

## **Protecting a City's Image: The Death of *Las Vegas Beat*, 1961**

In February 1961, Bill Todman, marketing partner in the successful Mark Goodson-Bill Todman Production Company, attended a meeting of hotel-casino owners and their public relations men in Las Vegas. Todman hoped that he could persuade them to permit his company to complete the filming of a pilot called *Las Vegas Beat*. The hour-long program featured the exploits of a public relations man, portrayed by Peter Graves, who also solved crimes in the nation's gambling capital. The assembled representatives of the casino industry had summoned Todman to inform him that they did not want "a television show about Las Vegas at this moment in time." A shocked Todman responded, "You guys gave me your markers. Your hotels agreed and the Chamber loved it, the newspapers loved it." At that point, as Todman recollected, one of the men pounded his fist on the large conference table and said, "Make your f . . . . . pilot and get out of town."<sup>1</sup> Developments at the meeting may not have proceeded precisely as Todman related. There is nothing in the meeting minutes about such an exchange and Todman was known for exaggeration.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the episode, no matter how imperfectly recalled, reflects the adversarial relationship that had quickly developed between the television industry which was seeking to film two detective series based in Las Vegas, and representatives of the resort casino industry, who were seeking to protect the image of their city. Goodson-Todman's *Las Vegas Beat* was scheduled to be part of the 1961-1962 television schedule on NBC, while Warner Bros. Television had a competing series, *Las Vegas File*, slated to be on ABC. Neither program

reached the air waves because of the determined opposition of several hotel owners, their publicists, and the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

Many in the television industry in late 1960 and early 1961 pinned their hopes on the two proposed series. Robert Kintner, who had developed a profitable relationship between ABC and Warner Bros. in the mid-1950s, had moved to NBC. However, in his four years as president, the popularity of the network's programs had slipped. Mark Goodson and Bill Todman, who had developed several very successful game shows, were hoping to broaden their company's offerings to the networks with *Las Vegas Beat*. Andrew J. Fenady, the show's creator, was concerned about being known exclusively as a "Western writer" after his successful launch of a Western series called *The Rebel* (1959-61) and was hoping for a hit detective show. Peter Graves, who had starred for five seasons in *Fury* (1955-60) and had finished shooting a program called *Whiplash* (1960-61) in Australia, was looking for work. Likewise, Jamie Farr, picked to play Graves' sidekick in *Las Vegas Beat*, had been recently discharged from the U.S. Army and was struggling to resume his career that had begun as a regular on the *Red Skelton Show* (1951-71). While Graves and Farr would later star in very successful programs—*Mission: Impossible* (1966-73) and *M\*A\*S\*H*. (1972-83)—in 1961, they needed a job. Warner Bros. Television needed a new hit show in the wake of declining interest in their productions and a recently canceled series. This was a particular concern for William T. Orr, who became production chief for movies and television at Warner Bros. in March 1961. Clearly, there was much riding on the success of these new programs. Yet, as much as the two major television networks were eager to improve their ratings by airing detective series about an exciting resort city and the "entertainment capital" of the world, the city's Chamber of Commerce and several of the hotel owners were determined to stop the filming of both series. These leaders of the gambling industry sought to control the shaping of the city's image, not only to encourage tourism, but also to prevent federal efforts to control or eliminate their lucrative and rapidly growing business.

In 1955, the State of Nevada, the only state with legal casino gambling, had made gaming "a privileged business." In other words, the state's licensing board could deny applicants for gaming licenses and revoke current holders' licenses without "just cause."<sup>3</sup> This interpretation that gaming

does not hold the same protections as a “vested right” has been upheld by state and federal courts. For example, in 1977, the Nevada Supreme Court, in a case brought by bookmaker Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal, was crystal clear: “Gaming is a privilege conferred by the state and does not carry with it the rights inherent in useful trades and occupations.” The court continued, “we view gaming as a matter reserved to the states within the meaning of the 10<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In this context, we find no room for federally protected constitutional rights.”<sup>4</sup>

Owners of the casinos worried that the “crime and violence” sure to be depicted in these programs would have an effect “on the privilege of gambling.”<sup>5</sup> While the owners were most concerned, the loss of gambling licenses would affect all residents of Nevada, a state that had taken a huge risk when it had embraced gambling as its fundamental industry. Before Nevada approved wide-open gambling in 1931, Las Vegas had never attracted more than 125,000 tourists, most of whom had stopped over on their way to see the site of the massive Boulder Dam construction project little more than thirty miles away. The allure of gambling dramatically changed the tourist flow. By 1941, Las Vegas drew 800,000 tourists. In 1952, there were 7,000,000, and as the decade ended, nearly 10,000,000 tourists were pouring into Las Vegas.<sup>6</sup> Tourists spent \$122,000,000 in 1952, and in 1960 the *New York Times* reported that tourists were spending an estimated \$400,000,000 on gambling, hotels, food, and entertainment. In 1955, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported “more than 80 per cent of its residents” relied “upon the gambling economy.”<sup>7</sup> Revenue from gamblers provided ever more jobs and gambling taxes and fees produced an increasing proportion of the state’s revenue, from just slightly more than one percent in 1932 to “more than 30 per cent of the state’s general fund income” in 1960. In 1951, Pat McCarran, Nevada’s powerful senior United States Senator, acknowledged to a journalist the significance of gambling to his state. The prosperity enjoyed by his fellow citizens, McCarran explained, “was accomplished [sic] by making the State of Nevada a playground to which the world was invited, and that playground has as its base gambling in all forms.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the debate over *Las Vegas Beat*, as significant as it was to the producer, director, and actors in the proposed series, was of paramount importance to the business and civic leaders in Las Vegas, a community dependent upon gambling-based tourism.

