CONTENTS

Preface, ix
Introduction, 1
1 “Bright Light City”:
   The Introduction to Las Vegas, 6
2 Las Vegas:
   The Last Frontier Town, 19
3 Bugsy Siegel and the Founding of Las Vegas, 37
4 Organized Crime in Las Vegas, 59
5 Images of Gambling in Las Vegas, 97
6 The Entertainment Capital of the World, 114
7 “Beautiful Women Were as Commonplace in Las Vegas as Poker Chips”:
   Images of Las Vegas Women in Popular Culture, 158
8 “So Much Luxury in the Middle of the Desert”:
   Images of Luxury and Amenities in Las Vegas, 180
9 “An Awful Place”:
   The Negative Images of Las Vegas, 203
Conclusion:
   The Ultimate Attraction of Las Vegas, 221
Afterword:
   The Intellectuals’ Images of Las Vegas, 229
Notes, 237
Bibliographical Essay, 295
Index, 305
How does a scholar who has spent over three decades researching and publishing articles and books on early American history turn to the history of Las Vegas? How does one pivot from a career focused upon investigating the mysteries of the Salem witch trials and the English colonization of Barbados to an analysis of the popularity of Sin City? Actually, the answer is quite simple: visiting Las Vegas, beginning in 1992 and returning every year for two decades. In 2009, David G. Schwartz, historian and columnist for Las Vegas Weekly, asked me what drew me to the city and its history. “The reason I like Las Vegas,” I told him, “is because it’s almost all the things that I am not. I’m rural America, I’m small-town America, I’m conservative in my personal finances, I’m not flamboyant, and Las Vegas is the opposite of all four of those.” In other words, this study is in part a personal quest to understand my attraction to Las Vegas, yet one that I believe will illuminate what has made the city such a powerful magnet for millions of tourists over the past century.

The quest is built on a simple assumption. People who had never been there assuredly encountered images and descriptions of the city in popular culture that made a trip to Las Vegas appealing. I examined 150 films, over 200 television programs, over 200 novels, nearly 1,500 newspaper articles, and over 200 magazine articles in addition to a large number of relevant secondary works seeking to discover the patterns of images of Las Vegas Americans encountered between 1905 and 2005.

The chapters that follow examine those patterns. Chapter 1, “‘Bright Light City’: The Introduction to Las Vegas,” reveals how authors, journalists, and screenwriters shared with readers and viewers the remarkable lights, sounds, and action they would encounter should they travel to the southern Nevada resort city, no matter what decade they visited. Chapter 2, “Las Vegas: The Last Frontier Town,” describes how most observers saw the city in the first half of the twentieth century: as a community that reflected much of the collective American view of the West, a place of prospectors and cowboys enjoying the vices associated with frontier towns. In print and in film, Las Vegas seemed to be one of the last bastions of rugged individualism, where one could experience all that the fabled frontier saloons had offered in the nineteenth-century West: liquor, women, and wide-open gambling. Chapter
3, “Bugsy Siegel and the Founding of Las Vegas,” assesses the enduring legend of Benjamin Siegel and his role in the development of the resort city. Filmmakers, novelists, and journalists have contributed to a remarkable founding myth associated with Siegel, arguing that in 1946 he had a vision of a sophisticated resort city in the midst of a woebegone desert town of little consequence. That narrative credits him with pulling Las Vegas away from its tired frontier origins to a more cosmopolitan approach to building a resort city, similar to Miami and Palm Springs. Chapter 4, “Organized Crime in Las Vegas,” presents a comprehensive account of how scores of journalists and muckrakers, as well as novelists and filmmakers, have described a city, from the time of Bugsy Siegel until the 1980s, largely built by members of some of the most powerful figures in organized crime—men who used the gambling city not only as a source of funds for their organizations, but also as a place to become legitimate and to live respectable lives. However, in the end, it is an account that explains how local, state, and federal officials broke their power as corporate America took over their properties. Chapter 5, “Images of Gambling in Las Vegas,” deals with what almost everyone most associates with Las Vegas: the many games of chance. Observers have described gambling in Las Vegas in a multitude of ways, including the extraordinary dangers of becoming a compulsive gambler and the inexperienced tourist miraculously winning enormous jackpots; however, gambling is most often portrayed as a thrilling, edgy experience making the trip to Las Vegas well worth the money, even though the overwhelming majority of gamblers come away losers. Chapter 6, “The Entertainment Capital of the World,” offers an extensive discussion of the favorite topic about Las Vegas in newspapers and magazines. From the 1940s, entertainment columnists have been effusive about the extraordinary entertainment options in Las Vegas, including great vocalists and comedians, elaborate production shows, and popular lounge acts. A handful of those entertainers came to define the Las Vegas style of entertainment and consistently attracted the attention of music critics and entertainment columnists alike, who filled the nation’s press with appealing pieces on Liberace, Louis Prima, Keely Smith, Wayne Newton, Elvis Presley, and Frank Sinatra, the individuals who became the biggest stars in the pantheon of Las Vegas celebrities. Chapter 7, “Beautiful Women Were as Commonplace in Las Vegas as Poker Chips: Images of Las Vegas Women in Popular Culture,” deals with the limited ways that the women of Las Vegas have appeared in popular culture. Except for those seeking a quick marriage or divorce, most of the women in novels, films, television, and periodicals have been cocktail waitresses, prostitutes, strippers, or showgirls. Most are objects of men’s at-
tention, collectively creating an image of a city with multitudes of readily available women. Chapter 8, “So Much Luxury in the Middle of the Desert”: Images of Luxury and Amenities in Las Vegas,” presents the many images of spectacular hotels, luxurious accommodations, excellent restaurants, and remarkable showrooms in post–World War II Las Vegas. Chapter 9, “An Awful Place”: The Negative Images of Las Vegas,” deals with the elements of Las Vegas that attract the greatest criticism, most notably compulsive gambling, the types of people attracted to the city, and the ways that casinos manipulate those who enter their doors. Indeed, in many accounts, the city is not a fit place for respectable folks. Chapter 10, “Conclusion: The Ultimate Attraction of Las Vegas,” discusses what most observers see as the ultimate appeal of Las Vegas: that it represents an escape from the mundane, everyday cares facing all people. It is a place to evade the normal and to experience uninhibited fun, at least for a few days. The brief “Afterword: The Intellectuals’ Images of Las Vegas” reveals how the intellectual class has tended to view Las Vegas; predictably, it has been a dismissive assessment, although some seek to understand Las Vegas in the American context as either a mirror of national trends or a model for future American directions.

