from “the business” in 1953 to stay with her husband and their young child.<sup>87</sup> Finally, on July 23, Betty Marlowe, “a medium built blonde,” confirmed that Sanchez had recruited her in Los Angeles to

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<sup>81</sup> Reid, “‘Singing’ Panderer,” *Sun*, July 22, 1954, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 22, 1954, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>84</sup> Reid, “Unnamed Senator,” *Sun*, July 23, 1954, 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, Voigt, “Roxie Love Peddler,” *Review-Journal*, July 22, 1954, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Reid, “Unnamed Senator,” *Sun*, July 23, 1954, 1.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

work at the Roxie, and that she traveled there four separate times, working there for about ten weeks over several years.<sup>88</sup> (See Figure Fifteen)



**Figure Fifteen.** Betty Sanchez (left) and Betty Marlowe exiting court after testifying that they had worked as prostitutes at the Roxie under the management of the Clippingers and Kellogg. Associated Press Photo, reprinted in the *Las Vegas Sun* July 24, 1954.

One of the defense's main arguments was that as a co-conspirator, Joseph Sanchez's testimony was unreliable. Indeed, the trial seemed to reveal that Sanchez was motivated primarily by self-interest or the hope of taking vengeance against Eddie for perceived wrongs. The government's insistence on using him as their primary witness indicates how intent it was in obtaining a conviction against the Clippingers and Kellogg, and perhaps reveals its willingness to use forceful direct measures to police prostitution in America. Attorney Louis Wiener began the

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<sup>88</sup> Voigt, "Roxie Doxie Tells," *Review-Journal*, July 23, 1954, 2; Reid, "Defense Blunder," *Sun*, July 24, 1954, 1; Minutes of the Court, July 23, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

defense's arguments by asking immediately for the charges to be dismissed.<sup>89</sup> Judge Tolin denied the motion, and the defense moved forward by calling their witnesses.<sup>90</sup> On July 29, the defense called Sanchez's personal attorney Bernard William Minsky to testify about his advice to Sanchez on cooperating with the government.<sup>91</sup> During questioning by Attorney Laven, Minsky told the court, "I told my client that I felt they must have had a fairly good case; and there was an opportunity for him to, if he gave a statement, possibly he might not be indicted."<sup>92</sup> In communications between U.S. Attorney Real and Attorney Minsky, Sanchez was led to believe that if he did not testify for the prosecution, Eddie Clippinger would testify against him. When Laven asked Minsky how Sanchez took this news, Minsky replied that he was "very mad" and asked, "What is this guy Clippinger trying to do?"<sup>93</sup> Attorneys Laven and Weiner later pointed to this element of the government's case in their petition for a new trial. "How can it be said," Laven wrote, "that Sanchez' testimony was not only biased but he was incited to get revenge against the defendants?"<sup>94</sup>

The defense also made full use of the murkiness of Clark County's laws regarding prostitution, an element of the trial that the government again seemed willing to overlook in order to obtain a conviction against the brothel operators. Throughout the trial, the Attorneys Laven and Weiner frequently reminded the jurors that they were only deciding whether the defendants had violated the Mann Act, and that running a brothel was not the charge. Even in the questions to potential jurors, the defense attorneys strenuously reminded potential jurors that prostitution was

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<sup>89</sup> Voigt, "Wiener Argues Dismissal of Roxie Charges," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 27, 1954, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 27, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 29, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>92</sup> "Additional Points and Authorities in Support of Motion for New Trial," August 17, 1954, 19, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>94</sup> "Additional Points and Authorities in Support of Motion for New Trial," August 17, 1954, 22, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

not illegal in Nevada.<sup>95</sup> They further asked, “Do any of you jurors by reason of your religious beliefs have any particular prejudice against legal and controlled prostitution?”<sup>96</sup> This would imply that the prostitution occurring at the Roxie was legal and controlled, which might have been contested by D.A. Foley and Hank Greenspun. In their instructions to the jury before final deliberation, Attorneys Laven and Weiner reminded the jury, “The defendants are not being tried to determine what kind of people they are.”<sup>97</sup>

The federal government’s disregard of local law enforcement’s actions in their own jurisdiction was emphasized when the defense called two of Glen Jones’ deputies as witnesses on July 27.<sup>98</sup> Captain Ralph Lamb and Lieutenant Lloyd Bell testified that the county sheriff’s general policy was that prostitutes operating on the Las Vegas Strip were arrested on vagrancy charges or “run out of town,” but that operations at the Roxie were left alone.<sup>99</sup> When the prosecution pressed Lamb on this point, the judge sharply remarked, “We’re not testing community problems.”<sup>100</sup> Greenspun and Reid were clearly infuriated that the judge stopped this line of questioning. The *Review-Journal* did not report on the deputies’ testimonies at all. This incident dramatically illustrated how the federal government’s actions regarding prostitution in Southern Nevada had grown more direct than even during the war; though the brothel at the Roxie had clearly been operating with the sanction of the sheriff’s office, the government was more concerned with directly targeting and removing the owners than with working with local officials to curb prostitution in the community.

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<sup>95</sup> “Questions Suggested by Defendants for Submission to Prospective Jurors”, 2, box 1444, folder 2, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> “Instructions Requested by the Defendants,” July 26, 1954, 43, box 1444, folder 4, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>98</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 27, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>99</sup> Reid, “Sheriff’s Prostitution Policy Told by Deputies at Roxie White Slave Trial,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 28, 1954, 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

The defense's next witness was Eddie Clippinger himself, and the spectacle of hearing from the man at the center of the case allowed the *Sun* to again attack the Democratic machine in Nevada. The *Sun*'s article painted an unflattering portrait of Clippinger, portraying him as sleazy and low-class as much as possible.<sup>101</sup> Reid referred to him familiarly as "Clip," recounted incidents when he mispronounced words, and repeatedly called him a "pimp."<sup>102</sup> The article's description of Clippinger emphasized that he was a despicable underworld figure. For instance, the article reported that when Clippinger stated, "I'm speaking for the average citizen," the courtroom "howled" with laughter.<sup>103</sup> One particular element of Clippinger's testimony was surely the most infuriating to Reid and Greenspun, however; in one sentence the article drily noted, "There was no cross-examination on the influential friend Sanchez said Clippinger had."<sup>104</sup> The journalists were clearly hoping for their accusations against Senator McCarran to be verified in the federal court. Again, the federal authorities were unconcerned with the political corruption that the trial hinted at, but the *Sun* used their coverage of the trial to draw their readers' attention to it. By portraying Clippinger as an unrepentant criminal and then reiterating the implication of his connections to Senator McCarran, the *Sun* invited its readers to include the latter in the same category.