Although he was only thirty-two years old in 1960, Andrew J. Fenady had already enjoyed success in Hollywood. He had been a writer and producer on Paul Coates' television documentary program *Confidential File* (1953-58) and had written and produced two screenplays—*Stakeout on Dope Street* and *The Young Captives*.<sup>9</sup> Although *The Rebel*, the Western series he created, had gained high ratings, Fenady thought it time to develop a private eye series. When considering locales, he concluded that San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago had “been done to death.” Fenady had visited Las Vegas a couple of times and had come away thinking that the city was an ideal locale. Harris Katleman, west coast vice president of Goodson-Todman Productions and a relative of Beldon Katleman, who was one of the owners of the New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, endorsed Fenady's idea for a series. With that encouragement, Fenady “wrote a treatment” for a Las Vegas-based detective series which Goodson and Todman liked. After negotiations with ABC stalled, Goodson-Todman sent it to NBC where Mark Goodson had a good friend named David Levy, the network's program director. Levy passed the “treatment” along to Eugene Burr, vice president for program development, who responded enthusiastically and told Fenady to “move right on to script.”<sup>10</sup> This all had the blessing of network president Robert Kintner, who was eager for a hit program. When Kintner took the helm of the network in the mid-1950s, NBC had eight of the top twenty-five rated programs, but that figure had slipped to only four.<sup>11</sup>

Once Fenady had completed the script for a pilot, he sought a critical reading of it from both the Las Vegas News Bureau, which functioned as the publicity arm of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, and the hotel publicists who served on the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce Promotion Committee. Other than minor corrections, both the News Bureau and the Promotion Committee endorsed the script, an action which led the hotel owners to approve the project.<sup>12</sup> With the backing of Goodson-Todman, the commitment from NBC, and the good will of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, Fenady picked a director, began to assemble a cast, and made preparations for filming the pilot in Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, Warner Bros. Television also was busy developing a series based in Las Vegas. The company, which had a long history of success

in motion pictures, was becoming ever more involved in television productions. In 1955, ABC, in need of new programming as it struggled to compete with the more successful CBS and NBC, had approached the major film studios in hopes that they would develop some series for them. Jack L. Warner, although he had a disdain for television, decided to cooperate with ABC because his studio needed the money.<sup>13</sup> Warner delegated the task to his son-in-law William T. Orr, who quickly developed several successful programs for Warner Bros. and ABC. The company's first program was *Warner Bros. Presents* which premiered in 1955. It had rotating episodes of programs based upon successful company films: *Casablanca* (1955), *King's Row* (1955-56), and *Cheyenne* (1955-63). Only the latter survived as a weekly series. However, ABC, following the trend of ever more Westerns on television, did order *Maverick* (1957-62), *Colt .45* (1957-60), and *Sugarfoot* (1957-61) from Warner Bros. for the 1957-58 season. Warner Bros. then developed *77 Sunset Strip* (1958-64), a private eye series for the following television season. The program's success prompted the rapid production of three similar programs: *Bourbon Street Beat* (1959-60), *Hawaiian Eye* (1959-63), and *Surfside 6* (1960-62). They all followed the same format with "a glamorous location, flawlessly handsome heroes, mystery, and beautiful but treacherous females."<sup>14</sup> The Warner Bros. Western and private-eye programs were shot with limited budgets and very tight schedules. They had consistent narratives and used plenty of stock footage. Hugh Benson, William Orr's assistant, acknowledged that the private-eye series "were just alike." Warner Bros. simply "changed names, switched locales, and used the same script."<sup>15</sup>

This assembly-line formula worked wonderfully for Warner Bros. for a few years. Its prime-time series in the 1958-59 season grossed \$12.6 million. By 1960, Warner Bros. provided ABC with a third of its prime-time schedule, a total of over 250 hours of programming.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the company's success was momentary. Poor ratings caused the cancellation of *Bourbon Street Beat* and ABC bought fewer hours from Warners for the 1960-1961 season. Knowing that ABC looked to Warner Bros. only for Westerns and detective programs, Orr and Benson sought a new "sunny" and exciting locale that would fit their model for the detective genre. They visited Las Vegas in summer 1960 to determine how appealing it could be for a series. Orr and Benson met with the Clark County Sheriff's Department and the

Las Vegas Police Department and got their tentative approval to develop a program based upon crime files from those two departments. A subcommittee of the Chamber of Commerce Promotion Committee also gave its approval after hearing Orr and Benson's pitch for the program.<sup>17</sup>

While Warner Bros. did line up a cast featuring Peter Breck in the lead role, they did little else for several weeks other than issue a series of press releases about their proposed series. Mark Goodson and Bill Todman, on the other hand, were eager to film their pilot. A twenty-three-year veteran of radio and television programming, Mark Goodson had formed a lasting partnership with Bill Todman in 1946. Their first television venture was the game show *What's My Line* (1950-67) which ran for seventeen seasons. With Goodson serving as the creative partner and Todman as the salesman, Goodson-Todman had a string of other successful game shows in the 1950s, including *Beat the Clock* (1950-61), *I've Got a Secret* (1952-67), *To Tell the Truth* (1956-68), and *The Price is Right* (1956-65, 1972-). They had ventured into other types of programming with the Westerns *Jefferson Drum* and *The Rebel*, and following their short-lived *Philip Marlowe* (1959-60) series, were experimenting with the detective genre.<sup>18</sup> Their key man in this venture was Andrew Fenady, who drew upon "everybody that was involved in *The Rebel* and had them do something on Las Vegas."<sup>19</sup> They shot the interiors for the pilot at Paramount Studios and spent just over two weeks in Las Vegas shooting. The pilot served to introduce all the key characters—Bill Ballin (portrayed by Peter Graves), a hotel publicist and detective; Gopher (portrayed by Jamie Farr), his sidekick; Cynthia Raine (portrayed by Diana Millay), an aspiring journalist and love interest; R.G. Joseph (portrayed by William Bryant), a cynical veteran journalist; and Lt. Bernard McFeety (portrayed by Richard Bakalyan), a Las Vegas policeman who cooperates with Ballin. The plot involved an attempted armored car robbery foiled by Ballin and the police. The out-of-town gangsters who have planned the heist kill a shyster private eye and two armored car guards, and also shoot the wife of one of the gang members. All the gangsters are killed by the episode's end. Fenady, mindful of the city's concern with its image, had the Las Vegas journalist place the deaths in a national context. R.G. Joseph writes, in one of his accounts of the gangsters' crimes, that "Las Vegas boasts the lowest per capita homicide rate of any city in the country." Moreover, Fenady has Ballin, a home-

town boy, explaining that his job is fundamentally to protect Las Vegas—that is, to make sure “people don’t get hurt in this town or hurt it.”<sup>20</sup>

