WOMEN OF THE STRIP:
A GENDERED HISTORY OF LAS VEGAS

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Abstract

This thesis offers a gendered history of Las Vegas. It does so by investigating the histories of women workers in Las Vegas, especially showgirls, cocktail waitresses, and casino card dealers. It also does so by exposing the masculine political economy of Las Vegas that restricted women to the realm of sex workers or rendered them invisible in histories of Las Vegas. Showgirls and cocktail waitresses were shadowed by the image of sex and prostitution for decades. In contrast, female blackjack dealers had to divorce themselves from sexuality in order to gain employment in a field with direct male competition. Women in Las Vegas had to learn to live between sexual extremes and to inhabit what one scholar termed their “liminal space” in Las Vegas. In doing so, though, they experienced a real sort of financial empowerment and a real sense of liberation, particularly when viewed in the context of the larger American culture and society. These women were sexual outlaws, often breaking barriers firmly in place for women elsewhere in America.

It is argued here that the threat posed by female sexuality was acknowledged by a masculinized Las Vegas in two ways: by reducing women to what men saw as the demeaning roles of “strippers and prostitutes,” and by outlawing female sexuality when it directly competed with masculine employment, as in casino card dealing. Women in Las Vegas, however, also used their bodies—both by exposing and concealing them—to survive and prosper in Las Vegas, and to become a significant part of the city’s history.
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All women in Las Vegas are either strippers or prostitutes.
Frank Lamb, former Governor of Colorado

Amie Williams, director of the 1998 documentary Stripped and Teased: Tales From Las Vegas Women, interviewed women who worked in Las Vegas to gain insights about their lives in the city. She interviewed and filmed, among others, a cab driver, a cocktail waitress, a construction worker, an exotic dancer, a maid, a professional card player, a showgirl, a casino/hotel corporate vice-president, and the then-mayor of the city. Every one of these women claimed to have found empowerment and self-satisfaction in their Las Vegas employment. These are concepts about female work in Las Vegas that have long escaped the attention of most men and most historians.

Mayor Jan Jones, during her interview with Williams, stated that there had always been a problem with the perception of women in Las Vegas. Jones shared with Williams a recent experience. While she was doing a promotion for the local NBC television station, one of her political consultants heard entertainer L L Cool’s manager state, “Isn’t it amazing that only in Las Vegas could you find a mayor who in her past life had been a showgirl.” When the consultant corrected the manager,
pointing out that Mayor Jones had never been a showgirl, Cool's manager replied, "Oh well, NBC thinks she was." ¹

This type of assumption about women workers in Las Vegas, that somehow they must be linked to what could broadly be termed sexualized employment, paralleled former governor Frank Lamb's statement that "All women in Las Vegas are either strippers or prostitutes."² This simplified notion of women selling their bodies in Las Vegas derived in large part from Las Vegas' history of legalized and then decriminalized prostitution and from its overall reputation for sexual permissiveness. It also developed, however, from the masculine control over Las Vegas that permitted men to shape the city and women's presumed places within it. Throughout much of Las Vegas' history, women have been perceived as sexual commodities, as a means of satisfying high rollers, politicians, businessmen, and male tourists.

There is, of course, some real merit to the presentation of women as sexual beings in Las Vegas, and there is little doubt that women's bodies have been featured prominently in the development of the sex industry in the city of Las Vegas. The city was founded in 1905, and between that year and the next, Block 16—the nascent city's gambling, drinking, and "red light" district—flourished as the one area in "Glitter Gulch" where women could in fact work, if only as prostitutes.³ Between 1906 and 1942, when the United States military presence in Las Vegas forced the

¹ Stripped and Teased: Tales from Las Vegas Women, dir. and prod. Amie Williams (Bat-Maiden films Production, 1998).
² Frank Lamb, as cited in Stripped and Teased.
³ William J. Morris, "I've Seen All the Rooms: Female Prostitution in Las Vegas," 1. Taken from website www.wfu.edu, on 26 Sept. 2002.
closure of Block 16, the only women laborers who roamed the most sought-after section of downtown Las Vegas were prostitutes. This image of women selling sex attached to almost all female workers in Las Vegas thereafter, and this sensualized presentation of women in Las Vegas was fostered and exploited by the men in control of the political economy of the city.

The gendered language in the title of a recent historical treatment of Las Vegas suggests the masculinized vision that usually controls representations of the city—*Players: The Men Who Made Las Vegas*, edited by Jack Sheehan. From its urban origins in 1905, but especially from the founding of “the Strip” in the 1940s, Las Vegas has evolved under a watchful male gaze. The men who made Las Vegas were also the ones who conceived of the roles women would play in Las Vegas, particularly those forms of work exclusive to women, such as performing as showgirls and serving cocktails inside casinos. Men resisted seeing women in ways that went beyond the sexual, especially since male casino owners and entertainment directors, for example, stood to profit from the sexual attractiveness of their showgirls and cocktail waitresses. They rarely acknowledged the sort of female-derived satisfaction that could stem from such employment, the sort of satisfaction documented in Arnie Williams’ documentary, *Stripped and Teased*.

In her film, Williams attempts to complicate the understanding of women’s roles in Las Vegas and to move beyond the stereotypical definitions of women’s work in Las Vegas, including work in the sex industry. This thesis also seeks to

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achieve a complex understanding of women's roles in Las Vegas, particularly by looking at the historical and cultural uses of women's bodies. While working within a masculine milieu and having to acknowledge male expectations about their bodies and beauty, women often demonstrated how the male understanding of their work, particularly in the way it was often equated to prostitution, in reality illustrated male misconceptions about women, their bodies, and their work. Like the men, ironically, these women who displayed their bodies also stood to profit economically from their work; they in fact gained economic power and a cultural status as Las Vegas icons, particularly in the case of showgirls.

This thesis, then, offers a gendered history of Las Vegas. It does so by investigating the histories of three of the most culturally evocative groups of women workers in Las Vegas—showgirls, cocktail waitresses, and casino card dealers. It also does so by exposing the masculine political economy of Las Vegas that restricted women to the realm of sex workers or rendered them invisible in histories of Las Vegas. The women who exposed the most skin on the Strip, showgirls and cocktail waitresses, were shadowed by the image of prostitution for decades. Their willingness to reveal significant parts of their bodies, which was integral to their "costuming," sexualized their appearance. In contrast, female blackjack dealers had to divorce themselves from their sexuality in order to gain employment in a field with direct male competition. Their uniforms, nearly identical to men's, desexualized them and made them far less sensually visual. Women in Las Vegas learned to live between sexual extremes and to inhabit what scholar Andrea Stuart
termed their “liminal space” in Las Vegas. By doing so, they experienced a real sort of financial empowerment and a real sense of liberation, particularly when viewed in the context of the larger American culture and society. These women were sexual outlaws, often breaking barriers firmly in place for women elsewhere in America.

Women working in Las Vegas resisted the definitions assigned to them by the men who made Las Vegas, and they defied the gender norms of their times. There is little doubt, though, that men controlled the development of Las Vegas and the emergence of a male-dominated culture that positioned working women in a subordinate, sexualized manner. These men meant to exploit female bodies for profit while “tainting” women’s reputations with innuendo about prostitution.

Female bodies were on display; female bodies were at times for sale; and female bodies were subjected to the male gaze in Las Vegas. However, women of the Strip remained in control of their bodies, at least until aging and the beauty myth ended their careers. They exploited their own bodies, and the male desire for those bodies, for profit. The threat posed by female sexuality was acknowledged and countered by a masculinized Las Vegas in two ways: by reducing women to what men saw as the demeaning roles of “ strippers and prostitutes,” and by outlawing female sexuality when it directly competed with masculine employment, as in casino card dealing.

Las Vegas proved to be a harsh environment for working women, but women used their bodies—both by exposing and concealing them—to survive and prosper in Las Vegas, and to become a historically significant part of the city’s success.