The *Review-Journal*'s coverage of Clippinger's testimony was again more straightforward than the *Sun*'s. The brief article made no mention of Clippinger's appearance or speaking missteps.<sup>105</sup> According to Voigt's version of the testimony, Clippinger simply and clearly refuted the FBI's charges against him. The article also carefully pointed out that since Clark County had no statute explicitly outlawing prostitution, Clippinger had broken no law by operating the brothel.<sup>106</sup> In the days just prior to Clippinger's turn on the witness stand, the

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<sup>101</sup> Reid, "Clippinger Stars as Witness at Own Vice Trial," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 29, 1954, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Voigt, "Clippinger Denies Testimony by FBI," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 28, 1954, 1.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 3.

*Review-Journal* had twice reported that the defense might allege that the Clippingers and Kellogg had merely been “caught in the middle of a political fight in the primary election for sheriff in Clark county.”<sup>107</sup> This was the *Review-Journal’s* only acknowledgement of the *Sun’s* repeated attempts to tie the federal trial to local events.

As the trial drew to a close, both the defense and the *Review-Journal* re-emphasized that Clark County was open to prostitution and that Joseph Sanchez was not to be trusted. On the final day of testimony, Dick Kellogg was called as a witness.<sup>108</sup> Kellogg testified that in his seven years as manager of the Roxie, he had typically hired women who came to the brothel seeking employment, rather than sending for women from out of state.<sup>109</sup> In his closing argument, defense attorney Bernard Laven reiterated Kellogg’s description of the hiring process at the Roxie, wondering aloud why the Clippingers and Kellogg would seek women in California when “[t]hey had a waiting list [in Las Vegas], and girls were knocking at the door.”<sup>110</sup> The *Review-Journal’s* report of the closing arguments again emphasized Sanchez’s involvement in the alleged trafficking.<sup>111</sup> As Judge Tolin gave the jury final instructions, Bob Voigt reported, he pointed out that “the question of whether Joe Sanchez was telling the truth or not is ‘a substantial point for consideration.’”<sup>112</sup>

With that admonition, the jury of eight men and four women began their deliberations. The trial concluded on July 30<sup>th</sup>. After twelve hours of deliberation, the jury returned with a verdict of guilty for all three defendants.<sup>113</sup> While awaiting sentencing, Roxie Clippinger was

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<sup>107</sup> Voigt, “Expect Less Lurid Roxie Testimony,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 25, 1954, 3.

See also Voigt, “Wiener Argues,” *Review-Journal*, July 27, 1954, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Deitch, “White Slave Case Ends,” *Sun*, July 30, 1954, 1; Minutes of the Court, July 29, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>109</sup> Deitch, “White Slave Case,” *Sun*, July 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Voigt, “Arguments in Clippinger Case,” *Review-Journal*, July 29, 1954, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Voigt, “White Slave Trial Ends,” *Review-Journal*, July 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>113</sup> Minutes of the Court, July 30, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California; Deitch, “Roxie Trio Guilty,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 31, 1954, 1; “Jury Convicts Trio Accused in Motel Vice Raid,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1954, 7.



released on \$35,000 bail, due to ill health.<sup>114</sup> Bail was denied to Eddie Clippinger and Dick Kellogg. On August 19<sup>th</sup>, Judge Tolin sentenced Eddie and Roxie to three years in prison and a \$5,000 fine each, while Kellogg was sentenced with a \$2,500 fine and five years' probation.<sup>115</sup> Judge Tolin recommended that Roxie serve her time in a federal institution where she might be treated for her conditions.<sup>116</sup> Both Las Vegas newspapers reported that Roxie cried as she was led from the courtroom, while Eddie "lunged angrily" at photographers lined up outside.<sup>117</sup> (See Figure Sixteen)



**Figure Sixteen.** After sentencing, Roxie hid her emotions behind large sunglasses, but her husband Eddie lashed out at the photographers taking his picture as he was led out of court. The man to the left of Eddie is the Roxie's manager, Dick Kellogg. AP Wirephoto, reprinted in the *Las Vegas Sun*, August 21, 1954.

<sup>114</sup> "Free Roxie Clippinger on Bail of \$35,000," *Las Vegas Sun*, August 5, 1954, 1.

<sup>115</sup> "Clippingers Get 3 Years," *Sun*, August 20, 1954, 1; "Eddie, Roxie Clippinger Ask Appeal," *Review-Journal*, August 20, 1954, 1; "Prison Meted for Mann Act Conviction," *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1954, 26; "Judgment and Commitment," August 19, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>116</sup> Roxie Clippinger's ailments included a broken coccyx and dropped kidney resulting from an injury in 1943. Her injuries are detailed in "Affidavit of Bernard B. Laven in Support of Motion for Reduction of Sentence," Oct 5, 1954, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California. In March 1955 her sentence was reduced to one year and five years probation. "Judgment and Commitment—Modified Judgment," March 1, 1955, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>117</sup> "Clippingers Get 3 Years," *Sun*, August 20, 1954, 1; "Eddie, Roxie Clippinger Ask Appeal," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 20, 1954, 1.