There was great anticipation at NBC and among the cast for this program. In January, NBC released a predictably bubbly fact sheet promising that the detective show would “feature taut, fast-paced action in an exotic tourist Mecca that rivals Paris for gaiety and opulence.” Peter Graves recalled that there was more than the typical hyperbole with this pilot. “It was,” he said, “the hottest thing” NBC had “on their schedule of new pilots.” Indeed, NBC’s Allan Courtney told Fenady that it was “the best pilot” he had ever seen, perhaps “the best pilot ever made.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet, as Fenady and his crew were completing their filming, the Las Vegas Promotion Committee met to discuss developing concerns about *Las Vegas Beat*. The committee, made up largely of hotel publicists and employees of the Las Vegas News Bureau and working under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce, met regularly to discuss ways to best publicize and promote Las Vegas. For their February 2 meeting, some hotel executives, as well as Sheriff Ralph Lamb, Police Chief Leo Kuykendall, and District Attorney John Mendoza, joined the regular committee members. Ben Goffstein, a partner at the Riviera Hotel, explained that “he had discussed” the script from *Las Vegas Beat* “with others on the ownership level” and they were opposed to the series. Publicists Lee Fisher from the Dunes, Eugene Murphy from the Desert Inn, and Al Freeman from the Sands all went on record in opposition to the series because it portrayed, despite Fenady’s best efforts, “the community in a bad light” and “showed untrue violence in Las Vegas.” Indeed, they noted six violent scenes resulting in five murders. Freeman also contended that the producers had gone forward with filming “without the cooperation of and without the approval of the Sheriff and Police Departments.”<sup>22</sup>

Harris Katleman of Goodson-Todman, attended the meeting and sought to reassure everyone. “It was certainly not the intention of his organization,” Katleman said, “to produce anything that would not meet with the approval of the entire Las Vegas resort industry, or that would show Las Vegas in a bad light.” He reminded the committee that Goodson-Todman “had gone ahead with the project” spending over \$200,000 because a subcommittee of the Promotion Committee had approved the pilot’s script the previous summer. Indeed, Harvey Diederich, publicist at the Sahara, and

Hank Kovell, publicist at the Hotel Fremont, had been on that sub-committee, and neither found the script “objectionable” or that it “put Las Vegas in a bad light.” Diederich even asserted that “he would be happy to have the series filmed entirely at the Hotel Sahara.” Katleman promised to screen the pilot “to everyone in Las Vegas who was concerned that it would be approved” and offered to “put a disclaimer at the beginning or end of the series stating that the action portrayed was entirely fiction.”<sup>23</sup>

If Bill Todman participated in a heated discussion with members of the committee, as he related to Peter Graves, those remarks were not included in the minutes of this meeting. However, the next day, Todman did answer questions posed by Colin McKinlay of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. In a genuine charm offensive, Todman told McKinlay, “the community has great potential because of the ideal climate, buildings and cooperation extended by residents.” “Todman and his associates,” McKinlay explained, “just finished ironing out differences about the present story plot and a group of the local hotel operators who thought the ‘blood and thunder’ plot would be detrimental to the community.” Besides promising a screening of the pilot to the press and hotel owners, Todman promised to hire some locals, notably some of the local police “when the script calls for a policeman.” He also sought to reassure the community about the lead character in the program. Todman explained that Bill Ballin would be “a public relations man” and “a troubleshooter for a number of commercial enterprises.” He would protect both the “town’s good name and free-spending tourists from fast buck artists who are lured here by thoughts of easy money.”<sup>24</sup>

Two weeks later, the Promotion Committee met with Warner Bros. executives William Orr and Hugh Benson to discuss *Las Vegas File*. Benson informed committee members that ABC had purchased “32 or 39 one-hour shows” and that a Warner Bros. crew hoped to come to Las Vegas the following week and do some exterior shots. He also provided a twenty-three page “presentation” about the program. Rather than a script, the presentation included “scenes of certain shows that are now in the writing stage.” Benson reviewed what he and Orr had done in preparation for filming. He reminded them that they had talked previously with some of the publicists, as well as the Sheriff’s Office and the Police Department, to develop ideas for the show. During the meeting, several skeptical publicists demanded script approval. They argued that Warner Bros. had offered

them too little information, what one publicist called “two little short scenes,” for them to make an informed decision. However, Orr and Benson, unlike Andrew Fenady, who had agreed to give the publicists script approval, consistently refused because in their rapid production schedule for series television, they often changed the script as they were filming. This refusal frustrated several of the publicists. Lee Fisher, for example, was unwilling to commit the Dunes Hotel to the project without script approval because he was unwilling to trust Orr and Benson’s “outline and . . . professed statements” that they would not portray Las Vegas unfavorably. As Hank Kovell of the Hotel Fremont reminded them, Goodson-Todman had “agreed to submit every script—absolutely—every script.” While they failed to resolve that issue, the committee members finally voted to permit Warner Bros. to film their presentation.<sup>25</sup>