The contributions of women to Las Vegas’ success, and the place of women in the history of Las Vegas, are elements usually lacking in historical studies of Las

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Vegas. This absence of women is telling and almost plausible given the decidedly masculine quality of the groups usually credited with building the city. In Players: The Men Who Made Las Vegas (1997), John Irsfeld titled his chapter “Cowboys, Crooks, and Corporations: How Popular Literature has Treated Las Vegas,” and his three ruling groups did indeed define and shape the evolution of the economy, the culture, the architecture, and gender roles in Las Vegas.7

Male domination in the Las Vegas environs emerged during the early days of the prospectors and cowboys, and continued through the eras of Boulder Dam workers, soldiers, gangsters, male entertainers, and corporate owners. In numerous Las Vegas histories, films, and advertisements, men have been the active subjects in Las Vegas, always cast in important powerful roles and receiving unlimited recognition for their contributions to the ever-changing city.

Michael Herr, in his article “The Big Room,” published in Mike Tronnes’ Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing About America’s Most Fabulous City (1995), stated that when President Franklin D. Roosevelt threw the switch at Boulder Dam, the “juice came down like paternal grace, it ran straight to Las Vegas.”8 The president was referred to as the “ceremonial father,” officiating at the opening of the completed dam. This sexualized “juice” of “paternal grace” suggested how masculinity seeped into histories of Las Vegas, and as well documented how men dominated the projects central to Las Vegas’ growth.

9 Ibid, 143.
During the five years of Boulder Dam’s construction, Las Vegas was the recipient of much of the project’s $500,000 monthly payroll. John M. Findlay, author of *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas*, stated that there were on average thirty-five hundred male dam workers who, when off-duty, would make the twenty-five mile trip into Las Vegas to enjoy “hard liquor and gambling.” They also frequented the prostitutes on Block 16. Findlay quoted a newcomer to the city in the 1930s who described Las Vegas as a place where:

>The people were friendly and money was loose and plentiful. The bars and gambling halls were packed to capacity, and the Boulder Dam workers were pouring their earnings into the town. Loafers and moochers roamed the streets and women of questionable reputation rubbed elbows with society.\(^\text{10}\)

What Findlay did not describe in his writings were the wives who accompanied their husbands to the Boulder Canyon Project. They roughed the horrendous desert temperatures and dealt with the constant dusty atmosphere. In the desert, these women were not afforded any luxuries. The project’s risky work and miraculous completion are credited only to men. When women were mentioned, they were sexualized; Findlay, for example, referenced only the prostitutes of Block 16.

At the completion of Boulder Dam, Las Vegans decided to advertise the city’s easy-going frontier town atmosphere, hoping to attract some of the dam’s visitors. The city’s residents wanted Las Vegas to be described, according to Findlay, “As an

\(^{10}\) Findlay, 113.
old West town.” Residents also wanted to advertise the town’s frontier features, linked to macho cowboys and a wild west morality, including

convenient marriage and divorce, low taxes, friendly residents, licensed prostitution, permissive laws, abundant self-promotion, plentiful alcohol, cowboy attire, western rodeos, 24-hour entertainment, and legal gambling.11

Irsfeld in “Cowboys, Crooks, & Corporations,” wrote that as late as 1939 Las Vegas still embraced its cowboy influences. Las Vegas’ Chamber of Commerce had published a cartoon map in a tourist brochure, and printed above the map was, “Las Vegas, Nevada. Still a Frontier Town.”12 At the bottom right-hand corner was written,

This map is dedicated to the prospector... ageless symbol of courage who has built the West... Alone... with only his burro... he travels far in his quest of bidden treasures... He is the spirit of adventure, the conqueror of the unknown, the founder of empire.13

According to Irsfeld, the brochure’s production was motivated by tourism, because of the increased visitor turnout since the opening of the Boulder Dam. Within the map’s drawing was the “Club Apache, a stage with dancing girls, and the county courthouse,” with an official “snipping with giant scissors the ties of matrimony between a man and a woman.”14 The prospector was credited with the founding of the town. Women received acknowledgment in the form of nameless commodities, dancing girls, not as pioneering women who survived the treacherous desert. They

11 Ibid., 116.
12 Irsfeld, 183.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
were only recognized as a form of entertainment, not as a source of the town's growing success.

Irsfeld further wrote that the "Cowboy Years" were reflected in the hotels El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier, both built in the early 1940s on Las Vegas Boulevard. Although both hotels were built on the famous boulevard that in later years was known as the Strip, their popular architectural style would be short-lived. By 1946, Irsfeld stated that the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier

sat out on Las Vegas Boulevard South and watched the new lady called the Flamingo prance haltingly into town. She was, as everyone now knows, only one in a long line of younger, flashier, sometimes even more beautiful ladies out on the Los Angeles highway with her skirt up high on her thigh, just in case.15

Irsfeld described the Flamingo Hotel as if he were sizing up a woman. His feminizing of the hotel reflected the overall objectification of women in Las Vegas, a trend that intensified during the next era in Las Vegas history—the era of the "crook," of organized crime. The building of the Flamingo Hotel signaled the end of the cowboy era. Gamblers would exchange their cowboy outfits for tuxedos and evening dresses, a shift in style prompted by mobster Benjamin Siegel, just one "father of Las Vegas."

Accompanying the arrival of the mob was the arrival of American military forces and war workers, who flooded into Las Vegas during and after World War II. The war, according to Findlay, "served to accelerate change and growth."16 The government began construction of an Army Air Corps training facility north of the Las Vegas airport. Between 1943 and 1945, the training facility was housing

15 Ibid, 184.
16 Findlay, 125.
between 8,000 and 11,000 soldiers, with a monthly payroll of $1 million. During this same time period, there were also 10,000 employees at the Basic Magnesium Corporation whose weekly payroll was $1 million. Soldiers from the military base and employees from Basic Magnesium ventured into Las Vegas and substantially contributed a large portion of their wages to the city's economy and deepened the masculine presence there as well.

Las Vegas, according to Findlay, "had suddenly become the popular recreation center."17 Not only training soldiers and plant workers frequented the young city; soldiers who were passing through by train stopped and patronized the city as well as Californians looking for escape from the coastal blackouts. They all took advantage of the many "last frontier" features of Las Vegas still lingering in the city. Las Vegas' quick marriages as well as easy divorces "suited the needs of servicemen."18 Another city feature, Block 16, was referred to as being "among its most prized attractions."19 The licensed prostitution business, in Findlay's findings, "did a land office business through 1941 and part of 1942."20 Pressures from military officials, civilian officials, and realtors prompted the closing of Block 16. The working women of that area were discreetly relocated outside the city's limits. Despite its reduced visibility, prostitution continued to thrive in Las Vegas. From this period forward, the shadowing image of prostitution loomed over all working women in Las Vegas. When Las Vegas changed from being a "last frontier" to a city of "Beverly Hills" styled hotel-casinos run by members of organized crime, women

17 Ibid, 126.
18 Ibid. 127.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
continued to work in service sector employment and became a means for casino
owners to promote their desired "image of sex."

According to John L. Smith, author of the chapter "The Ghost of Ben Siegel"
in Sheehan's book, Siegel turned Las Vegas' "old west-style themed operations
upside down" and changed them into "a glamorous, Beverly Hills-style carpet joint
just oozing with class." There would be "gourmet food and big-name
entertainment," something that the other Las Vegas clubs lacked. Siegel
acknowledged the city's past history of prostitution and wanted that business to
continue, but it was to be conducted in a way that would not hurt the real business,
gambling. Siegel's newly designed hotel wings situated rooms that "allowed a man
to go directly to his room with a prostitute." They were able to elude hotel security
and patrolling police, as well as any other casino guests.

The Flamingo Hotel-Casino, according to author Sally Denton, was an
"opulent resort" representing quality and taste that produced for the mob "incredible
profits and respectability." The mob's new investment would "marry criminal
money to legal finance, famous names, and businesses, the throbbing new wealth
and power of America." The patriarchal character of organized crime families also
assured a staunch masculinity operating in Las Vegas, and this was symbolized in
the roles they envisioned for women in the era of "crook" control in Las Vegas:
showgirls and cocktail waitresses.

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Las Vegas (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1997), 85.
22 Ibid.
24 Morris, "I've Seen All the Rooms," 3.
25 Sally Denton and Roger Morris, The Money and The Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on
In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Las Vegas provided women with job opportunities that were not available in other parts of the nation. Las Vegas' new reputation as the “entertainment Mecca of the world” and as “sin city” continued to provide job opportunities exclusively for women. According to Findlay, “gaming industrialists generally did not rival one another” in their gaming features, instead they “strove to create the most sensational spectacles and present the most popular entertainment.”