In nearly a decade of research, I have become indebted to many people who helped guide me on this quest. Most important have been the remarkable faculty and staff at Special Collections in the Lied Library at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Delores Brownlee, Su Kim Chung, Michael Frazier, Jonnie Kennedy, Kelly Luchs, director Peter Michel, Mary McCoy, Joyce Moore, Dave Schwartz, Tom Sommer, Kathy War, and Claytee White were always welcoming and helpful with my research queries. In eight years of research, I spent over one hundred days at Special Collections. In 2008, a research fellowship from the Center for Gaming Research at UNLV funded a month-long stay. The center is the best place to study all aspects of both contemporary and historical gaming. I have conducted research at dozens of manuscript repositories in the United States, England, and Barbados in my career and have never encountered a staff equal to the one at UNLV in knowledge and hospitality. It is a superb place to research the past.

Dave Schwartz not only listened to my ideas on the book, but he also frequently took me to an intriguing array of restaurants, from the famous to the obscure, for lunch. Wherever we went, I never failed to learn from Dave something new about the gambling city’s past and contemporary challenges. Manuscripts librarian Su Kim Chung not only guided me to innumerable useful collections, she, along with her delightful parents, Al and Kelly, ad-
opted me into their family. They made my many trips to Las Vegas a special treat. The entire staff at the Curtis Laws Wilson Library at the Missouri University of Science and Technology was exceptional in facilitating my research, particularly Mary Haug, Annette Howard, and Catherine Lindsey, who secured seemingly countless interlibrary loan books. Through their good research, students Ashley Grace, Amanda Kamps, Allyson Lutz, and Evan Mobley taught me much about Las Vegas. Several people consented to interviews, all of which helped me understand the context from which the many images of Las Vegas emerged: Harvey Diederich, Don English, Jamie Farr, Alan Feldman, Andrew J. Fenady, Oscar Goodman, Peter Graves, Michael Green, Brian Greenspun, Jan Jones, Don Payne, Millicent Rosen, Hal Rothman, Jim Seagrave, and Richard Taylor. Diana Ahmad, Su Kim Chung, and Dave Schwartz all read a portion of the manuscript, while Peter Michel, Doris Gragg, and Clair Willcox read it all. Their collective insights and suggestions truly improved this work. I particularly wish to acknowledge the contribution of Clair Willcox, who encouraged me early on to pursue this project and was consistently supportive. He is one of the most accomplished people I have encountered in the book-publishing business. I will not be able to repay the debt I owe to him. The book’s referees offered invaluable advice for revisions, which I happily included. Fred Woodward and everyone else at the University Press of Kansas have been a terrific team. It was a pleasure working with them.

I also wish to thank the extraordinarily talented faculty members in my department for building an atmosphere of excellence in teaching and research. It has been an honor to chair this department for nearly seventeen years now, and I am working hard to keep up with them. Provost Kent Wray has been consistently supportive of my research and of me as department chair. He helps make Missouri S&T a great place to work.

Finally, and most important, my biggest debt is to my wonderful family. While I have always enjoyed exploring the history of Las Vegas and interacting with all the intriguing and helpful people I have met there, Doris, Julie, Curt, Buddy, Hopper, and Rascal are the real joy in my life.
Introduction

I begin this book about the famous city in southern Nevada fully aware of the caution offered by French philosopher Bruce Begout, who wrote, "Anyone planning to write about Las Vegas runs a serious risk of looking like the wet blanket who, in the midst of the festivities, cuts short the laughter and the dancing to make a speech that is bound to sound tediously in contrast with the party mood." As Begout suggests, some find Las Vegas—the city of lights, gambling, beautiful women, mobsters, and spectacular entertainment—not a proper subject for serious consideration. Indeed, when I explain my research on the history of Las Vegas to colleagues, their typical response is a knowing nod and wink. Don English, the late gifted photographer of the Las Vegas News Bureau, explained to me a few years ago that the city promoters faced a similar challenge in trying to attract conventions to Las Vegas in the 1950s: “It used to be a laugh when somebody said they were having a convention in Las Vegas. They’d say, ‘yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, and you get a lot of work done.’ And there was a stigma, you know, ‘Sin City.” Yet a number of scholars have devoted much time and energy in a quest to understand the city, and the result is several excellent histories, all of which have enriched my understanding of Las Vegas. Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green published a fine comprehensive work for the city’s centennial. Moehring also has a monograph in which he describes Las Vegas as a typical Sunbelt resort city. David G. Schwartz has explained the significant development of the casino resorts in Las Vegas in the immediate post–World War II era as places where Americans, who otherwise opposed gambling in their neighborhoods, could enjoy that vice in a safe locale. John M. Findlay has argued that Las Vegas is best understood as an embodiment of the gambling cultures that have always accompanied America’s frontiers. Hal Rothman
has portrayed Las Vegas as the prototypical example of America’s embrace of entertainment tourism.³