Amidst the debate among the Promotion Committee members, a clear division developed over the virtues of having one or two television series about Las Vegas. In his February 4 article on Bill Todman, reporter Colin McKinlay had noted in discussions about *Las Vegas Beat* that there was “a split in the resort hotels. Some pledged their unqualified cooperation, while others denied their facilities to the producers until they have viewed the pilot film.”<sup>26</sup> Predictably, these differences were reflected among the hotel publicists as well. In part, they drew divergent conclusions about how the viewing public would perceive Las Vegas as presented in a show like *Las Vegas Beat*. Several publicists consistently argued that viewers would get a sense that the city was too dangerous to visit. But others argued that viewers would understand that it was fiction and all of the criminals were from out of town.<sup>27</sup> For some, like Harvey Diederich, financial considerations undoubtedly affected their position. Some of the cast and crew for *Las Vegas Beat* stayed at the Sahara Hotel where he was the publicist. Moreover, there was a scene in the pilot with a beauty contest at the Sahara pool which gave considerable exposure to his property.

Long-term friendships also played a role. Al Freeman acknowledged that William Orr and Hugh Benson were “two of my best friends.”<sup>28</sup> More importantly, Benson informed the committee that he had worked for Freeman’s boss, Sands Hotel entertainment director Jack Entratter, as a press agent. A co-owner of the famed New York Copacabana before coming to Las Vegas in 1952, Entratter had built the Sands into the premier

entertainment venue along the Strip attracting stars like Danny Thomas, Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin, and Frank Sinatra. “I owe him a great deal,” Benson said, “he has done many things for me.” This close connection raised questions in the minds of some about Freeman’s objectivity in the discussions about the two programs. Freeman consistently supported the Warner Bros. proposed series over the Goodson-Todman series. He claimed that Benson and Orr, unlike Goodson-Todman, were “respectable business men” who had “approached this in a gentlemanly fashion.” At one point, Freeman even complained, “We’re being a little hard on Warner Brothers.” Freeman’s friendship with the two Warner Bros. executives prompted fellow publicist Maury Stevens to lead a failed effort to oust him as chair of the Promotion Committee.<sup>29</sup>

While Goodson-Todman was completing its pilot and Warner Bros. was completing its presentation, there were many news stories in the local and national press about the two programs. On February 6, *Las Vegas Sun* columnist Ralph Pearl claimed that “the top brass of a Strip major hotel” attempted to prevent Goodson-Todman’s crew from finishing filming to give Warner Bros. an opportunity to send its crew to film *Las Vegas File*.<sup>30</sup> Two weeks later, Murray Hertz, another *Sun* columnist, reported rumors of “intense competition” between the production companies allegedly because two employees of Goodson-Todman had worked at Warner Bros. “when the Las Vegas File idea was conceived.” Another rumor had Warner Bros. seeking to sign Sammy Davis, Jr. to star in an episode of *Las Vegas File*. Meanwhile, the two production companies fed the nation’s newspapers plenty of press releases. Famed entertainment columnist Louella Parsons, for example, reported that the two new series would make Las Vegas “as well known to the world as Monte Carlo was in its heyday.”<sup>31</sup>

These “insider” pieces did what the production companies most wanted; they kept the names of their programs in the print media. However, on April 3, the news turned decidedly sour for both of the programs. That was the day Sam Boyd, President of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, sent a telegram to Robert Kintner at NBC warning of a law suit to stop the screening of *Las Vegas Beat*. Boyd claimed not only that the program was too violent, but also that Goodson-Todman had submitted their pilot to the network prior to showing it to “Las Vegas law enforcement officers and civic and community leaders,” in violation of a promise not to

do so. He also threatened Warner Bros. with legal action if it failed to screen their presentation to the same group.<sup>32</sup> The next day, Royal Blakeman, an attorney representing Goodson-Todman, replied with a threat of legal action against the Chamber of Commerce if they continued to interfere with his “client’s property rights and business and contractual rights.”<sup>33</sup> Of the two programs, the Las Vegas Chamber’s primary concern was with *Las Vegas Beat*. Yet the program’s creator, Andrew Fenady, and Goodson-Todman had done virtually all that city leaders had requested. When the Promotion Committee complained that there were too many violent scenes in the original script, including the shooting of “an innocent passer-by driving into Las Vegas,” Fenady deleted that scene and later recollected that “if it meant the survival of the series,” he would have deleted more scenes if the Chamber members found them objectionable. Additionally, Goodson-Todman had agreed to provide scripts to the Promotion Committee prior to filming. Moreover, Sam Boyd did not accurately represent the promise Goodson-Todman had made about screening their pilot to Las Vegas officials. In the February 2 meeting, Harris Katleman had assured the Promotion Committee that “all parties concerned be assembled for a viewing” and that “the film would not be released for television until it had the approval and support of Las Vegas.”<sup>34</sup> Katelman had not promised to screen it in Las Vegas prior to sending it to NBC for its review as Boyd charged.

Nonetheless, in April 1961, Robert Kintner summoned Goodson-Todman officials and Andrew Fenady to his office to announce, “I’m not going to put this show on.” He told those assembled that he “heard from Las Vegas if anybody sponsored that show that product would not be sold in Las Vegas.”<sup>35</sup> This led to an official announcement to the press from Harris Katleman on April 27. He said Proctor and Gamble, as well as Liggett & Meyers, the two sponsors Goodson-Todman had lined up for *Las Vegas Beat*, had withdrawn because of eleven telegrams they had received.<sup>36</sup> Katleman would identify neither who had sent the telegrams nor their contents, but in the context of the Kintner explanation to the Goodson-Todman people, it is clear that the telegrams had threatened a Las Vegas boycott of the soap and tobacco products.