## **The End of the Brothel Prostitution in Clark County**

Though this latest wave of local attention to prostitution had been instigated by the direct federal intervention in the community during the April raid and the trial was happening outside the community in a U. S. Court in California, the brothel and its workers still had to be dealt with at the local level. Following the same pattern of federal intervention followed by local responses that began with the building of the Hoover Dam and repeated during World War II, the Roxie's final chapter began with federal action but ended with local leaders taking action themselves. While the Clippingers and Kellogg awaited sentencing, the nineteen women who had been rounded up in late April finally went to court in Clark County. Louis Wiener represented the nineteen women in court. (See Figure Seventeen) Eighteen of the women pleaded guilty to vagrancy and were fined \$25 each.<sup>118</sup> One, Mary Fegundes, chose to plead not guilty and the charges against her were dismissed when her attorney pointed out to the judge that she was not present at the Roxie at the time of the raid but had been arrested elsewhere.<sup>119</sup> Given that the recent trial revealed how lucrative their line of work could be, these fines were probably not a tremendous burden to these women. "Where the girls will go is anybody's guess," the *Sun* article opined.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> "18 of Roxie's Girlies Plead Guilty as Vags," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 10, 1954, 3.

<sup>119</sup> "18 Roxie 'Joy Girls' Pay Fines," *Las Vegas Sun*, August 10, 1954, 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure Seventeen.** Attorney Louis Weiner (right) not only represented the Clippingers during their federal trial, but also represented the Roxie's employees who were facing county charges. In this photo, taken in May 1954 before the start of the federal trial, Weiner and Dick Kellogg are directing an unidentified Roxie employee who has just been released by the sheriff's department. Sunfoto, May 1, 1954.

Despite the *Sun's* fears, it is possible that the Roxie's prostitutes did not go far; even after the Clippingers' and Kellogg's convictions, the Roxie was not closed for long. Within a few weeks, both local newspapers reported that the establishment had been sold to a new owner-

operator, Margaret Burke, who had previously operated a brothel in Oregon.<sup>121</sup> According to the *Sun*, while Roxie Clippinger had been out on bail awaiting sentencing, she returned briefly to Las Vegas to arrange the sale. Business continued as usual under the new owner, and it seemed that for the moment the Roxie might continue to enjoy the tolerance of local law enforcement officers that it had under the Clippingers. When armed gunmen robbed the Roxie in November, Margaret Burke did not think twice about alerting the sheriff's office to the crime.<sup>122</sup>

Though Burke's purchase of the property had ensured that it smoothly kept running while the Clippingers' federal trial was happening, the Roxie's final end loomed. The *Sun's* successful effort to remove Glen Jones from office and its continued crusade to end the brothel's political protection prompted local authorities to turn a renewed focus on the Roxie in the final months of 1954. As sheriff-elect Butch Leypoldt and District Attorney-elect George Dickerson prepared to take office in January of 1955, they announced their intentions to close the Roxie for good.<sup>123</sup> Burke's report of the armed robbery in November proved to be the brothel's downfall; Lieutenant Lloyd Bell of the Sheriff's Department used the ensuing investigation to verify that the brothel was definitely operating. Bell had been one of the defense witnesses during the Clippingers' trial who had testified that the sheriff's office unofficially sanctioned the brothel. His willingness now to provide the evidence needed to close the establishment seemed to indicate that indeed Sheriff Jones had been directly responsible for the Roxie's longevity in the community. Bell presented his statement to the County Commission on December 28, 1954, in a formal petition requesting an order of closure as a public nuisance.<sup>124</sup> The County Commission immediately issued a

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<sup>121</sup> "Clippingers Sell Roxie's Bordello to Ore. Woman," *Las Vegas Sun*, August 22, 1954, 1; "Report of Sale of Roxie's is Investigated," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 24, 1954, 1.

<sup>122</sup> "Masked Gunmen Rob Roxie's," *Las Vegas Sun*, November 22, 1954, 1.

<sup>123</sup> "Three Bordellos Ordered to Close Shop by Officials," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 28, 1954, 1; "Roxie Will Close for Good," *Las Vegas Sun*, December 29, 1954, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Lloyd Bell, Petition to County Commissioners, December 28, 1954, vertical file, "Prostitution," Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division.

resolution ordering the abatement of the Roxie within five days.<sup>125</sup> Though not yet sworn into office, DA-elect Dickerson told the *Sun* that he had initiated the action at that time because he owed it to his predecessor Roger Foley to see the fruits of his years-long fight against the Roxie begin during the final days of his term of office.<sup>126</sup>

The residents and employees of the Roxie were given the deadline of January 2, 1955 to vacate the premises.<sup>127</sup> The following day, DA Dickerson, Sheriff Leypoldt, and a group of sheriff's deputies and reporters arrived at the brothel to verify that the order had been obeyed.<sup>128</sup> With the same rapt tone that they had used in reporting on the federal trial against the Roxie's previous owners, both newspapers described the interior of the infamous brothel. "Scatterings of flimsy clothing" and "mussed beds" indicated that the women who lived and worked there had left in a hurry.<sup>129</sup> (See Figure Eighteen) A guard still on the premises told reporters that only ten women had been working there at the time the County Commission had issued the closure order.<sup>130</sup> Satisfied that the brothel was indeed closed for business at the moment, Sheriff Leypoldt told reporters that a "continual watch" by his deputies would ensure it never reopened.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Resolution, December 28, 1954, vertical file, "Prostitution," Office of the County Clerk, Commission Divison.

<sup>126</sup> "Roxie Will Close," *Sun*, December 29, 1954, 2.