The showrooms’ gala parade of semi-nude showgirls and the scantily-clad cocktail waitresses were used as tools to lure potential gamblers. The male-managed hotel-casinos capitalized on society’s changing desires for more extreme entertainment, and showgirls and cocktail waitresses ultimately benefited. Las Vegas continued to feature beautiful semi-nude women even as it introduced top-name male entertainers.

At the Dunes, the hotel featured Minsky’s Follies, and the Stardust produced the Lido de Paris. These female entertainers wore skimpy outfits revealing almost every part of their bodies. Both female and male entertainers were used as a means to draw customers into the casinos. Yet, it was the male entertainer who was cast as the headliner, as in “The Ziegfeld Follies starring Frank Sinatra.” Even in the entertainment world women were cast as supporting players. No type of questionable reputation was assigned to any of the male entertainers, but female entertainers always worked under the shadow of sex.

Many opinions have been offered as to when the Las Vegas Strip was truly

26 Findlay, 59.
27 Mike Weatherford, Cult Vegas (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 2001), 12.
born. According to Mike Weatherford, author of *Cult Vegas*, “Vegas was born on September 4, 1951—the day Frank Sinatra came to town.” Prior to that day, the first electric lights in 1901 on Fremont Street, the 1931 Boulder Dam Project, and the 1946 first resort hotel-casino, the Flamingo, only “sort of set the stage.” It was Sinatra’s presence that intensified the Strip’s popularity, particularly in terms of entertainment. In collaboration with his friends in organized crime, Frank Sinatra in Las Vegas came to personify “martini machismo,” a perfected form of masculinity that overshadowed the contemporaneous contributions of women to Las Vegas entertainment. There were only three hotel-casinos on the Strip when Sinatra made his debut at the Desert Inn. Between 1952 and 1958, the Sands, Sahara, Dunes, New Frontier, Riviera, Royal Nevada, Hacienda, Tropicana, and Stardust all arose and reflected the new, classy resort image featuring top-name performers—like Sinatra at the Sands.

When corporations took over between the 1970s and 1990s, the working woman’s shadowing image of prostitution did not alter significantly. What changed on the Strip was the architecture of the hotels. They were much more elaborate and eventually mirrored the look of “Disneyland.” The new, often all-male management continued with extravagant entertainment featuring showgirls’ breasts either totally exposed or with tiny starlets covering their nipples, as well as with cocktail waitresses’ costumes that continued to bare more and more skin. As early as the 1970s, corporate owners were forced by law to open the once exclusively male card dealers’ positions to women. This newly created job slot afforded another form of

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29 Ibid.
employment opportunity for women. In all three areas of employment, however, women were subjected to sexualization and sexual harassment as they continued to work in an almost exclusively male environment.

Throughout the history of Las Vegas, women have been overshadowed by the men who made Las Vegas. These historical eras in Las Vegas, controlled by the sensibilities imparted by cowboys, crooks, and corporations, nonetheless also contained the histories of women workers, however invisible or sexually defined they were amidst such hyper-masculine tropes. This study of “Women of the Strip” renders visible and more complex the stories of these women and their work in Las Vegas, challenging the simplified images popular in the male political economy of the city. Chapter Two discusses showgirls and their status as both sexual outlaws and cultural icons. Chapter Three offers an evaluation of cocktail waitresses and the “liminal criminality” imputed to them not just because of hints about prostitution but also because they aided casinos in “stealing” money from gamblers by promoting alcohol consumption and loosening inhibitions.

Showgirls and cocktail waitresses represented the women of the Strip who were willing to display their bodies, who embraced the opportunities offered by their beauty and semi-nudity. The limits of their bodily liberation came with aging and with women’s entry into the previously male sphere of casino gaming. Chapter Four details the experiences of female card dealers, whose discrimination-shattering careers came at the cost of their sexuality. In retrospect, it seems clear that the male-constructed images of women as “only” strippers and prostitutes reflected a certain fear on the part of men who made Las Vegas. Women’s sexuality in Las Vegas was
powerful, and that power first became obvious for the showgirls who displayed their bodies in casino showrooms along the Strip.
Show me your tits. I've got a topless show for Christ's sake. Let me see your tits.

*Showgirls (1995)*

On the stage are sixteen young ladies stretching and bending. All are warming-up for an audition for the Las Vegas show “Goddess.” Every girl is dressed in some type of tightly fitted or revealing outfit. Many of these women have gone to the extreme and are wearing g-strings with bikini-styled tops. Nomi, new to Las Vegas, is attired in tight, long black pants and a fitted top. She stops dead in her tracks as soon as she glimpses all the flesh moving so freely on the stage. Before she can alter her outfit, producer Tony Moss passes her and utters, “Hey Pollyanna.” This infuriates Nomi and she runs to the open dressing area, quickly ripping off her top and pants. There she stands in front of the mirror, in her lavender lace bra, black g-string panties, and sheer black nylons, applying even more make-up to her face. As soon as she feels that she looks like the rest of the women, she returns to join them at the end of the line.\(^{30}\)

While Nomi had updated her outfit, Moss had introduced himself as a “prick,” saying that he was there for only one purpose, the show. He then explains

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to everyone, “I wanna see ya dance and I wanna see ya smile. I can’t use you if you can’t smile, I can’t use you if you can’t show, I can’t use you if you can’t sell.” Moss then has them form a single line so he can get a better look at each girl.

As he looks at the first girl, Moss calls out to his assistant, “Hey Marty, take a look at these tits. Are they watermelons? Honey this is a stage, not a watermelon patch, see ya.” He then proceeds down the line, stopping in front of a girl he remembers from a previous audition. The young lady reminds him that he told her to fix her nose and then come back. He comments on her nice nose and nice smile, but now he does not like her ears. He gives her his famous cut line, “See ya.”

At this point, every woman who has been cut has had some type of physical imperfection. Moss tells another girl to “come back when you fuck some of this baby fat off” as he pinches her cheeks. The final cut from this line had nothing to do with physical imperfections. The girl claims to have had “ice skating classes, ballet classes, technique classes, stretch classes, jazz classes, and jazz technique classes.” Moss replies, “This show is called ‘Goddess.’ It ain’t called classes.” He taps her on the shoulder as he says, “See ya.” Nomi stands tall as Moss approaches. She has not had any previous dance classes, so he asks her “Well, what are you doing here?” Nomi replies, “Watching you be a prick.” He comes back with “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

The next part of the audition consists of the girls executing a few routine dance steps. An instructor demonstrates the routine and then the music starts. Every tight, firm body moves vigorously and in sync. From a distance, Moss watches with his assistant and with Crystal, the star of the show. Only a few minutes into the routine, he cuts sixteen girls from the line. The three remaining girls burst into smiles until Moss boldly demands, “Show me your tits.” The girls hesitate and their smiles quickly disappear. He then shouts, “I’ve got a topless show for Christ’s sake. Let me see your tits.” They all release the hooks to their tops and let him gaze
upon their breasts. When the music starts up again, Moss instructs them, “Show me some attitude.” Each girl places one hand on her crotch while the other hand moves up and down her body. They dance in a hard violent manner. By the end of this dance, only two girls remain. It is at this point, with Nomi’s nipples exposed, that Moss finds an imperfection. He tells her to make her nipples stick-up. She slowly moves her fingers across the tips of her nipples under his instruction, but nothing happens. He then tells her to “pinch ‘em.” Moss stares straight into Nomi’s eyes and tells her he is “erect, why aren’t you?” Just then Marty arrives with the ice cubes Moss had requested earlier. He fills both of his hands with the ice and as he hands the ice cubes to Nomi he says “put them on your nipples.” She stares back with a harsh, serious look and then violently whacks the ice out of his hands and runs off the stage.

Nomi’s exit from the stage can be seen as her refusal to submit to male authority. The fact that she had already revealed her breasts does not mean that she was no longer in control. This small act of defiance from a would-be showgirl suggests the strength of the women who chose to dance clothed or topless in the spectacular productions staged in Las Vegas from the 1950s to the present. Nomi’s self-control in this scene, however, is not typical of the film Showgirls. The makers of this 1995 movie were not representing the showgirl in her true form. This type of misconception about the showgirl and dancer has been a legendary problem.