As the controversy over the two programs escalated, the Las Vegas newspapers disagreed on the value of the programs for the city. Columnist Paul Price in the *Las Vegas Sun* left no doubt about his views, recommend-

ing that the two production companies “should tear up their scripts, fold their cameras, respect the considered opinions of our leaders—and get out of town.”<sup>37</sup> *Las Vegas Review-Journal* columnist Colin McKinlay disagreed. He urged the Chamber of Commerce to cooperate, not oppose, the two series because both companies had promised to “portray honest cops, honest gambling and respectable hotel operators.” Some other companies might come along and “portray hotel operators as gangsters, the gaming tables being rigged and the cops crooked.” In the same issue, the *Review-Journal’s* editorial likewise called upon hotel owners to cooperate. Their refusal would give a network an opportunity to portray Las Vegas in a negative way: “Here it is, the TV series Las Vegas tried to keep off the air.”<sup>38</sup> The split among Las Vegas journalists mirrored the views of national journalists. A *Los Angeles Times* article argued Las Vegas could well be “in danger” should it permit networks to portray it as a violent city. That would be “the ‘image’ that is to be set up nationally of Las Vegas for the first time. Get that—the first time. Never before has Las Vegas been pictured in this manner: in fact, never before has it been made the locale of a long TV series.” If viewers got the wrong impression, “millions of would-be visitors will stay away.”<sup>39</sup> However, in announcing that Warner Bros. had abandoned its series, columnist Malcolm Epley chided Las Vegas for seeking publicity, but “getting choosy about the kind of publicity it gets.”<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, the two production companies, in the face of the mounting opposition, saw no profit in going forward with their programs.

The trials and tribulations of the producers of *Las Vegas Beat* are more than a saga of one among many failed television pilots or a revealing glimpse into the struggles of networks and production companies working to find a series that would boost their ratings. It reveals how the nation’s gambling Mecca felt threatened by a simple television program. Civic leaders and hotel owners understood that the federal government could eliminate their vital gambling industry if Americans perceived that it was an industry tainted by violence and controlled by organized crime.

The first threat to the gambling industry came in 1947 when the city struggled to counter the image of their community that had emerged in the wake of the murder of Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. The flamboyant Siegel, who opened the Flamingo casino in December 1946 and the hotel the following March, had angered leading crime figures like Charles “Lucky”

Luciano, and Meyer Lansky, who had financed his venture, because of his extravagant spending on the resort property. Contemporary commentators argued that these “Syndicate” leaders had commissioned Siegel’s assassination. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines, almost always with notes about his connection to Las Vegas, carried gruesome photos of Siegel’s dead body in the home of Virginia Hill, his Beverly Hills mistress. As *Time* magazine explained, “the tabloids of Manhattan, the sensational papers of Los Angeles and, to a lesser degree, papers all over the U.S. played it high, wide & handsome.”<sup>41</sup>

The remarkable attention devoted to Siegel’s murder coincided with a growing national concern with the power of organized crime, particularly its links with gambling. Many cities established crime commissions to address the situation. Former FBI agent Virgil Peterson, the operating director of Chicago’s crime commission as well as the editor of the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, emerged as the nation’s most influential post-war voice on organized crime. A consultant to many city governments, Peterson’s views on organized crime gained widespread press interest. Peterson had concluded not only that a “Syndicate” dominated organized crime, but also that gambling was a key source of revenue for that “Syndicate.” Indeed, by 1954 he was arguing that “elements of the mob of the late Al Capone have taken over at least partial control of a number of gambling houses in Las Vegas.”<sup>42</sup> Tennessee senator Estes Kefauver gave the issue even greater visibility when he conducted a wide-ranging inquiry into organized crime. His Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950 and 1951 included hearings in over a dozen cities including Las Vegas. Building upon the work of Virgil Peterson, the Kefauver Committee concluded that there were “two major crime syndicates” and that “a sinister criminal organization known as the Mafia” had linked the two. Committee members argued that both syndicates were present in Las Vegas and “an interlocking group of gangsters, racketeers, and hoodlums” controlled the city’s gambling business.<sup>43</sup>

Robert Kennedy, however, emerged as the chief threat to Las Vegas’ gambling interests. The young Kennedy served as chief counsel to the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations headed by Arkansas’s John McClellan. The committee began hearings in 1957 into the ties between the Teamsters and organized crime. As with the Kefauver investi-

gation, Las Vegas became a part of the federal inquiry when the committee issued subpoenas to some hotels to determine the connections between Teamster leaders Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa and organized crime. Senator McClellan followed the Peterson-Kefauver interpretation of a largely monolithic criminal organization in America. There was, McClellan concluded, a “close-knit, clandestine, criminal syndicate” which drew upon “narcotics, vice, and gambling” to finance its activities. Kennedy likewise saw his work on the committee as an education in the power and influence of organized crime. In his 1960 book *The Enemy Within*, Kennedy argued “the gangsters of today work in a highly organized fashion and are far more powerful now than at any time in the history of the country.” Because “organized criminals” had so successfully corrupted public officials, labor unions, and legitimate businesses, only a concerted national effort to stop them could prevent gangsters from destroying America.<sup>44</sup> In his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, following his nomination to be Attorney General, Kennedy made clear his intentions to “pursue” organized crime “to the full vigor of the Department of Justice.”<sup>45</sup> Las Vegas had much to fear from this self-proclaimed “crime buster” because Kennedy agreed with Virgil Peterson, Estes Kefauver, and John McClellan that organized crime figures were using Las Vegas casinos to help bankroll their operations.<sup>46</sup>