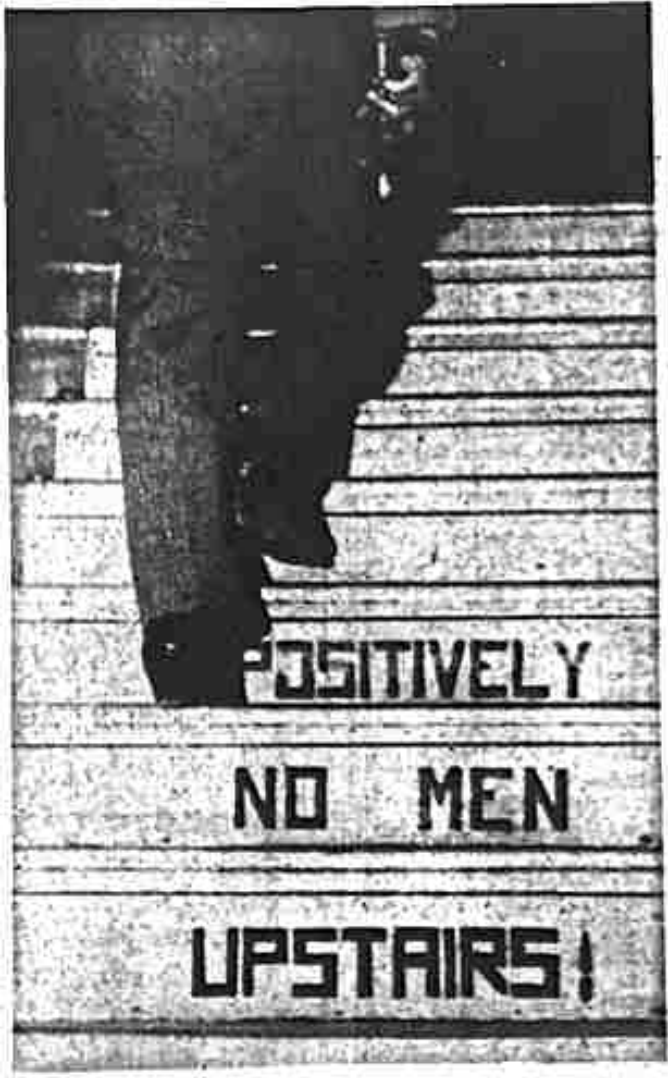
<sup>127</sup> "Sunday Deadline for Brothels Ordered to Close," *Las Vegas Sun*, December 30, 1954, 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Roxie's Apparently," *Review-Journal*, January 4, 1955; Deitch, "New Sheriff, D. A.," *Sun*, January 4, 1955.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Deitch, "New Sheriff, D. A.," *Sun*, January 4, 1955, 1.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



**Figure Eighteen.** As they searched the premises to verify that the Roxie's employees had in fact cleared out, sheriff's deputies disregarded the long-standing brothel rule prohibiting men from entering the prostitute's private living quarters. Sunfoto, January 1, 1955.

Later that week the County Commission passed a rooming house ordinance patterned on the 1942 law passed by the city of Las Vegas that had effectively closed the brothels of Block 16.<sup>132</sup> Sheriff Leypoldt reported that the new law not only gave law enforcement more power to close down suspected brothels, but also “would serve to allay a popular public attitude that prostitution will return to the county as soon as the current heat is off.”<sup>133</sup> In fact, this law and the new attitudes that came with Glen Jones' downfall and the election of Sheriff Leypoldt, the Roxie

<sup>132</sup> “‘Love for Sale’ Banned by County Commission,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 7, 1955, 3.

<sup>133</sup> “County Outlaws Brothels,” *Las Vegas Sun*, January 7, 1955, 1.



never reopened as a brothel. Though call girls and streetwalkers found their own footholds, no house of ill fame ever operated openly in the Las Vegas valley. The era of brothel prostitution in Clark County effectively ended January 3, 1955.

### **The Roxie's Impact**

While the federal trial of the Roxie's owners set the stage for county leaders to finally shut it down permanently, it is also triggered a series of events that had significant consequences for the state's power structure. As the trial proceeded during the summer of 1954, the *Sun* worked to justify the allegations of local corruption it had first made during the June primary. In early October, a month before the general election, the *Sun* began publishing a series of dramatic exposes that revealed corruption not just at the county level but even pulling in Lieutenant Governor Clifford Jones.<sup>134</sup> Ed Reid contacted an old acquaintance, Pierre LaFitte, "an undercover agent and clever impersonator," and the two created a plan to catch corrupt local officials red-handed by secretly taping LaFitte's conversations with members of organized crime syndicates and local politicians.<sup>135</sup> LaFitte posed as Louis Tabet, a "hoodlum" from the East Coast looking to invest in a new venture in Las Vegas. Over the next several weeks, the *Sun* detailed the results of this sting operation. LaFitte/Tabet first approached the Clippingers about purchasing the Roxie while they awaited sentencing.<sup>136</sup> Roxie Clippinger put him in touch with Dick Kellogg and Louis Weiner, who advised him about which local officials needed to be bribed

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<sup>134</sup> The first of these articles, "Sun Blows Lid Off County Corruption," appeared on October 11, 1954, and they continued through October 24, 1954. From October 29 to November 2, the *Sun* published the full transcript of the taped recordings of Tabet's conversations with Louis Weiner. The *Review-Journal's* coverage of these events focused solely on the grand jury's actions. Its articles repeatedly emphasize that the corruption was only "alleged", at one point reporting that the county officials "are accused of being in Tabet's company when he allegedly made pay-off offers." ("Grand Jury in Week's Recess," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 15, 1954, 2.) This is obviously misleading; they were accused of *accepting* those pay-offs.

<sup>135</sup> Reid and Demaris, 103.

<sup>136</sup> Reid, "Prostitution Cash," *Sun*, October 13, 1954, 1.



in order to keep the Roxie running.<sup>137</sup> LaFitte/Tabet also met with Sheriff Glen Jones and County Commissioner Rodney Colton, both of whom received money, gifts, or both from the “hoodlum” in exchange for political protection as he prepared to take over the Roxie.<sup>138</sup> Though he did not directly receive any gifts or bribes from, a second County Commissioner, Harley Harmon, was also implicated in the scandal when the *Sun* reported that Colton had included him in a list of local officials who would be open to working with syndicate operatives.<sup>139</sup>