My own quest to understand Las Vegas began in 1992 during a visit to the fabled city. After several enjoyable trips, I became interested in the historical development of this extraordinarily popular place. Reading all the books and articles I could find on Las Vegas’s past gave me an appreciation for the many factors that have contributed to the emergence of the largest urban area to develop in the twentieth century. Yet that research also led to one overarching unanswered question: What best explains the ever-greater popularity of Las Vegas to tourists? In 1930, before Nevada approved wide-open gambling, Las Vegas attracted 125,000 tourists. By 1941, the number had increased to 800,000. From there, the increases were astonishing: 9,000,000 in 1960, 11,900,000 in 1980, and 38,566,000 in 2005.⁴ This book is my first of two in which I will offer answers to that query. In fashioning my explanation, I have worked from a fundamental assumption: It is critical to know what images of Las Vegas Americans encountered in the nation’s popular culture that fueled their fascination with a city they had never visited. It is not difficult to find images of Las Vegas in words and photos, in print and on film, in fiction and nonfiction. There are hundreds of novels, movies, and television programs and thousands of newspaper and magazine articles that deal with Las Vegas in its first hundred years, 1905–2005. The challenge has been to gather all those portrayals and make sense of them, to find the themes and trends that developed over time, and to find the images that most attracted people to Las Vegas. Few scholars have taken this approach to the historical study of Las Vegas, and they have not looked at the range of materials that I utilize here.⁵

In the chapters that follow, the prevailing images clearly emerge as a kaleidoscope of impressions of lights, color, and sound; characters and characterizations; and praise and criticism—and, ultimately, amazement about the city that has attracted ever more people. However, there is another dimension that helps explain the success and popularity of Las Vegas. It is critical to understand how local journalists, civic leaders, hotel developers, and publicists crafted and distributed appealing images of the city. I will pursue that dimension in another book, but a brief description of that promotional effort here will help the reader appreciate what was involved in the emergence of the positive images of Las Vegas that I have included in this book.

From its earliest years, Las Vegas’s civic leaders and businessmen have been excellent promoters. The Las Vegas chamber of commerce and its predecessor, the Las Vegas Promotion Society, worked diligently through the 1920s to push the potentials of agriculture, ranching, and manufacturing, as
well as tourism. Once construction began on Boulder Dam in nearby Black Canyon in 1931, chamber of commerce leaders focused almost all their attention on tourism. For over a decade, they followed the example of other cities, promoting tourism by placing billboards and road signs throughout the Southwestern states, distributing thousands of promotional brochures and pamphlets, and sending civic leaders on speaking tours of major cities in the West. Utilizing these approaches, the chamber of commerce hoped to attract tourists by calling attention to the scenic wonders in the region, like Boulder Dam, Lake Mead, and nearby canyons such as Zion, Bryce, and the Grand Canyon. Other attractions they included in their promotions were the weather, the resort hotels with great entertainment, and annual events like the May frontier celebration, called Helldorado. In the immediate postwar years, as part of an aggressive, well-financed promotional effort known as the Live Wire Fund, the city secured the services of leading promotional firms like J. Walter Thompson and Steve Hannagan and Associates. These firms emphasized a practice begun earlier by the chamber of commerce: providing copy and photos to magazines and newspapers. Hannagan established the Desert Sea News Bureau, later renamed the Las Vegas News Bureau, staffed with photographers and writers. This key office saturated the nation’s media outlets with photos and stories about all the entertainers performing in Las Vegas, not to mention plenty of cheesecake—photos of attractive young women in swimsuits at the hotels—all in “an attempt,” according to Joe Buck, one of the bureau’s photographers, “to create the belief that if you came here you might be able to rub elbows with movie stars” and beautiful women.

In the 1950s and 1960s, hotel publicists like Al Freeman, Harvey Diederich, Eugene Murphy, Herb McDonald, Dick Odessky, and Jim Seagrave, as successful publicists elsewhere have done, gained even more favorable coverage in the press by assiduously cultivating close relationships with entertainment and travel columnists. They provided not only good copy, but also complimentary rooms, meals, parties, and shows when the columnists visited Las Vegas. Relationships were so good that with a simple phone call, the publicists could have Walter Winchell, Earl Wilson, Leonard Lyons, Jim Bacon, or any number of the leading columnists “out here on the next plane” to cover a hotel opening or the debut of an entertainer in their hotel’s showroom. Because of these relationships, favorable press coverage was common. Two examples suffice to illustrate. When the Sands Hotel opened in December 1952, Al Freeman, the hotel’s publicist, brought in over a hundred newspapermen to cover the event, and he provided rooms, meals, and even money
for gambling. The outcome was golden for the Sands. Popular syndicated columnist Earl Wilson wrote, “Here in what has become the most amazing part of America, a new high in hospitality was attained when the new Sands Hotel, gambling spot, held its magniloquent opening.” Another columnist was even more expansive: “No opening in history, could match the curtain-raising ceremonies that attended the launching of . . . the fabulous Sands Hotel. There were more celebrities, radio, television and wire service men and Broadway and Hollywood correspondents around than one-armed bandits.” Some entertainment columnists even offered a quid pro quo to publicists. Dixon Gayer of the Daily News in Garden Grove, California, seeking a deal on a room at the Sands Hotel, told Al Freeman, “I am [the] page one columnist and television columnist for the Daily News and believe you could get some page one mileage out of any effort you might be able to make to oblige.” Freeman gladly accepted the offer. By using such techniques, he and other publicists often got entertainment columnists to simply print articles verbatim that the publicists wanted in the nation’s press.