Julie Menard, an ex-showgirl, considers Showgirls degrading. She remembers that in her audition and in her performances “I never even had to show my breasts, nothing.” Paul Verhoeven, the director of Showgirls, admits that while he had interviewed several showgirls, dancers, and choreographers, he decided not to go with their story. Instead, he visited strip clubs like the Cheetah, the Crazy

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31 Joyce Marshall, An Interview with Julie Menard (Las Vegas: University of Nevada, 1997), 20.
Horse, and the Palomino. Here he found the sleazy atmosphere that was used in the
movie.32

Verhoeven claims that “sexuality and the uses of sexual power are central to
Showgirls.”33 The more realistic image of Las Vegas’s showgirls has been
overshadowed by the myth that showgirls are selling sex as they do in the film.
What the public does not see is the hard work they put into the various dances they
perform. The showgirl reveals a significant part of her body, but this does not signify
sex for sale.

It appears that when the showgirl joined Las Vegas’s entertainment industry
in the 1950s she was often tagged with the reputation of being a prostitute. Then and
now, she has been overlooked for her significant contribution to this unique city.
One of the goals of this chapter is to show how women, and especially showgirls,
were significant parts of Las Vegas’ success. This study also seeks to demonstrate
that women in the entertainment industry in Las Vegas found economic
opportunities through the use of their extreme beauty and nudity. As they paraded
on various stages, these showgirls commanded the attention of their audience and
remained in control of their bodies and their jobs.

This chapter studies women who came and stayed in Las Vegas. It is not a
definitive study, but rather an investigation into the contributions made by the
showgirls of the Las Vegas “Strip.” The materials for this study center on the
disparate representations of showgirls in a variety of sources - - oral histories, Las
Vegas newspapers, and historical photographs of showgirls and shows, among
others. The chapter is organized into four parts. The first part provides some
background information on the rapid and successful growth of Las Vegas. During

33 Verhoeven, 17.
this growth period, the showgirl was a silent yet visible contributor to Las Vegas' development. In Las Vegas, women were offered economic opportunities not available in other cities. The rapid construction of hotels and resorts offered several employment opportunities for women. Those who fulfilled the requirements for becoming showgirls would experience a freedom unavailable to other women in American society. The second part of this chapter discusses the showgirl’s exciting lifestyle during the 1950s and 1960s. The circles in which she traveled consisted of celebrities, businessmen, and other influential people in Las Vegas. The daily transformation she underwent to create a persona that has become an icon of desire and pleasure is also treated here.

Part three of this chapter examines the evolution of the showgirl’s image and clothing. Although no real historical treatment of these women has to date been written, there are a few materials upon which to base this analysis, including some oral interviews of women who were showgirls and who currently reside in Las Vegas. Despite the fact that they have retired from the entertainment business, they have remained connected. This examination of showgirls explores the reputation the showgirl acquired through advertisements, costumes, make-up and dance routines. It investigates how the shows themselves changed due to the high volume of competition among the hotels that featured these showgirl-dominated productions. Also included is an account of the economic freedom achieved by showgirls as they became an attraction for the real money-making business, gambling. This chapter examines the showgirls’ continual evolution, which was influenced by society’s changing mores, by the demands of the audiences, and by the shifting structure of Las Vegas’ entertainment economy.

The fourth and final part of this chapter, the conclusion, discloses that the showgirl’s story is not simply a crass one of “tits and ass.” It demonstrates that the showgirl has been, as one commentator noted, an “icon of pleasure and leisure, an
insult, a lifestyle, . . . a conduit of desire,' and the recipient of economic opportunities. She is a complicated phenomenon deserving of more cultural and historical understanding."34 Audiences continue to be overwhelmed and thrilled to watch showgirls display themselves on the stage, and this fascination had its roots in the era immediately after World War II.

34 Stuart, 8.
I: What other place has only 50 years of rapid development and 1 million people?
Merlyn Potter, 1997

The showgirl’s identity is at once an individual and a collective one. She is both historical fact and fictional fodder . . . . Her legend is that of the sexual predator as well as that of the corrupted innocent . . .
Andrea Stuart, 1996

According to Andrea Stuart, author of *Showgirls*, “glamour and pleasure, sexuality and fantasy, beauty and desirability, consumerism and power, anonymity and stardom, these are the conceptual threads that pull the showgirl’s story together.”35 The showgirl belongs to Las Vegas, the most “unique city in the world.”36 Its name is synonymous with casinos, towering hotels, and the spectacular entertainment that began soon after World War II.

World War II had a significant impact on both women and Las Vegas. Many restrictions regarding employment had earlier been imposed upon women. In twenty-six states, married women were prohibited from any form of employment out of the home. Single women were limited to low-paying jobs as salesgirls, waitresses, maids, or secretaries. The onset of the war allowed them to work in jobs previously reserved for men or alongside men and earning nearly the same wages. Women had begun to experience a sort of economic equality, but it would be short-lived. In 1946, 80 percent of the six million working women expressed a desire to continue in their present employment, but few were allowed to do so.

As scholar Susan J. Douglas notes, “nine seconds after Japan surrendered,” a

35 Stuart, 2.
campaign began to put women back in their place.\textsuperscript{37} Psychologists claimed that "women who wanted to continue working outside the home were nuts."\textsuperscript{38} The authors of \textit{Modern Women: The Lost Sex} wrote that the "only healthy woman was one who followed her biological destiny and procreated on a regular basis."\textsuperscript{39} It was concluded that any women who wanted to "step out of the confines of the kitchen and the bedroom were sick, sick, sick."\textsuperscript{40}

Despite these claims, 80 percent of the six million working women still indicated their preference to remain working. As soldiers returned home and to their jobs, however, four million women were fired, returning them to dependency on a male provider or to employment in a low-paying job. One event, though, did allow women to experience job opportunities: the postwar growth of Las Vegas.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, hotels and casinos were rapidly appearing on Las Vegas Boulevard, the central avenue of casino-hotel-resorts that overtime displaced downtown Las Vegas as the locale of gambling and entertainment in Las Vegas. Business was soaring in part because of the military's presence at Nellis Air Force Base. The base provided Las Vegas with young clients who were willing to spend their free time and money seeking the excitement of the bright lights and gaming tables. This explosion of population and growth continued throughout the postwar era.\textsuperscript{41}

After the war, Americans experienced a shift in their attitudes toward work and play. The nation sought a new way of life through leisure activities.\textsuperscript{42} This new desire was enshrined in Las Vegas, which offered a “sleepless and timeless

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{42} Findlay, 160.
\end{footnotes}
atmosphere of excitement, tension, and pressure.\textsuperscript{43} Those who made it their vacation destination claimed they came for "the gambling, the night life, and the entertainment."\textsuperscript{44}

The casinos of the gaming industry did not rival one another. Competition was reserved for the entertainment industry. These resort hotels created "sensational spectacles" presenting the most "popular entertainment."\textsuperscript{45} Entertainment became a tool, giving tourists a reason to enter the casinos and to repeat business.\textsuperscript{46} Of course, any visitor attending the show had to walk through a significant part of the casino. This route was designed with the intention of getting the visitor to pause at the many noisy slot machines, crap tables, and other gaming lures.

In 1952, over seven million tourists visited Las Vegas.\textsuperscript{47} That same year, casinos grossed forty-three million dollars. The entertainment industry was a large contributor to the expansion of tourist business and therefore to gaming profits. A novel element in the postwar entertainment industry was the showgirl, one of many women who starred in gala productions that featured scantily-clad female dancers. In the entertainment industry, a showgirl acquired unique opportunities in "adventure, sexual freedom, and financial autonomy."\textsuperscript{48} She was transformed by make-up, feathers, sequins, and jewels into a woman of fantasy.\textsuperscript{49} Thousands of dollars were spent on costumes to display ostentatiously the showgirl's breasts, face, and legs. At the same time, the costumes aided in concealing the "onset of age, a lack of talent, or the frailty of the flesh."\textsuperscript{50} This beauty and glitter were then turned into a "marketing tool" to draw potential casino patrons.