This secret operation soon grew much larger than Reid anticipated, however. As the story broke, Greenspun wrote in his editorial column, “What started out as a routine investigation of the sheriff of Clark County and his relation to the house of prostitution, soon mushroomed into a full-blown inquiry of all officials.”<sup>140</sup> Weiner introduced LaFitte/Tabet to his law partner and brother-in-law of the *Review-Journal’s* John Cahlan, Lieutenant Governor Cliff Jones. Lt. Gov. Jones revealed that his business partners in the Thunderbird Casino on the Strip were the gangsters Jake and Meyer Lansky, and implied that Democratic gubernatorial candidate Vail Pittman would assist LaFitte/Tabet with his interests in Las Vegas after he won the November election.<sup>141</sup>

The *Sun’s* reports sent shockwaves through the state, with major repercussions. Reid turned his tapes over to D.A. Foley, who presented a case against Sheriff Jones and Commissioner Colton before the county grand jury.<sup>142</sup> The grand jury indicted Jones and Colton on charges of bribery, effectively ending their political careers in Nevada.<sup>143</sup> Lt. Gov. Jones resigned as a Democratic National Committeeman and faced investigation by the Nevada Tax

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<sup>137</sup> Reid, “Prostitution Cash,” *Sun*, October 13, 1954, 1-2.

<sup>138</sup> Reid, “County Official Delighted with Payoff Present,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 16, 1954, 1.

<sup>139</sup> Reid, “County Officials Snared in Web of Corruption Evidence,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 24, 1954, 7.

<sup>140</sup> Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 11, 1954, 6.

<sup>141</sup> Reid, “County Officials Snared,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 24, 1954, 7; Reid and Demaris, 118-119.

<sup>142</sup> Reid, “Sun Blows Lid,” *Sun*, October 11, 1954, 6; “Grand Jury Calls Five in Corruption Inquiry,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 15, 1954, 1.

<sup>143</sup> “Sheriff at Las Vegas Arraigned in Vice Case,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1954, 24.

Commission for his business interests in the Thunderbird. The charges against Sheriff Jones and Commissioner Colton were eventually dropped, and Lt. Governor Jones lost his gaming license but faced no criminal charges for his complicity with the underworld figures.<sup>144</sup> Though the major figures in the scandal escaped the most serious consequences, the scandal's impact on Nevada politics was significant. Republican Governor Charles Russell was re-elected, despite early indications that Democrat Vail Pittman was likely to win.<sup>145</sup> Perhaps most significantly, in the wake of the scandal, Russell established the State Gaming Control Board in an effort to curb the further infiltration of organized crime figures into Nevada's political and business arenas.<sup>146</sup> These consequences grew indirectly out of the initial federal raid of the Roxie. The *Sun* used that event as a springboard to launch a wide-ranging attack on political corruption at both the state and local levels, which ultimately resulted in the political shake-ups that shaped Las Vegas history for the next several years.

The political climate that emerged in the wake of the Roxie scandal prevented brothel prostitution from being re-established in the Las Vegas area. The Clippingers apparently never returned to Las Vegas, nor made any attempt to re-open the brothel they had owned there for almost a decade. In March 1955, Roxie Clippinger was released from federal prison after her sentence was reduced to one year in prison and five years probation.<sup>147</sup> Eddie served the full three years of his sentence and then joined Roxie in San Bernardino, where they remained for the rest of their lives. In 1966, Eddie was killed in a car accident in Riverside, California.<sup>148</sup> Roxie passed away in 1989.<sup>149</sup> It seems that after the ordeal of their trial and prison terms, and with both federal and local attention trained on prostitution in the 1950s, they did not re-enter the brothel business.

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<sup>144</sup> Reid and Demaris, 123-124; Moehring, *Resort City*, 91-92.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Russell Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 330-332.

<sup>147</sup> "Judgment and Commitment—Modified Judgment," March 1, 1955, box 1444, folder 1, U. S. District Court, Central District of California.

<sup>148</sup> "Auto Crash Kills Vice Case Figure," *Pasadena Star-News*, March 3, 1966, 3.

<sup>149</sup> From California Death Index, 1940-1997, online database, via Ancestry.com

Soon after the prostitutes vacated the Roxie in January 1955, a local developer named Howard “Bud” Burgess purchased the buildings and converted the establishment into a men’s rooming house called the Cottonwood Lodge.<sup>150</sup> A year and a half after sheriff’s deputies verified that the prostitutes had fled, the structure that had been the Roxie was destroyed in a fire.<sup>151</sup> As the *Review-Journal* reflected on the buildings’ final end, it waxed a bit nostalgic, referring to the establishment as “one of the old county landmarks” in its heyday.<sup>152</sup> For his part, Greenspun considered the demise of the Roxie to be one of the *Sun*’s finest achievements.<sup>153</sup>

The differences between Block 16’s history and the Roxie’s reflect important changes in Las Vegas’ political economy around mid-century. Beginning in the early 1940s, efforts to clean up vice conditions in Los Angeles pushed many organized crime figures out of Southern California into Las Vegas.<sup>154</sup> Some of these were high-profile casino owners like Guy McAfee and Tony Cornero, but Eddie Clippinger was also an example of this trend. As these figures insinuated themselves into the political and economic fabric of the community, the nature of both gambling and prostitution changed in the city. Though it is unclear if the City Commission’s decision to sanction the Meadows in early 1942 was motivated by any connections to Clippinger directly, it certainly marked a transition from an era when the control of local prostitution shifted from long-time Las Vegas residents to newcomers with organized crime connections. The brothels on Block 16 were run like other businesses in the area, selling sex in addition to alcohol and gambling but otherwise remarkably similar to other downtown resorts. The Roxie, by contrast, more closely resembled the underground houses of prostitution that syndicate figures had operated for decades elsewhere in the country.

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<sup>150</sup> “Roxie’s in Ruins,” *Review-Journal*, May 8, 1956, 3. The chain of ownership of the property is unclear; further research is needed to determine who exactly sold the property to Burgess at that time.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Greenspun, “Where I Stand,” *Las Vegas Sun*, September 23, 1965, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Denton and Morris, 98.