The Las Vegas chamber of commerce and hotel publicists also worked diligently to shape the images of Las Vegas that Americans saw on the silver screen or on television. In 1940, Bob Griffith and Robert Kaltenborn, two members of the chamber of commerce, lobbied William LeBaron, the president of Paramount Studios, to make a musical comedy about Las Vegas. LeBaron ultimately agreed, and the result was Las Vegas Nights, which showcased the nightclub scene in Las Vegas with Tommy Dorsey’s orchestra and emerging singing star Frank Sinatra. The 1941 film portrayed Las Vegas as “the friendliest little city in the world,” and delighted town boosters saw it as a great publicity tool for the community.

Hotel publicists likewise courted movie and television production companies, seeking films and programs that would portray their properties favorably. With movies like Meet Me in Las Vegas (1956), Pepe (1960), and Ocean’s Eleven (1960), as well as television shows like Dave Garroway’s Wide, Wide World (1955), the Danny Thomas Show (1957), I Spy (1966), and Julia (1970), Al Freeman gained much positive exposure for the Sands Hotel. He worked with the production companies to provide rooms and meals, and he worked with city officials to help them film along the Strip. The value Freeman saw in these efforts is evident in an internal memo he sent to all the hotel staff just before the filming of episodes of the television series Julia. “These three segments of ‘Julia,’ he explained, “have a family type theme and should be good for the image of Las Vegas and especially the Sands.” In return for subsidizing some of the productions and permitting filming on their properties,
hotel executives often demanded that they have a chance to review scripts to prevent the broadcast of negative images of their properties.

Chamber of commerce officials and hotel publicists strongly opposed projects they thought had the greatest potential to harm the city’s image. In 1949, for example, Maxwell Kelch, the chairman of the chamber’s publicity committee, refused to cooperate with producer Frank Seltzer, who was hoping to film a portion of 711 Ocean Drive in Las Vegas. Seltzer’s film is an exposé of organized crime’s role in the national race wire service. Appalled by a script that featured a good bit of violence in the city and the implication that a national syndicate controlled not just the race wire but also the casinos, Kelch and chamber of commerce president Vern Willis refused to cooperate in any way with Seltzer. The local police would not provide escorts for film crews or clear the streets for filming. In the end, Seltzer had to build a set in Los Angeles to simulate a casino.13 Twelve years later, the chamber of commerce threatened lawsuits to stop the production of two series, Las Vegas Beat and Las Vegas Files, because chamber of commerce leaders and most hotel publicists believed that the two series would have projected an image of Las Vegas tarnished by organized crime and extraordinary violence.14 In 1970, NBC television approached Sands Hotel officials about filming an episode of the series The Name of the Game on their property. When he learned that the story line of the episode had “Las Vegas as the locale for a series of several derogatory scenes, including beatings, violence such as hotel doors being kicked in and finally an explosion in a hotel room,” Al Freeman recommended to hotel management that they refuse, noting that the script included “several gangster-type characters.”15 The concern with scripts remained well into the twenty-first century. In 2006, Alan Feldman, senior vice president of public affairs for the MGM Mirage group, explained that he reviewed all scripts of productions shot at the company’s hotels, pointing out to producers, “When you use our properties you play by our rules.”16

Although it is clear the publicists, journalists, and the chamber of commerce carefully crafted many of the appealing images of Las Vegas, reality ultimately did not matter to the viewers and readers who encountered those images. Most reacted positively to the stories, photos, and films about Las Vegas and decided to visit a place that offered them an opportunity to leave the mundane behind and to enjoy a vacation city like no other. My hope is that you will see the following chapters as I intended them to be: an eclectic blend of stories, people, sights, and sounds that together make up the extraordinary appeal of Las Vegas—a place that by the early twenty-first century was luring nearly forty million tourists annually.

INTRODUCTION  |  5  |
“Bright Light City”

The Introduction to Las Vegas

I’ve seen it a thousand times in pictures and on television and in movies.

Barbara Samuel, 2005

Then there is the sound, not only the sound of people, but the sound of things.

Chicago Tribune, 1961

The 1964 film Viva Las Vegas begins with an aerial view of several downtown casinos—Golden Nugget, Horseshoe, the Mint, Pioneer Club, Hotel Fremont, Silver Palace, and Lucky Casino—with their blazing neon signs in bright yellow, pink, and turquoise, as well as Vegas Vic, the forty-foot neon cowboy. Then the camera pans along the Strip, where the viewer sees the Stardust, Riviera, Sahara, Tally-ho, Desert Inn, and Tropicana; the final credits appear as the camera rests on the Flamingo with its neon champagne-glass tower.

With the colorful shots of popular hotels and casinos come the lyrics sung by Elvis Presley, the film’s star and iconic Las Vegas figure, with “the now immortal percussion and twangy guitar sync” that have been endlessly used in the past five decades, “Bright light city gonna set my soul, gonna set my soul on fire.”1 This effective use of a montage of hotels and casinos, accompanied by music, had, by the release of Viva Las Vegas, become a standard, indeed obligatory, element in film and television portrayals of the resort city. It was incumbent on the motion picture or television director, the journalist, and the author to introduce the extraordinary city to those who had never been to Las Vegas. They emphasized that this was a tourist destination like no other, focusing on the kaleidoscope of lights, the cacophony of sounds, and
the frenzied action in the casinos and nightclubs all occurring in the middle of a forbidding desert. New York Times journalist Gladwin Hill nicely captured the collective image with this vivid first impression: “The place roars,” he wrote in 1953, “to a round-the-clock clink of silver dollars and rattle of dice in a setting of bright lights, liquor, music and dancing girls.”