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\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 147.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 159.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Anthony Cabot, \textit{Casino Gaming} (Las Vegas: Trace Publications, 1996), 231.
\textsuperscript{48} Stuart, 117.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 170.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 170.
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The expansion of the entertainment industry can also be attributed to the wives who accompanied their husbands on trips to Las Vegas. These women were “less inclined” to gamble and so hotels staged entertainment designed to appeal to women and men alike. Suggesting female as well as male interest in sexuality, showgirls attracted women and men to their gala shows. By the late 1950’s, topless showgirls were introduced to the Las Vegas stages. This prompted other promoters to bring in French extravaganzas in part to appeal to women tourists and to remain competitive with other casino-hotels. This introduction of topless showgirls did cause some concerns for the Las Vegas community as many of the hotel signs overtly advertised the topless productions. The new open sexuality and cross-gendered audiences of showgirls helped make showgirls postwar rebels. According to Andrea Stuart,

> From the moment she emerged on the American entertainment scene, the showgirl positioned herself as sexual outlaw, poised eternally on the edge of legality, flouting what was considered acceptable female behaviour, rewriting what was permissible and even desirable in popular entertainment.

Showgirls knew that it was their beauty and various forms of nudity that attracted the audience, but perhaps their unusual positioning as “sexual outlaws” in an age of domestic containment also enticed men and women. They were providing audiences with a glimpse of the “boundaries between stage and street... between sexy performance and sexual act, between theater and disorderly house.”

The showgirl was a product of the tradition of “entertaining exhibitionism,” which dates back to antiquity. She can be found, as Stuart pointed out, on “Egyptian wall paintings; she pirouettes round the circumferences of Greek vases; she is

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51 Findlay, 160.
52 Ibid.
53 Stuart, 178.
54 Ibid, 24.
55 Ibid, 11.
displayed on the frescoes of Indian temples and is etched deep into the facades of Angkor and Bangkok. A showgirl obtained her immortality through her "decorativeness and sexuality," through her constant flirtation with what was permissible and what was not, which both "threatens respectability and helps to define it."

Her acceptance and evolution in Las Vegas can be attributed to the postwar transformation of American society. Showgirls' sexuality and economic opportunities battered against societal demands on women in the 1950s and 1960s, but their careers suggested how women fought postwar attempts to domesticate them. Their popularity, with women and men, equally suggested an America with changed attitudes regarding sexuality and respectability.

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56 Ibid, 2.
57 Ibid, 8.
58 Ibid.
II: This town not only overtly deals with the objectification of women’s bodies, but there’s also the power that women have found here, in the midst of what the outside world has characterized as victimhood.
   Amie Williams, 1997

They were caught up in the love of what they were doing and never thought it would end.
   Merilyn Potters, 1997

In a June 1996 *Las Vegas Sun* article, a former Copa Girl of the 1950s and 1960s remembered the “glamour of being one the world’s most famous showgirls, dancing for crowds that included Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Elvis Presley.”59 These women were not necessarily “feminist, but they had the best of both worlds.” They worked in a respectful environment and at the same time were earning unbelievable salaries. The showgirls were also gaining exposure that could be used to earn other entertainment contracts.60

During the 1950s, a showgirl in Las Vegas was offered $125.00 - $175.00 per week for approximately twelve minutes of stage work per night. No other city in the nation offered women this type of economic opportunity. Only in Las Vegas could a woman without any previous skills or experience earn what was considered to be a

Showgirls were hired for their beauty. On stage, they commanded the attention of an audience composed of men and women. They wore “multithousand-dollar costumes” of feathers, sequins, rhinestones, and furs. Showgirls’ feet were fitted for custom-made shoes. The costumes were specially made and imported from Paris, France.

These exotic outfits became the outer identity of the showgirl. Julie Menard, an ex-showgirl from the Tropicana Hotel, described her costume as having “lots and lots and lots of feathers.” The outfit was a modest bikini that covered all of her “rear end.” Every girl wore a huge, heavy headpiece pinned to her head. At the Sands Hotel, a Copa Girl was described as being dressed in “beautiful gowns - sometimes long, sometimes short.” Copa Girls had a limited amount of body exposure in the 1950s. The producer, Jack Entratter, did not believe that “nudity would add anything.” At this time, however, many of the other showgirls had acquired skimpier outfits. The Copa Girl always appeared as an exotic fantasy woman, regardless of the amount of body coverage.

Part of this exotic transformation was accomplished with the aid of make-up. The showgirls of the 50s and 60s used “pancake” make-up instead of the traditional foundation. To dramatize the eyes, “big long fake eyelashes” were applied. An exorbitant amount of eye-shadow, lipstick and rouge were also used to create

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62 Potter, 2.
63 Marshall, Menard, 2.
64 “Copa girls’ are choicest, but difficult to choose,” *Augusta Chronicle*, 1965, 1.
65 Ibid, 1.
66 Marshall, Menard, 18.
extravagant eyes. The application of heavy make-up was an essential part of the showgirl’s ability to renew herself each day.

This hard-work at exoticism did not go unnoticed. In fact, according to Menard, “Here you’re like a queen.”67 The showgirl was so pampered that “you could hardly buy yourself a sandwich.”68 In few places could a showgirl receive so much respect. Menard recalled at the beginning of her career on stage being asked to have dinner with one of the bosses of the Tropicana Hotel. When she joined his table, there was Connie Francis. The evening went very well for everyone. Menard remembered receiving a “huge thing of red roses.”69 With it was a note from her boss: “You are so nice, stay as sweet.”70

Thinking back to that era, Menard also had a memory of a very embarrassing experience. It was a few years after she had retired as a showgirl. She and her husband were attending a cocktail party in the Bahamas with many influential people, including the president of Costa Rica. For no known reason, Menard’s husband brought up the topic of her past employment. He blurted out, “Julie used to be a showgirl.”71 All conversations ended as silence filled the room. If this had happened at a cocktail party in Las Vegas, those present would not have been shocked. In Las Vegas, showgirls often earned respected reputations. They belonged to a “very exclusive club.”72

This club existed during the exciting, mysterious era of mob control in Las Vegas. The presence of gangsters was just “part of everyday life.”73 No one ever

67 Ibid.
68 Potter, 2.
69 Marshall, Menard, 7.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid, 18.
72 Ibid, 19.
73 Ibid, 6.
thought about it. What was experienced was a very safe city. "I could go marketing at three in the morning and not worry," 74 testified Menard. Showgirls as well as others were always treated very well; as she said, "everything was nice. It was a glamorous type thing."

Money was never an issue, according to Menard. There were always many "old-fashioned big-spenders." 75 While these men were gambling, they wanted a showgirl hanging on their arm. All enjoyed a good night out on the town. When it was over, the big-spender was happy and the showgirl would go home with "several hundreds of dollars." There was never any question about going to bed with them: they did not.

The money and freedom provided Menard with an exiting lifestyle. She was asked during an interview, "What did you do for recreation?" One of her favorite activities was drinking champagne. She and her friends would go to the lounges after their own performances. "In the Blue Room, everything was comped for us. When we left we sometimes took bottles of Dom Perignon and champagne." 76 Menard also liked taking trips to Los Angeles. Since money was not an issue, she went often. On several different occasions, her plane was running late. Menard had no choice but to apply her stage make-up while still in the air. She remembers "everyone would be watching me trying to get my big eyes on." 77 Menard clearly enjoyed the lifestyle that accompanied being a showgirl.

Another ex-showgirl, Kim Krantz, also remembers the 1950s as being "glamour years." 78 She felt it was a big deal, performing on the stage with famous entertainers. Krantz recalls rubbing "elbows" with people like Zsa Zsa Gabor, Frank Sinatra, and Desi Arnez. Gabor and Krantz performed at the same time at the

74 Ibid, 7.
75 Ibid, 6.
76 Ibid, 5.
77 Ibid.
Riviera Hotel. Krantz describes her as being “lovely.”79 Backstage, “If Zsa Zsa drank champagne, we had champagne.” Krantz remembers “stepping on her gown in the finale, tore the daylights out of it.” Gabor simply replied, “Don’t worry darlink.” She never held it against Krantz. In fact, Gabor gave her a moon and crescent comb set. The French twist hairstyle was very popular then and Krantz had always admired the set Gabor wore. There was one request Gabor had: “Backstage I love you -- when we’re in the casino and I’m with a gentleman, don’t speak to me. You are too young and too beautiful.”80

When these young and beautiful showgirls entered the stage, it was breathtaking. The entire audience watched as they slowly walked down a stage filled with stairs. Each one of them had her arms fully extended. Every head was balancing an extremely heavy feathered headdress. The costumes sparkled as the overhead lights shined on the rhinestones and sequins. Menard remembers “walking down . . . steep stairs, standing there, nothing to hold on to.”81 As she took each step, Menard numbered them in hopes of preventing an accident.

