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SEX, LIES, AND LAS VEGAS

(Note: In this chapter, the term "girl" has been selected in an effort to use the least offensive label for women who practice prostitution.)

Casino gambling is accessible, accountable, and accepted. With books, videotapes, even lessons provided free by the casinos themselves, you can participate in the games, manage your bankroll, and maintain the proper attitude--in short, *play intelligently* in a very short time. On the other side of the tables, the house advantage, that intractable swindle behind your predictable dwindle, is the worst-kept secret in Nevada. The second worst-kept secret is that sex is nearly as prevalent an illegal business in Las Vegas as gambling is a legal one. But there's one main difference. The mathematically exact and publicly acknowledged gambling business is inversely proportional to the profoundly enigmatic and unspoken scope of the business of sex in Las Vegas.

BLOCK 16

At the turn of the century, red-light districts were common all over the country. They were confined and adequately policed. By the time Las Vegas was founded in 1905, Nevada's tradition of flesh peddling in mining boomtowns was nearly 50 years old, as old as the state itself.

Las Vegas's original sex market, known as Block 16 (downtown between First and Second, and Ogden and Stewart streets) was typical. A mere block from the staid and proper First State Bank, the Block was established in 1905 by conservative town planners working for the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, as the predictable byproduct of the company's liquor-containment policy. Immediately after purchasing Block 16 lots at the railroad auction, two saloon owners hitched their establishments to freight teams and dragged them over from Ragtown to the Block--with the working girls trailing right behind. Hastily erected lean-tos were eventually replaced by a row of cribs behind the saloons, and finally by rooms upstairs, all in a "line" facing Second Street. The Block, sleepy and deserted during the daytime, woke up at night, when its well-known vices, gambling and whoring, temporarily banished the dried-up, small-town desolation. When the train pulled in, no matter what time of day, savvy travelers used the 45-minute stop, as the engines were serviced with coal and water, to refuel themselves. This group of men daily huffed the few blocks to the Block for a couple of drinks, a little faro, maybe even a quickie.

In a twilight zone not quite illegal, Block 16 was not quite legal either. During the early years, saloons operating brothels were required to buy \$500 licenses. Later, regular raids and shakedowns helped finance local government. The 40 or so "darlings of the desert" were required to undergo weekly medical exams; at \$2 per, the city physician held a plum position! Law and order were maintained by the steely eyes and quick fists of a six-foot-three, 250-pound Sam Gay, the one enduring character from the Block, who went from bouncer to five-term sheriff.

Even with an occasional spirited civic campaign to eliminate it, Block 16 activities were barely interrupted by the state's

1911 ban on gambling. It also managed to survive the tidal wave of shutdowns nationwide during the Progressive years of this century's second decade. The wave did touch Las Vegas in the 1920s, however, when a grand jury instructed city commissioners that "occupants of houses of ill fame not be allowed on the streets, unless properly clothed." On hot summer nights it wasn't uncommon to see scantily clad women sitting in second-floor windows along the Line while young boys on bikes rode by for a peek. The Block fared well during the tricky years of Prohibition, with booze provided by bootleggers from the boonies of North Las Vegas. And even during the federal years of Boulder Dam and the New Deal, amorality thrived, and Block 16 housed more than 300 working girls without undue interference.

Ironically the re-legalization of wide-open gambling in 1931 foreshadowed an end to the Line, and kindled the enduring opposition of casino operators to blarant prostitution. The clubs, casinos, and hotels along Fremont Street were bright, boisterous, and (mostly) benign, but the Second Street approach to the Line was suitably subdued, sequestered, slightly sinister. Respectable residents now only ventured into the Block while acting as guides to visiting friends. At least one practical joker arranged for a shady lady to emerge and greet, familiarly, the visiting friend, wife at his side! To the dismay of local boosters, the prosaically named Block 16 began to gain a measure of fame, as word spread about this last holdout of the Wild West, and tourists to the dam site and Lake Mead visited Las Vegas to rubberneck the saloons and casinos and bordellos. It was no accident that the downtown sawdust joints, and even the first two hotels on the Strip, adopted strictly frontier motifs.

What finally killed Block 16 was World War II. The War Department had many reasons to want open prostitution closed. With soldiers at the gunnery range coming up for off-duty passes in rotations of hundreds per night, the road to downtown Las Vegas could become Intercourse Boulevard and Block 16 would turn into the "pubic center of the West--this at a time when syphilis took weeks to check, and when gonorrhea could cripple a company," Gabriel Vogliotti writes in his seminal *Girls of Nevada*, The voices of the wives of men assigned to bases near notorious Las Vegas (and Reno) were heard loud and clear in Washington: by allowing uninhibited sex for sale in the vicinity, the government was offering federal help in sex betrayal to men who'd been called to arms. Thus, these women believed, the War Department was "debauching men and cheapening wornanhood." The commander of the Las Vegas Aerial and Gunnery Range simply threatened to declare the whole town off-limits to servicemen, and local officials immediately revoked the liquor licenses and slot-machine permits of the casinos on Block 16.

These fronts financed the prostitution, which by itself could not finance the fronts, and the Block's illustrious 35 year alternating current finally ran out of juice. (Today it's occupied by a parking structure for Binion's Horseshoe, fronted by a statue of Benny himself astride his trusty steed.)

-----Much more in the actual book-----