The earliest accounts of Las Vegas in periodicals, novels, and films concentrated on downtown casinos along Fremont Street, near where the city began. The San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad established Las Vegas in 1905 as a division point between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. The locale had long been known as an oasis in the forbidding Mojave Desert because of its aquifers, fed by the snowmelt from nearby Mount Charleston. The railroad town, with its repair shops, slowly grew from a population of just under 1,000 in 1910 to over 2,300 ten years later. Fremont Street quickly became the center of commercial activity in the small downtown district. Along with several shops, the town’s first substantial hotels were built along Fremont Street. Yet there was little prospect that the community would be much more than a small company town until President Calvin Coolidge signed legislation in December 1928 authorizing the construction of a dam in nearby Black Canyon to harness the Colorado River. Construction of the dam, which began in 1931, eventually brought over 5,000 workers to the area. Almost all the workers lived near the dam site in Boulder City, a government-built town that forbade gambling and the sale of alcoholic beverages even after the repeal of Prohibition. Las Vegas warmly welcomed the workers and their collective monthly wages of $750,000 to its saloons and gambling halls.

Gambling has been legal during most of the state’s history. Within a year of the founding of Las Vegas, according to a contemporary, saloons outnumbered all other types of businesses combined. The Arizona Club, the Gem, the Red Onion, the Turf, the Favorite, the Star—all offered, besides liquor, various games of chance: poker, blackjack, roulette, craps, faro, slot machines. In 1909, reformers led by Governor Denver Dickerson and U.S. senator Francis Newlands persuaded state legislators to ban most forms of gambling. However, legislators in subsequent sessions relaxed the prohibition, permitting some “social” card games. In early 1929, when it became evident that construction would proceed on the Boulder Dam project, several businessmen in Las Vegas, expecting a substantial “Saturday-night business” from the workers, quickly opened “card clubrooms” offering low-stakes card games like poker. In July, city commissioners issued licenses for twenty-three “gaming tables.”

The following year, Las Vegas realtor Thomas Carroll led an effort to elect
state legislators who would repeal the restrictions on gambling in Nevada. He took out full-page advertisements proclaiming that legalized gambling would enable Reno and Las Vegas to become “famous as the Convention Cities of Nevada—the Playground of the United States.” Most businessmen in Las Vegas, as revealed in a November survey, supported “wide open gambling.” They believed that legalized gambling would not only be profitable, but also that it would provide additional fees for both the state and local governments.7 Shortly after state legislators approved an open gambling bill in March 1931, Las Vegas city commissioners quickly began issuing licenses for slot machines as well as for table games, wheel of fortune, and keno. The largest casinos in the 1930s, mostly along Fremont Street, were the Northern Club, Boulder Club, Las Vegas Club, Frontier Club, and the Apache Casino. Besides about three dozen slot machines, most offered a craps table, a couple of roulette wheels, poker and twenty-one tables, a wheel of fortune, and a room for keno.8 These were the casinos that caught the attention of so many writers, journalists, and filmmakers over the next quarter century. Proprietors of most of these gambling establishments upgraded their exteriors in the 1930s with “plate glass window, chrome trim, and black Vitolite.” The Apache Casino gained the reputation as the “plushest casino in town, with its own neon sign and terra-cotta facing.”9

The various montages of downtown gambling halls, with their garish neon lights, in films and on television introduced viewers to these casinos.10 Countless postcards that tourists visiting Las Vegas sent home reinforced the celluloid images with various nighttime shots of Fremont Street, its neon lights aglow.11 By the early 1950s, the focus of the images was on the spectacular hundred-foot-high neon sign above the Golden Nugget gambling hall and the forty-foot neon sign called Vegas Vic, which stood atop the Pioneer Club. The image of Vic the cowboy had been used on chamber of commerce stationery and advertisements for Las Vegas, but he gained an iconic status as the neon symbol of the nation’s gambling center. As Katharine Best and Katharine Hillyer wrote in their 1955 book Las Vegas: Playtown U.S.A., the “monster animated cowboy” quickly had “become the Washington Monument, the Eiffel Tower, the Cleopatra’s Needle of Las Vegas.”12 Journalists and authors struggled to find fitting adjectives to describe the neon kaleidoscope in downtown Las Vegas. Bright, brilliant, vivid, garish, and gaudy all seemed insufficient. The chamber of commerce provided an assist when it named the brightest two-block section of Fremont Street Glitter Gulch in 1947 and began using that label in press releases and advertising.13 Yet journalists found that moniker wanting as well. Like columnist Bob
Considine, they sought a “counterpart to Las Vegas in the average person’s knowledge.” To Considine, the most helpful comparison was to “a Western movie in Technicolor.” Another journalist argued that seeing Fremont Street was like viewing “a rocket go off on the Fourth of July, crackling cheekily under the stars.”14 Most frequently, however, journalists tried to help their readers by comparing the lights of Fremont Street to those in other famous locales like Paris or Tokyo’s Ginza district. The favorite comparison was to the lights of Broadway or Times Square. A column in a Zanesville, Ohio, newspaper, for example, claimed “Manhattan’s ‘Big Broadway’ looks pretty puerile beside” the lights of Fremont Street. Similarly, a Long Beach, California, paper claimed “there are more bright lights in proportion than Broadway can flash, but these are more dazzling because they shine from the first instead of the 18th floor of a skyscraper.”15

Novelists also found it essential to explain to readers the brilliant spectacle provided by Fremont Street. Richard Prather, in his 1951 mystery novel Find This Woman, described “what most people think of when Las Vegas is mentioned.” Fremont Street “was a blaze of lights and color and neon.”16 Yet it fell to William Pearson, in his novel Muses of Ruin, to offer the most remarkable descriptive passage of Fremont Street. Hyperbole is too mild a word for his extraordinary rambling effort to help readers grasp the extraordinary sights:

"Bright Light City"
Glitter Gulch: a neon collage of Roman candles, skyrockets, and shooting stars suspended at zenith like a mad surrealist’s frenzied rendering of orgasmic transport. The three of us wait for the inevitable nacreous bursting, the coruscant earthward showering of fire opal and diamonds, the final coital shudder, but the wild embrace holds, cleaving space and time. Metallic reds and harsh yellows and electric blues clash like fighting cocks. Even the pedestrians, bentonic chameleons prowling the floor of this garishly iridescent sea, glow first green, then orange, then coral pink. At one in the morning the street emits the harsh, stabbing antimony of daylight leached through a migraine hangover.