At the end of these steps, showgirls would “stand with hands out and sashay from side to side,” giving the audience a complete view of their beautiful bodies in the elaborate costumes. In another dance routine, the showgirls all wore “real big hoop skirts.”82 Menard remembers having men and women trying to look “under the skirts” of the girls who stood at the edge of the stage. There was a certain way to move the hips and it would “knock all their little drinks over.” It only took a little extra “swish” and everything went down. This self-possession and humorous control were parts of what defined a showgirl. Publicists also worked to give showgirls a high profile in Las Vegas.

79 Ibid, 6.
80 Ibid, 7.
81 Marshall, Menard, 11.
82 Ibid, 12.
In these beginning years of the showgirl productions, publicists used various methods to gain exposure for the shows and stars. Harry Diederich, a publicist at the Sands Hotel, used several types of “cornball” stunts. During the 1956 presidential campaign, he had a showgirl dress in a bathing suit, stand alongside the pool and hold in one hand a poster of the Republican candidate Dwight Eisenhower and in the other hand a poster of the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson. This stunt is claimed to have gotten “a lot of play.”83 Another stunt that went nationwide involved a showgirl swinging a golf club. She stood at the first hole of the golf course in a very short nightie. The caption read, “Night-Tee-Time.” Diederich believed that this type of publicity “far, far exceeds the values of advertising.”84 He wanted to give the nation a preview of the beauty and titillation that awaited their visits to Las Vegas.

Las Vegas’s publicity stunts and various advertisement ploys drew in a large variety of patrons. Many were the everyday customers, but several were wealthy high rollers. It was a policy in most hotels that the showgirls be made available for these high-rollers. According to Menard, “There was never even a question of going to bed with them.” The high roller simply wanted to be “seen with a showgirl.”85

Not every hotel required the showgirls to be available for the high rollers. The hotels did want the showgirls to mingle in the crowds, though. According to Krantz, “You would come to work to do your show and between shows, go play 21.” The pit boss gave her “$50 worth of silvers [silver dollars] on the table.”86 She would play the tables, mixing with the customers in the casino. The showgirl was allowed to keep any of the winnings. It was referred to as “window dressing.”87

84 Ibid, 4.
85 Marshall, Krantz, 6.
86 Ibid, 17.
87 Ibid, 61.
promoters wanted the customers to “ogle” the girls they had just viewed “nude or semi-nude.” It was a ploy for repeat business. This advertisement gimmick also gave potential customers a sneak-preview of the type of entertainment offered in that hotel. Mingling in the casino also had benefits for the showgirl. There was always the chance she could meet a potential husband. According to Krantz, this is how she met her husband.89

It was not uncommon for entertainers, hotel managers, and other businessmen to marry showgirls. Krantz’s husband, Danny Krantz, was involved in the hotel food and beverage business. She met him while he was a guest at the hotel. Danny Krantz networked with the “big boys” in Las Vegas. His circle of associates included stars like Milton Berle. Frank Sinatra was also known among the showgirls. His fourth and final wife was ex-showgirl Barbara Marx.90

In the 1950s and 1960s Las Vegas’s guests dressed for the shows. Men were attired in their finest tuxedoes and women wore dazzling pieces of jewelry, beautiful gowns and furs. The showroom’s atmosphere was filled with sophistication.91 This changed as society became more liberal and as promoters imported what were termed “French Extravaganzas.”

Prior to the arrival of the “European showgirl,” there had been no women born in the United States who went topless in any of the Las Vegas shows. Julie Menard came very close, as she wore flesh colored pasties that resembled stars or “sparklets.” Having the pasties on her breasts kept her comfortable and she “never really felt . . . nude.”92 Kim Krantz always wore costumes with a top that covered

89 Marshall, Krantz, 18.
90 Ibid, 22.
92 Marshall, Menard, 13.
most of her breasts. She did note, however, that other showgirls did go topless, and she thought it “liberated a lot of women across this country.”

Even before showgirls expressed their liberation through nudity, however, they had already evinced signs of such freedom. As the careers of Menard and Krantz made clear, showgirls in the 1950s and 1960s had gained visibility, respect, and economic power, and they had escaped domesticity through their roles as “sexual outlaws.”

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93 Marshall, Krantz, 4.
III: The showgirl has quite literally been shaped by the people watching her and the societies in which those people live.
Andrea Stuart, 1996

The nudity still carries a shock value, even today, and you can't say it's not for sexual attraction. But it's not meant to be pornographic like a strip club.
Fluff LeCouque, 1996

The movie Showgirls, directed in 1995 by Paul Verhoeven, grossly misrepresented real showgirls. In a book he published, Portrait of a Film: Showgirls, Verhoeven explained his research on the Las Vegas showgirl. He found a few "shows that feature the real, old-fashioned showgirls with their feathered costumes."94 After interviewing some of the showgirls, dancers, and other members of the production, he decided this was not the angle he wanted to portray. Verhoeven then visited strip clubs like the Cheetah, Crazy Horse, and the Palomino. There he found the "raucous, sleazy atmosphere" he would use in his movie. According to Verhoeven, the girls in the strip clubs were not dancers, they just moved to sensuous music.95

In the movie, the showgirls' performance centered on dances that mimicked sexual acts. Those who were ambitious used sex to achieve their goals. The movie's atmosphere was one of sex and prostitution. According to the ex-showgirl Julie Menard, the movie was "very degrading. It's very irritating because that is not a showgirl. Showgirls are honest, working girls who are dancers and mannequins in a show. They are not the strippers if you want to get very technical."96 The stripper

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94 Verhoeven, 9.
95 Ibid.
96 Marshall, Menard, 2.
moves sexually on a runway, selling the illusion of performing sex. The showgirl is performing as a member of an entire show, a musical and dance extravaganza. She is not selling sex, but the idea of beauty and strength and agility. The look of the stripper and the showgirl is also completely different. The stripper takes her clothes off, whereas the showgirl remains in her outfit, however revealing it is. In fact, the showgirl’s identity is formed by the way she is dressed. Even as showgirls wore less and less over time, they never presented themselves as sleazy, as in *Showgirls*. Their image evolved, but they remained respected performers.

In a 1949 picture of a showgirl performing at the El Rancho Hotel, she is dressed in a strapless one-piece bathing suit. She is wearing enlarged dice on her head and wrists. Her legs are the most exposed part of her body.\(^{97}\) Looking back at this, she appears modestly dressed. This modesty and coverage shrank when the Strip introduced topless showgirls.

The Dunes Hotel hired Harold Minsky, a well-known burlesque showman, in the late 1950s to bring in a new sensational attraction. To meet the demands of the hotel and society’s more liberal values, he created a show consisting of girls from burlesque houses. As Krantz noted, “They were a very different breed of women.”\(^{98}\) The burlesque showgirls had gone on strike to get the Dunes Hotel to build them a separate, “new dressing room.” The new attraction of these demanding topless showgirls spread throughout the Strip.

The Stardust Hotel was the first hotel to import the French extravaganza “Lido de Paris” in 1959. The show featured a promenade of “European beauties.”\(^{99}\) The production cost the Stardust Hotel $750,000.00. This French import took hold in Las Vegas and became the prototype for all future imported shows on Las Vegas

\(^{97}\) McCracken, 68.
\(^{98}\) Marshall, Krantz, 2.
\(^{99}\) McCracken, 82.
Boulevard. From this point on, showgirls underwent major transformations.

The introduction of the European showgirl also entailed the arrival of a completely new costume consisting of feathers, rhinestones, and sequins. The headdress featured tall feathers reaching high into the sky. At the base of the headdress was a cap covered in rhinestones and beads. It was a spectacular attraction. The one-piece outfit changed to one resembling a bikini. The showgirl's mid-section was entirely exposed. To accent its beauty, rhinestones and beads were strung across the top portion. Rhinestones were also used around the leg area below the knee. The showgirls sparkled every time they appeared on the stage.