At one point during the February 16 meeting of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce Promotion Committee, publicist Al Freeman alluded to the interest the federal government had in Las Vegas when he warned his colleagues about the dangers of depictions of violence making Las Vegas “look bad in Washington.”<sup>47</sup> Freeman’s concern was warranted. The first ominous challenge from the federal government came in 1951 in the wake of the Kefauver investigation. The senator joined several colleagues in pushing for a federal tax on all gambling revenue. Nevada Senator Pat McCarran stopped the effort cold. Had he not, McCarran told a friend, “the gleaming gulch of Las Vegas would be a glowing symbol of funereal distress.” There were many efforts in future years to impose heavy taxes on gambling, but after McCarran’s death in 1954 other Nevada senators stepped into the breach, notably Howard Cannon.<sup>48</sup> However, in 1961, the city’s concern was with the new U.S. Attorney General. Twice in 1961 Nevada’s governor and its U.S. senators had to confront Kennedy over reports that he

planned “massive” investigations of gambling in Las Vegas. In the summer, Governor Grant Sawyer flew to Washington to meet with both the attorney general and President Kennedy to prevent a “raid” on “every major casino in Reno and Las Vegas.” In early November, the *Saturday Evening Post* reported that Kennedy had “just ordered the first co-ordinated federal investigation into Las Vegas and the forces that make it run.”<sup>49</sup> Reputedly, the Justice Department was trying to determine “whether Las Vegas is being used as a rendezvous by leaders of syndicated crime.” After both Governor Sawyer and Senator Cannon contacted Kennedy to determine the veracity of the stories, he assured them the Justice Department was not focusing on Las Vegas. Rather, every “major city” was subject to its inquiry.<sup>50</sup>

Press coverage of Las Vegas complicated the challenge for the gambling industry. The concerns about organized crime raised in the many governmental inquiries made for good copy for journalists and novelists in the 1950s. *Time*, *Look*, *Reader's Digest*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the *Nation* all had feature articles on organized crime in Las Vegas, as did major newspapers like the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Novels like *The Big Brokers* by Irving Shulman (1951), *Murder in Las Vegas* by Jack Waer (1955), *Diamonds are Forever* by Ian Fleming (1956), *No House Limit* by Steve Fisher (1958), *Chance Elson* by W.T. Ballard (1958), and *A Short Bier* by Frank Kane (1960) all dealt with hoodlums, gangsters, or the syndicate in Las Vegas. The sum of these publications was damaging and a few particularly so. In a 1954 *Look* magazine article, Dan Fowler claimed “the Vegas operation,” following the Peterson-Kefauver view, “has been dominated by a loose organization known as the Syndicate” which “decides gambling policies, picks political candidates, controls the Nevada legislature and, when the need arises, metes out gangland justice.”<sup>51</sup> Five years later, in *Reader's Digest*, Lester Viele argued that “gangsters are entrenched in the palatial gambling casinos” of Las Vegas.<sup>52</sup> A few movies also addressed the dark side of Las Vegas. *Dark City* (1950), *Las Vegas Story* (1952), and *Guns, Girls, and Gangsters* (1958) dealt with violence and murder in Las Vegas. On television, there were stories of robbery, murder, and fraud in the series *State Trooper* (1956-1959), including an episode entitled “Cash Out” in which a robbery suspect was in the “rackets” in Chicago. The *Mike Hammer* series (1956-

59) had a 1958 episode about Las Vegas called “Hot Hands, Cold Dice” in which one character had a connection to “a big gambling syndicate in the East.”

Las Vegas responded vigorously to the negative publicity and damaging story lines of the late 1940s and 1950s through its News Bureau. Established in 1949, the Las Vegas News Bureau saturated the nation’s media with photos and copy to portray Las Vegas as a “fun in the sun” resort community rather than “Sin City.” Bureau photographers daily went to the Strip hotels and photographed average Americans at the pools and sent those photos to the hometown newspapers of those people who gave their permission. They also blanketed the nation with pictures of entertainers who were performing in their showrooms. The bureau sent copy to newspapers, magazines, and television stations; they prepared travel packets packed with stories and photos for news outlets; and they produced promotional films like “Las Vegas, Playground USA.” The effort provided extraordinary positive exposure for Las Vegas. In 1957, for example, periodicals published over 15,000 favorable photos and stories about Las Vegas.<sup>53</sup> These efforts were not unique to Las Vegas. For over a century promoters in the West had flooded the nation with pamphlets, posters, and newspaper articles “boosting” their communities. Indeed, Reno, Nevada, had successfully used gambling, easy divorce, and prize fights to emerge as a successful tourist destination before Las Vegas’ success.

The Las Vegas News Bureau, the city of Las Vegas, Clark County, and the various hotels also often cooperated with television and movie production companies which produced programs and films that portrayed Las Vegas not only as a “Fun in the Sun” destination, but also as the “Entertainment Capital of the World.” Episodes from comedies like *Make Room for Daddy* (1957) and *The Luci-Desi Comedy Hour* (1958), as well as variety shows like *The Milton Berle Show* (1956) and NBC’s *Holiday in Las Vegas* (1957), all served as remarkable promotional pieces for the city. There were also a number of movies that served as commercials for Las Vegas. *My Friend Irma Goes West* (1950); *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine* (1951); *The Girl Rush* (1955); *Hollywood or Bust* (1956); and *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (1956) were lighthearted comedies or musicals that effectively showcased the appeal of Las Vegas and its resort hotels, particularly the Flamingo. *Meet Me in Las Vegas*, a musical shot at the Sands

Hotel with Dan Dailey and Cyd Charisse, was a big hit for the city. When *Variety* reviewed the film it concluded, “Las Vegas has never had a better film showcasing or more valuable advertising.”<sup>54</sup> Contemporaries agreed that the 1960 film *Ocean’s 11* was the film that best promoted Las Vegas. It starred the “Rat Pack” members Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop, led by Las Vegas icon Frank Sinatra. The quintet also performed at the Sands Hotel while filming the movie in early 1960. When the film opened that fall, Hank Greenspun, publisher of the *Las Vegas Sun*, asserted that *Ocean’s 11* “will carry the story of this city to literally millions of people throughout the United States and around the world.”<sup>55</sup> Al Freeman alluded to this film when he was defending Warner Bros. in the February 16 Promotion Committee meeting. As committee members became agitated over the refusal of William Orr and Hugh Benson to give the committee script approval for their program *Las Vegas File*, Freeman reminded his colleagues that Warner Bros. had helped Las Vegas’ image in “cinemascope with all the things we wanted into a picture just the way we wanted it” with the film *Ocean’s 11*, “which played around the country and did a hell of a job for Las Vegas.”<sup>56</sup>