By the time Pearson published his novel in 1965, images of the Strip largely had supplanted those of Fremont Street both on film and in print. What quickly became known as the Las Vegas Strip in the 1940s was Highway 91, or the Los Angeles Highway, which ran southwest from downtown. Beginning in 1941, it became the locale of several casino resorts. Since 1918, town boosters had advocated the construction of a resort hotel in Las Vegas, a property that might attract folks who otherwise would vacation in places like Palm Springs, California. A 1926 proposal, supported by city and county officials, the chamber of commerce, and the Union Pacific Railroad included plans for a 160-room hotel, a golf course, a riding academy, and a casino offering attractions similar to those in Monte Carlo. A decade later, several Southern California businessmen announced plans to construct El Sonador, a $2.5 million hotel that would have a casino, spa, golf course, and race track. Yet these efforts all failed to attract a sufficient number of investors. Even when Thomas Hull, the operator of El Rancho motels and luxurious hotels like the Hollywood Roosevelt in California, joined with wealthy San Diego investor Jack Barkley in 1938 to propose the construction of “one of the outstanding resorts of its kind on the North American continent” in Las Vegas, investors stayed away. Finally, two years later, Hull found enough backers in Texas and Las Vegas to begin construction on the El Rancho Vegas just outside the city on the Los Angeles Highway. Designed by Los Angeles architect Wayne McAllister, this property, which opened in spring 1941, as historian David Schwartz has shown, “set the rough pattern for Strip casino resorts until the high rise era, with a central structure housing the casino, restaurants, and theater surrounded by motel wings.” Rather than the opulence of his Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, Hull’s El Rancho Vegas offered Spanish mission-style bungalows and a host of Western adornments, from wagon wheel chan-
dellers to a dining room that resembled a corral. Its brochures promised a resort where “The Old West Lives Again.”23 El Rancho Vegas was the first of over two dozen major hotel-casinos constructed along the Los Angeles Highway over the next six decades. The highway soon became known as the Strip, a label bestowed on the boulevard by Guy McAfee, a former Los Angeles vice cop, owner of a nightclub along the famed Sunset Strip, and builder of the Golden Nugget in downtown Las Vegas.24

Like the El Rancho Vegas, the earliest properties along the Strip had a Western theme, most notably the Hotel Last Frontier, which proclaimed guests would enjoy the “Old West in Modern Splendor.”25 By the 1950s, how-
ever, developers pursued desert, Mediterranean, or modern themes, with the Desert Inn, Sahara, Sands, Dunes, Riviera, Royal Nevada, Hacienda, Tropicana, and Stardust. The opening of Caesars Palace in 1966 added a new dimension to the Strip properties with a themed fantasy resort where guests could experience an imagined trip to a luxurious, decadent ancient Rome. Three years later, Kirk Kerkorian opened the International, the world’s largest casino resort, with over 1,500 rooms, a property that ushered in the era of the megaresort. Many of the vast resort hotels that followed the International adopted its “design of a Y-shaped triform hotel tower” developed by architect Martin Stern. In 1989, developer Steve Wynn triumphantly merged the themed resort and the Stern design in his Mirage with its South Seas theme. Over the next decade, the Strip exploded with a plethora of massive themed resorts: Excalibur; Luxor; MGM Grand; Treasure Island; Monte Carlo; New York, New York; Bellagio; Paris; Mandalay Bay; and the Venetian.

Authors and journalists found describing the spectacle of the Strip at night to be as challenging as explaining the neon on Fremont Street. One columnist explained that the “multi-colored lights” viewed from 5,000 feet looked “like Tiffany’s window through a telescope.” Readers of a 1966 Look magazine article discovered that the galaxy of vivid colors along the Strip were so intense that the “electric signs hammer at the eyeballs and sear the brain.” Three years later, Charles Champlin, in the Los Angeles Times, drew on alliteration in an attempt to explain the Strip’s allure. It was, he wrote, over three miles of “urgent incandescence, one long, glowing shout, a blaze of blandishments to witness Berle, Benny, Barbara, babes, burlesque, even Bingo.” The multitudes of print descriptions catalog an array of dazzling colors. Some saw “white lights, yellow lights”; others saw “candy colors.” Novelist Michael Ventura wrote about “the orange-red of the Rio, the ice blue of Caesars Palace, the gold of the Mirage,” all “amid the pulsating shine of the Strip.”

Filmmakers found it easier to reveal the cascade of colors. Beginning with the 1951 film Painting the Clouds with Sunshine, most motion pictures about Las Vegas included a montage of Strip properties. One of the most effective was 1960’s Ocean’s Eleven. After a shot of downtown neon, there is an extended sequence featuring a long shot of the glowing neon marquees at the entrance of each of the properties Danny Ocean’s gang will rob: the Flamingo, Sands, Desert Inn, Riviera, and Sahara. Incorporating such a montage permitted filmmakers, as in the 1997 Vegas Vacation, to show the arrival of a character or characters to the Strip. More often, the use of the montage was an effective way to provide a setting for the story line in the glittering city. Long, slow aerial shots at night over the Strip with the camera lingering
above the hotel-casinos, as in *The Cooler*, are particularly impressive. As the
camera proceeds north along the Strip, the viewer sees the blue and red col-
ors of the Excalibur, the vivid green of the MGM Grand, the softly lit cupola
of the Bellagio, the sparkling half-scale Eiffel Tower at the Paris, and then on
to the glowing images of Caesars Palace, Treasure Island, the Stardust, Circus
Circus, the Sahara, and the Stratosphere.