Over the course of the two decades between the 1960s and 1980s, the costumes changed even more. The bottom piece of the outfit was cut so high that most of the girls' buttocks were revealed. The audience enjoyed more and more of the showgirl's beauty, which took on a new look. Over time, the requirement for a showgirl's figure changed. In 1957, the advertisement slogan for the famous "Copa Girl" was "all you need to be is beautiful." Of course, there were guidelines as to what was meant by being beautiful:

1. 5'4" in height; 116 lbs. in weight.
2. Bust 32-34, waist 24, hips 34.
3. Face -- small features, the American girl look, oval rather than round face.
4. Hair -- usually black.

This ideal figure, considered the absolute requirement for the once high-class "Copa Girl," changed with time. Producers in the 1970s wanted women whose breast cup-size was smaller and she needed to be at least "5 feet, 8 inches, most of that as legs and radiant beauty." The producers also started requiring some dance experience.

101 Bacon, 2.
102 McCracken, 82.
In the 1950s, a showgirl did “a little step here, a little step there, sashay, that was about it,” Menard explained. They were at times literally called “mannequins.” This static image evolved once many producers required “extensive ballet training.” In a 1978 picture of the “Lido de Paris” show, the showgirls were performing a rapid dance routine. The all-new “Folies Bergere: Sexier Than Ever” look is much more athletic, but the body is still adorned in rhinestones, sequins, and feathers.

The showgirls’ glittering outfits, elaborate make-up, and gorgeous bodies continued to attract an audience of men and women. Since the audience was mixed in gender, it was the showgirl’s responsibility to create a new category, to appear “excessively feminine and yet project a sexuality which is aggressive and dangerous,” a sort of “virile femininity.” According to Andrea Stuart, the showgirl has “literally been shaped by the people watching her and the societies in which those people live.” The showgirl is a reflection of fifty years of what the audiences “wanted to see—needed to see—in its female entertainers.”

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103 Marshall, Menard, 17.  
104 McCracken, 82.  
105 Bacon, 2.  
106 Stuart, 65.  
107 Ibid.  
108 Ibid, 2.  
109 Ibid.
IV: She is an icon of pleasure and leisure, an insult, a lifestyle, a euphemism, a social institution, a conduit of desire, a way out. Symbolically, she straddles that crucial liminal boundary between the good woman and the bad. She both threatens respectability and helps to define it. For men she is the face of illicit female sexuality that can acceptably be courted; for women, she is a female icon whose power rests not on her virtue but on her moral ambiguity.

Andrea Stuart, 1996

Las Vegas hotels and casinos are constantly renewing themselves. In this process, showgirl productions have been kept alive and fresh. According to Julie Menard, the “Tropicana show, the ‘Folies Bergere,’ probably is still the closest to the old show.” On August 27, 1999, the “Folies Bergere” celebrated its 25,000th performance. It is the longest running Parisian revue in Las Vegas and it celebrated its 40th anniversary on December 24, 1999. During the “Folies Bergere’s” forty years on Las Vegas Boulevard, the show underwent several renovations. Its most recent revamping pays tribute to women, dating back to the days of the “music hall to the flappers (of the 1920s) and up to today.” The entire show runs for ninety minutes and continues to showcase its original cast style of beautiful, bare-breasted showgirls.

Another hotel, Bally’s, features the “Jubilee.” This show originally opened in 1981, also featuring bare-breasted showgirls. In 1997, the hotel spent $5.6 million on

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110 Marshall, Menard, 17.
its renovation. Three million of those dollars were spent on costumes. The show focuses on one of Las Vegas’s “global calling cards - - beautiful women wearing sequins, feathers, beads, baubles, and little else.” The show’s atmosphere is much more sensual, and it has kept the tradition of showgirls descending from the ceiling. Through the use of mirrors, this gives the illusion of hundreds and hundreds of women cascading onto the stage. In accordance with the trademark of a huge headdress, hundreds of pounds of ostrich feathers, sequins, and beads are used to create “unusual headdresses and stylish costumes. Another traditional part of the showgirl’s costume, gloves, was re-introduced to create a look of sophistication.”

In a July 1997 Las Vegas Sun article, Joel Fischman commented that the Las Vegas showgirl was anything but “passe.” The “Jubilee’s” intent is to show the “beautification of women.” It was these women who contributed to the rapidly growing and unique city of Las Vegas, not the sleazy, overly sexed women so misrepresented in the film Showgirls.

Many of the hotels in Las Vegas, in their own way, have preserved and thus documented the strength and empowerment of the showgirl. In May 1997, the Riviera Hotel immortalized the showgirl. Erected in front of the hotel was an eleven-by-six feet bronze statue. This life-sized statue has caused some controversy on Las Vegas Boulevard. Anne Golonka of the National Organization of Women (NOW)

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114 Ibid, 2.
115 Ibid, 1.
claimed "it's kind of soft pornography because these statues are faceless." Those who pass in front of the hotel have a view of the back of five shapely women rather than fully conceived representations of actual showgirls with actual faces. Without distinct facial features, these bodies in the stature can represent all showgirls, past, present, and future. The artist of this statue, Conine, stated, “Nudity has been in art since the beginning.” Golonka does not believe that the faceless, semi-nude showgirls can be compared to Caesars Palace's copy of Michaelangelo's nude David. The women who posed for this 1,540 pound bronze statue, however, are "proud to be immortalized on the Strip.” Kim Barranco, one of the showgirls who posed for the statue, feels “it's more definite than a poster.” These women have claimed to be “excited about going down in history.” Showgirls, even in gaining this bronzed immortality, still arouse controversy and inspire misunderstanding. Their place in history, though, has been secured.

The showgirls' continued existence on the Strip reflects society's need to participate, even as viewers, in the beauty that dances nightly on the Las Vegas stage. These special women found empowerment as they transformed themselves into desirable entertainers. Those who did not appreciate their nudity used their illicit sexuality as means to demean all working women in Las Vegas. The showgirl represented sexual and economic freedom in a city that represented adventure and was free from conventional morality. Their contributions to the entertainment industry remain to be fully recognized. Society's desire for more leisure activities has

117 Ibid.
nonetheless aided in the showgirl's continual prosperity, and conversely, according to Andrea Stuart, the showgirl has had a "profound influence on popular entertainment forms, from the movies to pop industry."\textsuperscript{118} The showgirl continues to be an icon, evoking optimistic pleasures for men and women, and securing her empowerment through her beauty and nudity.\textsuperscript{119} Following in her footsteps were the other highly visible sexual outlaws of Las Vegas: cocktail waitresses.

\textsuperscript{118} Stuart, 203.
CHAPTER THREE
ACCESSORIES TO LARCENY:
LAS VEGAS COCKTAIL WAITRESSES AND THEIR "CRIMINAL" LIMINALITY

She serves men who are never asked to pay for a drink. She is an accessory to the world's most sophisticated, most flattering larceny.
Gabriel R. Vogliotti, 1975

During a dinner party in 1994, author Lynn Snowden announced her plans to work in Las Vegas as a cocktail waitress. From across the dinner table, her friend Jerry advised, "If you're going to be working in Vegas as a cocktail waitress . . . you've got to master the lean."120 Snowden queried him, "The lean?" 121 To explain what he meant, Jerry stood up and positioned his arm as if he were holding a tray. He said, "Get yourself a push-up bra, and then when you serve a drink to a customer you lean way in like this," he said, bending forward to thrust out his chest farther than his chin. Jerry claimed that this lean always gets big tips. 122

The next day, Snowden practiced walking around her apartment in high heels, a short skirt, and her most “ambitious push-up bra,”123 balancing a dinner plate with a few drinks on it in one of her hands. During her first attempt at the lean, Snowden pitched forward and spilled everything that was on her tray onto the

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid. 107.
imaginary customer and herself. The combination of the high-heel shoes, a push-up bra, and the lean threw her off balance.