The Roxie's final end reflects another significant trend in Las Vegas history. Though the community had greatly benefited from the investment of syndicate figures who had initiated the city's transformation into a major resort destination built around the commodification of leisure, glamour, and sin, by the mid-1950s Las Vegans were growing increasingly anxious to distance themselves from organized crime connections.<sup>155</sup> In 1950 and 1951, the hearings of the U. S. Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce, better known as the Kefauver hearings, were broadcast to a national television audience. The Kefauver hearings, particularly the one broadcast from the federal building in downtown Las Vegas in November 1950, cast an intense spotlight on the role of the country's crime syndicates in the creation of modern Las Vegas.<sup>156</sup> Though the Kefauver hearings had no direct consequences for the "alliance of gamblers, gangsters, and government" that was deeply entrenched in Nevada at the time, the federal scrutiny made Las Vegans more willing to embrace reforms initiated by people like Greenspun.<sup>157</sup> This larger trend was reflected not only in increased regulation of the casino industry after the 1950s, but also in the end of brothel prostitution in the community. The federal trial and the *Sun*'s exposes revealed how closely linked the Roxie was to the syndicate figures who controlled many of the community's casinos, and Las Vegas' rejection of brothel prostitution after the Roxie closed was an element of its attempt to avoid a national reputation as a haven for organized crime.

Despite the differences in their histories, the Roxie's closure resembles the end of Block 16 in two important ways. First, both were closed due to federal intervention in Southern Nevada. The history of prostitution in Las Vegas is a significant example for the ways that the federal government shaped the west in the twentieth century. Secondly, the underlying motivation for the

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<sup>155</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 242.

<sup>156</sup> Denton and Morris, 106-107. This was the same federal building that was built near Block 16 in the 1930s.

<sup>157</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 89. Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver followed up his high-profile investigation of organized crime by introducing a bill in the Senate that would have taxed gambling in Nevada so highly it would probably have permanently crippled the industry. The bill was defeated thanks to a considerable effort by Senator Pat McCarran to kill it in committee.

closures of both Block 16 and the Roxie was community leaders' belief that the brothels would be harmful to the local economy if allowed to continue. By the early 1940s the federal government was able to exert considerable influence in local policy through the promise of massive federal investment in the area if Las Vegas conceded to its demands or the threat of economic reprisals if it did not. Between 1942 and 1954, the federal government's methods had changed slightly, but the effect of its threats was the same, and in both cases Las Vegas leaders repositioned the city to accommodate its demands. The history of prostitution in Las Vegas from Block 16's establishment to the Roxie's end parallels and directly reflects the city's changing relationship to the federal government over fifty years.

## Conclusion

For five decades, from its founding in 1905 until the official end of brothel prostitution in 1955, the public discourse surrounding prostitution Las Vegas was shaped by the efforts of community leaders, the local press, and average citizens to balance the demands of the federal government with local concerns and economic necessity. This history reflects not just the changing role of prostitution in Las Vegas' cultural, political, and economic spheres, but also demonstrates how events and policies at the national level were experienced and navigated at the local level. As federal power expanded between the 1920s and 1950s, its ability to influence the development of cities like Las Vegas grew as well. This thesis has focused on three key periods in the relationship between the federal government and the city: the era of massive reclamation projects and early New Deal spending in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the period of intense military expansion during World War II, and the beginning of the Cold War. In each instance, the federal government's actions both directly and indirectly impacted the city's growth and development, and one way to examine this process is through exploring how the city's approaches toward prostitution changed over time.

Chapter One outlined prostitution's place in the economy and culture of the city in its earliest decades and described the reasons its early importance faded by the early 1940s. For over twenty years, prostitution was an integral part of Las Vegas' economy, and with both federal and state authorities relatively uninvolved, city leaders and average citizens alike embraced the brothels on Block 16. Catering largely to working-class visitors, railroad workers and miners, the city's self-image was modeled on the mining boomtowns that had dotted Nevada in the nineteenth century. When the federal government increased its presence in Southern Nevada with the building of the Hoover Dam in the early 1930s, Las Vegas' tolerance for commercialized brothel prostitution began to wane. The city rose in national prominence as a tourist destination by capitalizing on its proximity to the Dam, legalized gambling in Nevada, and the marriage and

divorce industries. This new status caused the city to move away from its frontier image toward a more modern resort city, and prostitution no longer fit into that image. By the time enterprising real estate developer J. R. Lewis began targeting Block 16 in 1941 in order to take advantage of its prime location downtown, the city government was ready to abandon it as a representation of a working-class past it was now eager to transcend.

Chapter Two analyzed the ways the community dealt with prostitution during a period of intense federal intervention and its actions when that federal presence abruptly receded. By the start of World War II, pressure from federal and state officials led to a wartime policy of “forced isolation” for suspected prostitutes in the city. After 1945, pressure from state and federal authorities faded considerably, but nevertheless the war had lasting effects on the community’s relationship with prostitution. In the immediate post-war period city boosters began actively cultivating an image of Las Vegas as a tourist destination for the expanding middle class across the nation. In this transitional phase in the mid- to late-1940s, Las Vegas was a “colorful if fleeting mixture of the town’s cowboy past and thriving present.”<sup>1</sup> In the context of this dichotomy, brothel prostitution continued to thrive in Clark County even as local officials publicly declared a “war on vice” that focused on closing down brothels throughout the community. One particular brothel seemed immune to this effort, however. With county officials secretly protecting the Roxie, it withstood the locally-directed “war on vice” for almost ten years.

The final chapter outlined how another direct federal intervention initiated a chain of events that brought brothel prostitution in the community to an end permanently. When FBI agents raided the Roxie in 1954, the stage was set for a final drive against organized prostitution throughout Clark County. The federal trial of the Roxie’s owners and operator provided a reason for the local newspapers to keep the issue in the forefront of local citizens’ minds for most of 1954. The raid and trial provided crusading newspaper publisher Hank Greenspun with an opportunity to challenge the state’s Democratic political machine, and the stories about

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<sup>1</sup> Denton and Morris, 101.



corruption that ran in his *Sun* created a scandal that turned public opinion firmly against the Roxie. With the county authorities who had protected it for years out of office and under investigation, the Roxie was finally closed in early 1955. With its closure, Las Vegas' complicated relationship with organized brothel prostitution finally came to an end.