In contrast to such grand visions, a few filmmakers create scenes that offer
more understated impressions of the Strip. In the 1988 film *Rain Man*, the
character of Raymond, after a huge win at the blackjack table, stands at the
window of a high-roller suite at Caesars Palace gazing at the neon below. The
autistic savant says simply that it is “very sparkly, very twinkly.” Similarly,
in the 1987 Las Vegas television series *Crime Story*, Captain Mike Torello, the
program’s lead character, looks over the Strip as the neon begins to shine
and says, “There really is something beautiful about these lights, this place.”
Regardless of the approach taken in film and print, the images of the Strip
are of a magical place where a new arrival is bemused, tantalized, intrigued,
or overwhelmed by the blinding electric signs—a place where “neon lights
blaze, blind, beckon and dazzle.”

In most depictions of Las Vegas, a variety of sounds added to what Tom
Wolfe called the city’s “unique bombardment of the senses.” The noise asso-
ciated with games of chance predominated. The rattle of the wheel of for-
tune, the click of the poker chips, the whir of the roulette wheel with its
bouncing ivory ball, the clacking of the dice on the craps table, the shuffle of
cards at blackjack and poker tables, the incessant clicking and ringing of slot
machines, and, most important, the jingle of coins and the ringing of bells
accompanying slot machine jackpots—all became an essential element in in-
troducing the reader or viewer to Las Vegas casinos. The sounds of people
added to the reverberating noise of the casino. The call of the croupier at the
roulette wheel, the cry of the stickman at the craps table, players yelling for
good rolls of the dice, an almost constant din of chatter at the table games,
cheers for winning hands and groans at losses, and the frequent paging of fa-
mous people through the casino loudspeakers all contributed to the commo-
tion. In their breezy 1955 book on Las Vegas, Katharine Best and Katharine
Hillyer explained,

It is not at all uncommon to hear “Paging Mr. Walt Disney, paging
Mr. Walt Disney” echoing for miles around, or “Miss Sophie Tucker
wanted on the telephone,” or “Long distance for Miss Patti Page,” or
“Mr. Bob Hope, please, Mr. Bob Hope, telegram at the desk.”
Whether the pages were genuine or simple ploys to add to the excitement of the casino floor, they worked.

There would almost always be music as well: the piano player, jazz quartet, jazz band, or singer in the lounge, or the singing and dancing in the floor shows. Many films featured singers, including Frank Sinatra in *Las Vegas Nights*, Roy Rogers in *Heldorado*, Jane Russell in *Las Vegas Story*, Lena Horne and Frankie Laine in *Meet Me in Las Vegas*, Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin in *Ocean’s Eleven*, Elvis Presley and Ann-Margret in *Viva Las Vegas*, Louis Prima in *Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins*, Wayne Newton in *Vegas Vacation*, and a host of guest stars on the television series *Las Vegas*, from Brooks and Dunn to Michael Bublé and John Legend. The music, excited chatter, jostling, joking, and general revelry invariably built into, as novelist Steve Fisher wrote, a “mounting babble” in the casinos.34

Novels, articles, and films regularly project an almost frenetic level of action in the casinos and along the streets of Las Vegas. Journalists in the 1930s found casinos “crowded day and night,” “filled with patrons,” even “packed to bursting.”35 These types of characterizations became standard in subsequent reporting—people jamming the table games two and three deep, filling the lounges and showrooms to overflowing, and packing the restaurants. All the elements created, as in the novel *Murder She Wrote: You Bet Your Life*, “a high energy hubbub.”36 Likewise, films presented a seemingly endless procession of people eager to join in the gambling at a fever pitch. For example, when the characters Diana and David Murphy arrive in Las Vegas in the 1993 film *Indecent Proposal*, the viewer sees first the Strip at night; then a lively lounge act with dancers and a saxophone soloist; happy, energized gamblers at slot machines; David winning a large slot jackpot; and three loud and happy female craps players, all amid a packed casino. Such scenes are common in film presentations, like *Las Vegas Nights* in 1941, as well as in television series, like *Las Vegas*, which featured such scenes in virtually every episode during its five-year run beginning in 2003.

This “slam of noise and light” had remarkable effects on first-time Las Vegas visitors, leaving many of them dazed, startled, disoriented, exhilarated, or simply overwhelmed.37 Some journalists promised much for those who had never been. “The magic quality,” of the lights, sounds, and actions of Las Vegas, according to a 1972 *Oakland Tribune* article, is that they “hold the visitor in a constant spell of enchantment.” Or, as Herb Lyon in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* put it in 1953, “The excitement engendered is the most contagious known to man.” In 1952, columnist Malcolm Epley predicted that a first-time visitor “is likely to go around in a daze amid scenes of undreamed color and
glamor, the jingle of silver dollars filling his ears with the subtle suggestion that money is fabulously plentiful.”

Jaw-dropping awe of the sights of both Fremont Street and the Strip is often featured in film depictions of people seeing Las Vegas for the first time. In the 1985 film *Las Vegas Weekend*, math whiz Percy Doolittle arrives in Las Vegas determined to use his system to win at blackjack. He drives down Fremont dumbstruck by the extraordinary display of neon. In *Vegas Vacation* twelve years later, there is a two-minute sequence showing the arrival of the Griswold family on the Strip. Driving past the “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign at the south end of the Strip, they cruise past all the major hotels, wide-eyed and speechless at the spectacle of lights. Two English women in the 1998 film *Girls’ Night* drive into Las Vegas and gaze open-mouthed at the neon-lit Strip, and when they walk into the Riviera casino and encounter the multitudes of jingling slot machines, one excitedly exclaims, “Now you’re bloody talking.”