The members of the Promotion Committee were attempting to fashion positive portrayals of their city in *Las Vegas Beat* and *Las Vegas File* similar to most of the prior productions about their town. They did not need any more tales of loss, violence, and the nefarious dealings of organized crime figures. There was too much at stake. The plot of the pilot for *Las Vegas Beat* had only criminals from out of state and none escaped the arms of the law. The producers had plans for a show that would, like so many other productions, showcase the city as “a very glamorous place” with luxury hotels and attractive night clubs. Yet the hotel owners and their publicists could not accept the depictions of violence on their properties, scenes they believed would jeopardize their successful business ventures. Upon reflection, actors Peter Graves and Jamie Farr understood the apprehension in Las Vegas in 1961 about their pilot. As Graves acknowledged, “the guys who ran the town in those days were obviously very sensitive about Las Vegas being the crime capital of the world.” Farr remembers that there were “rumors” while they were filming that “families in the underworld . . . were not too thrilled” with a program “that had to do with any kind of crime or any capers or any violence or anything in the city.”<sup>57</sup>

This was not new to Las Vegas. City leaders had always been quick to criticize films that portrayed their community as less than upright and hospitable. In 1949, the Chamber of Commerce rejected a script producer Frank Seltzer provided for their review. It featured a violent story involving the race wire service racket in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Indeed, city officials refused to cooperate in the filming of *711 Ocean Drive* and publicly criticized Seltzer for planning to make a film with “objectionable and untrue references to Las Vegas throughout.”<sup>58</sup>

The quest to shape the images of Las Vegas on television and in the movies so evident in these examples remained a concern for some of those in charge of the hotels’ public relations. Al Freeman, who continued as publicist at the Sands until his death in 1972, was a stalwart guardian of his hotel’s image in productions, demanding script approval before filming began. In 1970, for example, NBC sought Freeman’s approval to film an episode of its adventure series *The Name of the Game* (1968-71). The publicist rejected the script because it included too many “derogatory scenes” of beatings, explosions, and the attempted murder of an entertainer, plus the story included “several gangster-type characters.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet, Freeman’s actions represented a fading effort to stop films or television series that depicted violence in Las Vegas. As state and federal prosecutors successfully prosecuted organized crime figures associated with Las Vegas gaming and as publicists became ever more confident that their promotional efforts had successfully crafted an image of Las Vegas as an exciting gaming and entertainment center, hotels and the city were willing to cooperate with television production companies. Programs like *Vegas* (1978-81), *Crime Story* (1986-88), and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000- ), which regularly depicted the dark and dangerous side of the resort city, did so with the blessing of city leaders. As long as the programs did not film murder scenes on their properties, hotels were happy to have essentially free advertising to millions of viewers. In that sense, the city had matured. While civic leaders and the hotels would continue to try to shape the way television and movies portrayed their city, after 1970, there were very few efforts like those that successfully stopped the production of *Las Vegas Beat* and *Las Vegas File*.

**Larry Gragg**

**Missouri University of Science and Technology, Rolla**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As related by Bill Todman to Peter Graves in 1961, Peter Graves Interview with author, February 28, 2008. This article would not have been possible without the generous help of Mr. Graves as well as Andrew J. Fenady and Jamie Farr, all of whom graciously consented to extended telephone interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Chamber of Commerce Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1961, Sands Collection, Box 47, folder 9, Special Collections, University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Andrew J. Fenady interview with author, May 6, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Burbank, *License to Steal: Nevada's Gaming Control System in the Megaresort Age*, paperback ed. (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 24 and Mary Ellen Glass, *Nevada's Turbulent '50s: Decade of Political and Economic Change* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1981), 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Reno Evening Gazette*, February 3, 1977, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1961, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Las Vegas Age*, May 24, 1931, 1; Katharine Best and Katharine Hillyer, *Las Vegas: Playtown U.S.A.* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1955), 54; "Las Vegas: Nice People Live on Divorce, Gambling," *Newsweek* (April 20, 1953), 32; and *New York Times*, January 31, 1960, XX19.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, June 7, 1953, SM67 and January 31, 1960, XX19 and *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 21, 1955, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Nevada State Journal*, September 10, 1960, 10; Ron DePolo and Mark Pingle, "Nevada Gaming: Revenues and Taxes (1945-95)," *Journal of Gambling Studies* (March 1997), 60-61; and Jerome E. Edwards, *Pat McCarran, Political Boss of Nevada* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1982), 155.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew J. Fenady, "How Sweet it Was—and How Simple," the Caucus: For Producers, Writers & Directors, [http://www.caucus.org/archives/99sum\\_howsweet.html](http://www.caucus.org/archives/99sum_howsweet.html) (accessed April 26, 2009) and Peter L. Winkler, "Nick Adams: His Hollywood Life and Death," *Crime Magazine*, Aug. 15, 2003, <http://www.crimemagazine.com/03/nickadams,0815.htm> (Accessed April 26, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew J. Fenady Interview with author, August 18, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*; *New York Times*, November 25, 1960, 54, and James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 120.

<sup>12</sup> Fenady Interview, 2008 and Promotion Committee Minutes, February 2, 1961, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Thomas, *Crown Prince of Hollywood: The Antic Life and Times of Jack L. Warner* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1990), 192-194 and Lynn Woolley, Robert W. Malsbary, and Robert G. Strange, Jr., *Warner Bros. Televi-*

sion: *Every Show of the Fifties and Sixties Episode-by-Episode* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1985), 5.