This study fills important gaps in the existing literature on Las Vegas' history. The city's varied responses to commercialized prostitution illustrate one way that the "federal trigger" influenced the community's growth and culture.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant findings of this study is community leaders' conscious approach to local prostitution as they worked to recast the city as a modern resort city after World War II. Scholars like Eugene Moehring have documented how Las Vegas' explosive growth in the twentieth century paralleled similar trends in other sunbelt and tourism-dependent cities.<sup>3</sup> The shift of population and money to the sunbelt cities during World War II dramatically elevated the region's significance in America's culture and economy thereafter. The post-war economic boom stimulated an expansion of the middle-class nationwide, which embraced consumption and leisure on a massive scale. Historians have demonstrated how these national trends changes affected the gaming industry in Las Vegas; this study builds upon their work by extending the analysis of this historical process to include its effects on prostitution at the local level.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, this study expands women's history in Las Vegas to include sex work and the regulation of sex and gender norms in a broad context. Historians like Beth Bailey and Elizabeth Fraterrigo have argued that post-war Americans renegotiated, challenged, and expanded sex and gender ideologies to incorporate a more open expression of female sexuality. Las Vegas' public image both reflected and shaped this new dynamic, as the city's marketing created a vision of a "desert paradise—the ideal getaway for those embracing the new, permissive morality

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 1 of Moehring's *Resort City in the Sunbelt* is called "The Federal Trigger."

<sup>3</sup> See Moehring, *Resort City*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-106.

popularized during World War II.”<sup>5</sup> The local resorts bolstered this strategy by incorporating images of women who “sold possibility and sensuality, but not sex” into their promotional materials.<sup>6</sup> Sexuality became an integral part of Las Vegas’ cultural image after 1945, but within well-defined gender, race, and class boundaries. Brothel prostitution represented a working-class form of sexual expression and therefore conflicted with the middle- to upper-class image community leaders were cultivating.<sup>7</sup> While city and county leaders openly denounced brothel prostitution in the late 1940s and early 1950s, “high class” call girls worked in the resorts on the Strip.<sup>8</sup> The Roxie’s customers paid for services in \$5 increments; the call girls on the Strip worked for up to \$150 a night.<sup>9</sup> Local officials did not target the Strip’s call girls like their counterparts in the brothels, however, because their sexuality and gender performance supported the middle-class vision of sexual possibility the city was selling to the rest of the country.

Though 1955 marked the end of open, organized brothel prostitution in Clark County, the topic periodically re-emerged in public discourse in subsequent decades. The issue resurfaced in 1971, when rural brothel owners throughout the state began lobbying the state legislature to specifically legalize and regulate their businesses.<sup>10</sup> Though Clark County had effectively made prostitution illegal within its jurisdiction with the 1955 ordinance, the actions at the state level in 1971 sparked a new debate about the practice in the county. The County Commission began considering lifting the ban, joining the majority of Nevada’s counties in pushing for the right to license and regulate brothels. Letters both for and against this proposal poured into the County Commission. Milo Rechow pointed out that he remembered the Roxie and argued that it had not

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<sup>5</sup> Moehring, *Resort City*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> “Vegas Lawmen Hunt Top Boy in Local Vice Ring,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 20, 1953, 3.

<sup>9</sup> “Vegas Cabbie Held on Panderer,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 11, 1951, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck, 74.

been harmful to the community.<sup>11</sup> However, the powerful interests in the local gaming industry vocally opposed legalization in Clark County, arguing that it would tarnish the city's national reputation and cause a dramatic loss in revenue from tourists and conventions. Ultimately, this argument persuaded the Commissioners to abandon their proposal, and the issue seemed settled for good.<sup>12</sup>

In their study of legal brothel prostitution in late twentieth-century Nevada, sociologists Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck framed their research by asking, "Do the particular political, historical, and social circumstances in which prostitution occurs influence what prostitution ultimately is?"<sup>13</sup> This thesis not only expands the understanding of historical processes, but provides a more thorough context for contemporary issues. At present, Nevada is the only state with legalized prostitution, a position that routinely sparks renewed debates on its place in the state's culture and economy. Contemporary arguments for and against the practice are reminiscent of the past debates described in this paper. In February 2011, Nevada's U. S. Senator Harry Reid publicly called for an end to prostitution in Nevada.<sup>14</sup> The presence of the rural brothels was inhibiting economic growth in the state, he argued, as business owners from other states viewed them as immoral. This argument is remarkably similar to the position outlined in the 1946 *Review-Journal* editorial described in Chapter Two.<sup>15</sup> The 2011 article on Reid's call to action even uses the exact same phrase that was used to argue against prostitution in Clark County in 1946; opponents in both instances felt that the practice gave the community in which it existed a "black eye."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Milo Rechow to Commissioner Tom Wiesner, February 16, 1971, vertical file, "Prostitution," Office of the County Clerk, Commission Division.

<sup>12</sup> Chapter 3 of Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck's *The State of Sex* details the statewide legal history of prostitution in Nevada, including the 1971 debate. 42-89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Anjeanette Damon, David McGrath Schwartz, and Cy Ryan, "Harry Reid: 'The Time has Come for us to Outlaw Prostitution,'" *Las Vegas Sun*, February 22, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> "A Welcome Move," *Review-Journal*, January 7, 1946, 10.

<sup>16</sup> "Citizens Rise," *Review-Journal*, January 5, 1946, 6.