Yet Las Vegas also had an almost therapeutic effect on some people in fictional accounts. Although he loses every year he vacations at the Sands Hotel, a cowboy played by Dan Dailey in *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (1956) is made to feel right at home by everyone—the boys in valet parking, the cocktail waitresses, the blackjack dealers, the band in the lounge, the casino manager and owner Jake Freedman. In the novel *Mustang Sally*, an English professor named Packard Schmidt visits Las Vegas at the end of each semester: “But
it’s not just the games; it’s the whole town, something I can feel in the back of my jaw every time I see a picture of the Strip on television, the way the town bathes itself in light, the way you can just walk into it and get lost and nobody will come chasing you with papers to grade.” Upon walking into a casino, welcomed by the multitude of sounds, immediately his “fatigue lifts.” His visits always have a long-lasting effect. “Everything goes better for a few weeks,” and he feels “perked up and cleaned out, like a man who has just had a session of kidney dialysis.”

Carolyn Thomas has a character, Linda, in her 1957 novel *The Cactus Shroud* driving into Las Vegas; “despite her weariness and the oppressive heat, Linda felt a lift of spirit.”

Detective Shell Scott in *Find This Woman* calls the Desert Inn, and while on the phone, he “could sense the color and lights and gaiety” recalled from previous trips and “could almost hear the ivory ball rolling around the rims of the roulette wheels, and the whir of the slot machine. Just imagining it was so pleasant that the anger still with me faded a bit and I felt better.”

Whether it restored their mental health or gave them a unique thrill, those arriving in Las Vegas quickly realized that the magical city was a remarkable oasis in a most inhospitable desert. In the 1947 novel *The Honest Dealer*, Sam Fletcher and Sam Cragg approach Las Vegas from the west and encounter land “about as bleak as any they had seen, sand, a Joshua palm here and there, sand, tumbleweeds and more sand.” Likewise, in the Erle Stanley Gardner (writing as A. A. Fair) mystery *Spill the Jackpot*, the plane carrying two detectives to Las Vegas “dipped down over the desert, skimmed low over a dazzling white surface spotted with clumps of sage and greasewood.” Dick Pearce observed in a 1955 article in *Harper’s* magazine that Las Vegas “is a very tiny green thumbtack stuck in a vast and scabrous desert floor.”

The city of lights was a stark contrast to the barren, lifeless wasteland surrounding it, a contrast represented in dozens of films. Early movies like *Heldorado* in 1946 and *Sky Full of Moon* in 1952, as well as documentaries like *The Real Las Vegas* and *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History* produced decades later show viewers images of a cruel sun and unforgiving terrain—indeed, “a God-forsaken locale.” In the 1991 film *Bugsy*, director Barry Levinson reveals the enormity of the Mojave Desert when showing the construction of the Flamingo Hotel. Levinson includes several scenes of the building and completion of the Flamingo, and the viewer gets a sense, from the camera slowly panning from left to right of the rising resort hotel and casino, of how vast the desert is; there is no other structure near the Flamingo property. When Siegel flies over the nearly complete fabulous structure, it is dwarfed by the desert. Yet close-up shots reveal beautiful green lawns, palm trees, and lush shrubbery,
a veritable oasis. It became a common approach to present to the viewer or reader a place within the barren surroundings with air-conditioned rooms, shimmering Olympic-size swimming pools, cool green lawns, fountains with sparkling water, plush resorts, and appealing, cool, dark casinos packed with action. In the 1999 film *The Runner,* for example, an aerial shot from a rapidly moving camera starts over the land to the northwest of Las Vegas, moves over nondescript suburban tract homes with little or no vegetation, then on to neighborhoods with lawns and trees; in the distance, one sees, almost like a mirage, the Strip. The sequence ends at a massive fictitious hotel (actually the Stardust) and into its casino, which is packed with eager gamblers. Similarly, *New York Times* journalist Gladwin Hill wrote in 1953, “The traveler approaching this surprising oasis in the mountain-ridged Nevada desert is confronted at dusk by a strange mirage that could pass for Broadway.”

Many journalists through the 1950s, acknowledging that they could not adequately convey the spectacle of this desert oasis to their readers, felt compelled to write that one had to visit the city to grasp its unique qualities. “Seeing isn’t believing in Las Vegas,” *Los Angeles Times* columnist Lee Shippey wrote in 1946. “Even when you see it you can’t believe it,” he continued. “A recent arrival from New York said, ‘I wish I’d never before used the word fabulous.’” Such sentiments became almost a mantra: “This place must be seen to be believed. Even then you wonder.”

*Flamingo Hotel, ca. 1950, surrounded by the forbidding Mojave Desert. Source: UNLV Libraries, Special Collections.*
desert playground is likely to let his jaw drop and not get it back in shape for a couple of days.” “You have to see Las Vegas to believe it. Even then you occasionally pinch yourself, if you are a first-time visitor.” Novelists likewise felt obligated to argue that Las Vegas was an experience not to be missed. I. G. Broat, in *The Junketeers*, for example, has a character say, “Everyone should see it before he dies.”

In films, novels, newspaper and magazine articles, and on television, Las Vegas has a remarkable impact on the first-time visitors. It is breathtaking, stunning, exciting, and unexpected, unlike anything they had ever experienced. To be sure, actual visitors had a wide range of experiences, but their first impressions, their initial understanding of what they would encounter in the gambling center, drew on what they read and saw in popular culture. They anticipated a magical place, an escape from their reality, that promised lights, sound, and round-the-clock action, all in an amazing oasis in one of the world’s most forbidding locales. For the first half century of the city’s history, that escape was into a place that seemed to be the last frontier town.