<sup>14</sup>Woolley, Malsbary, and Strange, *Warner Bros. Television*, 97-98.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas, *Crown Prince of Hollywood*, 195.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 216, 246, 247, and 40.

<sup>17</sup>*The Daily Review* (Hayward, CA.), August 5, 1960, 25 and Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1961, 1.

<sup>18</sup>David Marc, *Prime Time, Prime Movers: From I Love Lucy to L.A. Law—America's Greatest TV Shows and the People Who Created Them* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 251-260; *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1992, 34; and *New York Times*, December 19, 1992, 12.

<sup>19</sup>Fenady Interview, 2008.

<sup>20</sup>Copy of *Las Vegas Beat* pilot, 1961 in author's possession.

<sup>21</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1961, C10; NBC Advance Information 1961-62 Programming, January 25, 1961, Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1961; Peter Graves Interview; and Fenady Interview, 2008.

<sup>22</sup>Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1961, 1-2 and appendix.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>24</sup>*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 4, 1961, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup>Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1961, 1-2, 42, 18, 15, 19, and 51.

<sup>26</sup>*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 4, 1961, 1-2.

<sup>27</sup>Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1961, 20.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 39.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 45, 42, 40, 36, and 1.

<sup>30</sup>*Las Vegas Sun*, February 6, 1961, 6 and February 25, 1961, 4.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, February 19, 1961, 4; *Anderson (Ind.) Daily Bulletin*, February 27, 1961, 12; and *The Fresno (Cal.) Bee*, April 2, 1961, TV 7.

<sup>32</sup>*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 3, 1961, 1.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, April 5, 1961, 1 and 19.

<sup>34</sup>Fenady Interview, 2009; Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1961, 5 and appendix and February 16, 1961, 22.

<sup>35</sup>Fenady Interview, 2008.

<sup>36</sup>*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 27, 1961, 3 and *Nevada State Journal*, April 28, 1961, 16.

<sup>37</sup>*Las Vegas Sun*, April 5, 1961, 1.

<sup>38</sup>*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 4, 1961, 2 and 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1961, B5 and *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 6, 1961, C9.

<sup>40</sup> *Independent* (Long Beach, Ca.), April 12, 1961, B1.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Lacey, *Little Man: Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 152-156; John L. Smith, "The Ghost of Ben Siegel," in *The Players: The Men Who Made Las Vegas*, ed. Jack Sheehan (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997), 81-91; and "The 'Inside' on Bugsy," *Time*, July 7, 1947, 59.

<sup>42</sup> David G. Schwartz, *Cutting the Wire: Gambling Prohibition and the Internet* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 50; Virgil Peterson, "Gambling—Should It Be Legalized?" *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (September-October, 1949), 259; and *The Independent* (Long Beach, Ca.), December 7, 1954, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Kefauver Committee Interim Report #3, May 1, 1951, parts 1 and 2, <http://www.onewal.com/kef3.html> and <http://www.onewal.com/kef3b.html> (accessed May 22, 2007) and Lee Bernstein, *The Greatest Menace: Organized Crime in Cold War America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press).

<sup>44</sup> Schwartz, *Cutting the Wire*, 74-75; Robert F. Kennedy, *The Enemy Within* (New York: Harper, 1960), 240 and 265; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1978), 168.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, January 14, 1961, 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, July 23, 1961, 37 and *Nevada State Journal*, January 7, 1961, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1961, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Michael J. Ybarra, *Washington Gone Crazy: Senator Pat McCarran and the Great American Communist Hunt* (Hanover, N.H.: Steerforth Press, 2004), 670-672 and Michael Verneti, *Howard Cannon of Nevada: A Biography* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 120-28 and 143.

<sup>49</sup> *Hang Tough! Grant Sawyer: An Activist in the Governor's Mansion* (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program, 1993), 89 and 91 and Peter Wyden, "How Wicked is Vegas?" *Saturday Evening Post* (November 11, 1961), 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Nevada State Journal*, November 7, 1961, 1 and *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1961, C11.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Fowler, "What Price Gambling in Nevada?" *Look* (June 15, 1954), 52.

<sup>52</sup> Lester Viele, "Las Vegas: The Underworld's Secret Jackpot," *Reader's Digest* (October 1959), 138 and 140.

<sup>53</sup> Don English Interview with author, August 2, 2005; *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 2, 1958, 28; and Larry Gragg, "From 'Sodom and Gomorrah' to the 'Last Frontier Town': The Changing Perceptions of Las Vegas in American Popular Culture, 1929-1941," *Studies in Popular Culture* (April 2007), 56-57.

<sup>54</sup> *Variety* (February 8, 1956), *Variety's Film Reviews*, vol. 10 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), n.p.

<sup>55</sup> *Las Vegas Sun*, August 3, 1960, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Promotion Committee Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1961, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Graves Interview, 2008 and Jamie Farr Interview with author, May 11, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1950, 19. Also, see Larry Gragg, "Defending a City's Image: Las Vegas Opposes the Making of 711 Ocean Drive, 1950," *Popular Culture Review* (Winter 2011), 7-15.

<sup>59</sup> Sands Collection, Box 51, folder 1.

**Larry Gragg** is Curator's Teaching Professor in the Department of History and Political Science at Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla, Missouri. He is the author of several articles on the history of Las Vegas, including "From 'Sodom and Gomorrah' to the 'Last Frontier Town': The Changing Perceptions of Las Vegas in American Popular Culture," in *Studies in Popular Culture* (April 2007). Gragg is completing work on "*Bright Light City*": *Perceptions of Las Vegas in Popular Culture, 1905-2005*, which will be published by the University of Missouri Press.