On the opposite side, proponents of prostitution resisted Reid's call using arguments that also have antecedents in the past. Governor Brian Sandoval and Lieutenant Governor Brian Krolicki both responded with an argument that had first been used when Governor Vail Pittman challenged statewide prostitution in 1949: the state government should defer to county and municipal governments on the matter.<sup>17</sup> State senator Steven Horsford added another point to the argument protecting prostitution that was repeated numerous times throughout the period covered in this paper; brothel prostitution in Nevada, he argued, should be preserved because it "has been a history and a tradition."<sup>18</sup> As the owners of Block 16 had in 1941, the brothel owners and operators in modern Nevada responded actively to the attack on their businesses. In response to Reid's complaints, they emphasized to reporters that their brothels protected public health, served the economic needs of their communities by generating tax revenue and creating jobs, and prevented women from turning to dangerous, illegal streetwalking.<sup>19</sup> All of these arguments were used at various times by proponents of brothel prostitution in Clark County during the period described in this paper. Finally, the brothel owners used another tactic used by local leaders who faced criticism during the "war on vice" from the late 1940s and early 1950s. The manager of the Love Ranch in Crystal, Nevada, diverted attention from her own business and the other rural brothels by pointing to a different "hot spot": illegal prostitution occurring in Las Vegas.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these debates at the state level, the issue periodically re-emerges in Las Vegas itself. Though the issue seemed to be resolved in Clark County in 1971, remarks by Mayor Oscar Goodman reignited the debate in 2003. Just like city leaders in the 1920s and 1930s, Goodman pointed to public health and economic concerns as arguments for legalized brothel

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<sup>17</sup> "Aroused Vegans Demand," *Review-Journal*, March 22, 1949, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Damon, Schwartz, and Ryan, "Harry Reid: 'The Time,'" *Sun*, February 22, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Spillman, "Lawmakers Lukewarm, Brothel Owners Seethe over Reid's Call to Outlaw Prostitution," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 22, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Doug McMurdo, "Brothels Fire Back at Harry Reid," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 27, 2011.

prostitution in the community.<sup>21</sup> Local authorities and citizens again seemed divided on the subject. Residents in the downtown area that Goodman proposed as the potential site of a new red-light district vocally opposed having brothels so near their homes and businesses, just as the residents of Buol's Addition and the Meadows protested proposed red-light districts in their neighborhoods in 1930 and 1941. Other citizens acknowledged that illegal prostitution continued to flourish despite decades of attempts by city leaders and law enforcement officers to curb it. "It's not going to go away, so they should clean it up," downtown resident Gus Arroyo told the *Review-Journal*.<sup>22</sup> Arroyo's comment echoes the recognition of prostitution as a "necessary evil" that emerged multiple times during the early debates surrounding prostitution in Clark County decades earlier. A thorough examination of the history of prostitution in Las Vegas gives places these contemporary debates in a fuller context.

This project has filled many significant gaps in the histories of prostitution and Las Vegas, but much research remains to be done. One significant area that demands further study is the history of prostitution in Las Vegas outside brothels, namely street-walking and the call girl system. The sources used in this study provided only glimpses of these forms of prostitution, indicating their presence in the community but giving little detail. For example, during the post-war crackdown on brothels throughout the county, local leaders facing public criticism routinely tried to divert attention away from themselves by pointing to non-brothel prostitution occurring elsewhere in the county. During the feud over the pig farm bordello in 1952, City Attorney George Franklin protested what he saw as undue pressure on North Las Vegas, pointing out that prostitution was well known to exist in "Las Vegas, at some resort hotels and at the Roxie."<sup>23</sup> Foley countered that "free-lance prostitution" was rampant in North Las Vegas' nightclub district

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<sup>21</sup> Erin Neff, "Legalized Prostitution: Vegas Brothels Suggested," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 24, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "NLV Receive First 'Complaint,'" *Sun*, February 2, 1952, 2.

on North Main Street.<sup>24</sup> These sources indicate that call girls set up operations in the resorts on the Strip almost as soon as they opened and that streetwalkers were common downtown and on the Westside from around the 1940s. However, much more research is needed to confirm these theories, recover these histories, and analyze how these forms of prostitution fit into the overall history of Las Vegas.

Another subject requiring further study is prostitution throughout the country during and after World War II. As previously noted, the majority of prostitution histories focus on the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The wartime policy of “forced isolation” recounted in Chapter Two was instituted in cities across the country; this project provides a case study for one of these cities. The widespread civil rights violations predicated by this policy deserve further scrutiny. Studies of the federal agencies that directed the “forced isolation” policy and of different cities’ reactions to that policy could reveal important details about this significant chapter of American history. Women targeted in these round-ups were unlikely to organize or speak on their own behalf due to the tremendous stigma associated with prostitution and promiscuity. It is the challenge of contemporary historians to recover their stories and study the effects of this policy in their lives.

In addition to the wartime approach to prostitution, historians must devote further study to the practice as it developed and changed after World War II. This study is one of only a handful of histories to study post-war prostitution at all. My research indicates that the federal government, through the FBI, showed a renewed focus on prostitution in the 1950s, particularly as it was connected to organized crime. Much more study is necessary to uncover how federal, state, and local authorities approached the topic in the post-war period. I believe this work could reveal important details about how sexuality, gender, and morality were constructed in the post-war and the Cold War eras. Prostitution is a key element in the ongoing project to complicate the understanding of gender in post-war history. As Donna Penn argued in a 1994 essay, lesbians and

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<sup>24</sup> “Suspect Pig Farm,” *Review-Journal*, February 1, 1952, 1.

prostitutes were archetypes of female deviancy in this period.<sup>25</sup> This paper provides an introductory attempt to begin reconstructing the history of prostitution in this time period so that a deeper understanding of its cultural significance can begin to emerge.

Today, escort services are ubiquitous in every major U. S. city, yet the connections between the history of prostitution and its current forms are poorly understood. Because so many historians have focused on periods when prostitution was openly tolerated throughout the country, its history as an illegal practice remains open for further exploration. This topic presents many significant challenges for contemporary researchers. Prostitutes were historically marginalized because their business was illegal and widely stigmatized; as such, records relating directly to the practice are scarce. This study demonstrates that despite these difficulties the excavation of such histories is possible. The challenge for future research is to broaden and deepen our understanding of twentieth-century prostitution throughout the United States by exploring how it reflected changes in the country's political, cultural, and economic structure and challenged or reinforced ideologies of gender and sexuality.

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<sup>25</sup> Penn, "The Sexualized Woman," in *Not June Cleaver*, 359.



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