Concerned about the footwear, Snowden sought the advice of a friend, who told her to wait and buy her shoes in Las Vegas. It is known that showgirls and cocktail waitresses have worn high heels for decades and have the “shoe stuff down to a science.”124 The type of costume Snowden would be wearing was even more of a concern. Her friend felt that the cocktail waitresses’ “getups look really humiliating,” but Snowden had a response: “The thought of all the tip money I’m going to earn, I think if I get the right kind of shoes I can deal with anything.”125

The morning of Snowden’s job interview, she had on a “push-up bra under a leopard-print turtleneck, a black miniskirt, sheer black hose, black pumps, and an awful lot of makeup.” She mused that she felt like a “delinquent hooker.”126 Upon returning from her interview, Snowden told her friend that there had been a surveillance camera filming her while the Bally’s manager’s eyes were constantly “flicking down to my breasts and up to my breasts.”127 Her friend laughed and said, “That’s nothing! There was one food and beverage manager who’d make the girls get into a string bikini and then he’d take Polaroids!”128

Within a week or so, Snowden learned that she had been hired as a cocktail waitress at the Tropicana.129 She was excited and ready to make all that great tip money. The only problem left was her fitting for the cocktail waitress costume. At

124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid, 113.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid, 117.
the casino’s dressing room, the woman in charge of costume fittings asked Snowden’s dress size. When she replied, “Between a size six and eight,” the woman handed her a size four. Snowden described it as a “tiny” garment cut low in the front and low in the back, with an extremely short flared skirt. The fabric was a tropical print of “screaming magenta, blue, and turquoise.”\(^{130}\) To zip up the zipper, she had to inhale and tug really hard. Snowden then stepped in front of a huge mirror and decided that her interview outfit “seemed dignified in comparison.”\(^ {131}\)

At the end of Snowden’s first day as a lounge cocktail waitress, she remembered how disappointed she was as she counted out only fifty-six dollars in tips. She had endured hours of loud music, men groping at her waist, and against her will, having to repeat customers’ drink orders like “Screaming Orgasms.”\(^ {132}\) Her dreams of earning hundreds of dollars a night had been shattered. As a new employee, Snowden did not get the lucrative tip areas in the casino (blackjack tables, craps tables, and baccarat pit). Snowden had originally factored in the job’s harassment but thought that the big bucks would make up for it all. As Snowden lay on her bed in total exhaustion, she recounted “I can’t remember exactly why I envied those smiling waitresses at the Mirage.”\(^ {133}\) Snowden’s original thoughts that a cocktail waitress job would be easy and lucrative turned out to be false. At the end of her short-term employment, Snowden decided it was neither easy nor glamorous to be a cocktail waitress.

\(^{130}\) Ibid, 118.  
\(^{131}\) Ibid.  
\(^{132}\) Ibid, 120.  
\(^{133}\) Ibid.
Las Vegas casinos have employed only women to serve cocktails and other beverages to their casino clientele. On the Strip, these women have always dressed in revealing outfits. On an Internet site, a page called “Las Vegas Cocktail Babes,” photographs dated December 2000 feature cocktail waitresses dressed in costumes that uniformly reveal a significant amount of the women’s cleavage and buttocks. Cocktail waitresses walk around the casino dressed in these skimpy outfits, heavily made up, and carrying a tray with a tip jar oozing with money. They are looking for customers. In part because of their occupation and their attire, they have been likened to prostitutes. After all, a prostitute walks the streets in skimpy, tight clothing with heavy make-up, looking for customers. This particularly male understanding of cocktail waitresses—much like the understanding of showgirls—proved to be demeaning and inaccurate, and this chapter demonstrates how these liminally-positioned servers of cocktails used their bodies and their labor for profit.

This chapter examines women from the 1950s to the present day who worked on the Las Vegas Strip serving alcoholic beverages to casino gamblers while wearing very little to conceal their bodies and their beauty. This analysis is designed to be an investigation into the social functions and working conditions of the Strip’s cocktail waitresses. Casinos and cocktail waitresses have developed a symbiotic relationship that has been very lucrative for both parties. The cocktail waitress’s sexy image is used as a tool to lure male customers into the casino. She is authorized to serve them free alcoholic beverages that remove their inhibitions about gambling and ultimately insure her a service gratuity. The casino and the cocktail waitress have

both profited from her sexual image, but at the same time, neither wanted the stigma attached to any associations between cocktail waitressing and prostitution. While there are clear and obvious differences between the two professions, the cocktail waitress's role as an accomplice in the casino's quest to take money from clients links her, however vaguely, to prostitutes. The lawless character of her position was suggested in Gabriel Vogliotti's treatment of *The Girls of Nevada*. He noted of the waitress, "She is an accessory to the world's most sophisticated, most flattering larceny."135

The materials used in this chapter center on representations of cocktail waitresses and include oral histories, Las Vegas newspapers, films, videos, documentaries, travel brochures, and historical photographs of cocktail waitresses and their movements through the casinos, lounges, and showrooms. This chapter is organized into five parts. The first part discusses the contested domesticity of the cocktail waitress's job. She is there to serve the clientele and at the same time to add glamour, sexuality, and excitement.

The second part of this chapter discusses the image projected by cocktail waitresses' uniforms. The image of sex and adventure in Las Vegas helped to stereotype cocktail waitresses as prostitutes, an image underscored by risqué costumes. This section also explores the hotels' legal exploitation of the cocktail waitress as well as those who opposed this exploitation. Part three examines the financial gains afforded the cocktail waitresses who forged on despite the stereotyping. It discusses the different advantages of working in casinos, lounges, or showrooms. In addition, it assesses the influence of organized crime on the

135 Vogliotti, 240.
workplace and working conditions. This analysis explores how the cocktail waitress acquired the reputation of a harlot by investigating advertisements, costumes, memoirs, and recollections of the working conditions.

Part four of this chapter explores the male-dominated environment that the cocktail waitress endured. On the casino floor she had to await patiently the pit boss's signals as to when she could approach customers. The bartender was another male figure who had the power to control the number of drinks she could deliver. This section also discusses her interaction with male customers. The fifth and final part of this chapter discusses the cocktail waitress as a trusted figure who could move freely among the pit bosses, dealers, and clients. She used her body and personality to become more than just a server; she was a friendly face to any gambler who had "lost it all" and she was someone who helped winners celebrate. The cocktail waitress has been a vital part of the successful growth of Las Vegas, whose power—like the cocktail waitress'—has long been associated with sexuality, liminal legality, and a questionable reputation for both empowerment and exploitation.
During the mob’s reign in Las Vegas, the job market for “low-paying service-sector, resort-industry jobs”\textsuperscript{136} expanded. Cocktail waitressing was one of these jobs. According to James P. Spradley, author of \textit{The Cocktail Waitress: Woman’s Work in a Man's World}, “Women have always performed these service roles, from the serving wenches in the days of Ben Jonson to Hugh Hefner’s bunnies.”\textsuperscript{137} In addition, Spradley notes that in 1970 “Thirty million women were employed in the labor force;”\textsuperscript{138} five million of them were working in service occupations that included cocktail waitressing. The role of these servers is “an extension of the traditional female role in the home,”\textsuperscript{139} according to Spradley. Cocktail waitresses were there to serve men. In the casinos, they served men and women alike, but the act of serving continued to perpetuate a sense of female domesticity. Yet, unlike women in the home, the cocktail waitresses’ outfits were not typically associated with homemaking. Cocktail waitresses were issued outfits at least one size smaller

\textsuperscript{136} M. Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins, and David R. Dickens, \textit{Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City} (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 111.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
than their true dress size. This caused a great deal of cleavage and buttocks exposure. In contrast, Harriet Nelson, the mother and wife in the television series *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), performed her domestic duties of caring for and serving her husband and two sons in a casual cotton dress that covered her knees.

The sexy outfits worn by cocktail waitresses enhanced Las Vegas' sexualized image of women and were used as tools to lure potential customers. This sexy image of women was projected in part by the costumes worn not just by the cocktail waitresses but also by showgirls and Keno girls. These signifiers of sex, along with Las Vegas's remote location in the middle of a desert, inspired the nickname of "Sin City." A starker comparison was with "Sodom and Gomorrah." In this city of alleged evil, with its "illusions and false hopes," the cocktail waitress circulated among the casino's clientele pushing free alcoholic drinks. Every drink taken helped to cloud gamblers' minds and loosen their monetary inhibitions.

In the fifties as today, it was the responsibility of the cocktail waitress to ensure that every guest of the casino was served free drinks. Peter Ruchman, general manager of Gambler's Book Club in Las Vegas, wrote that free drinks served by cocktail waitresses helped to distract the gambler. The loud music spilling over from the lounge, the constant sound of coins dropping, the lights flashing above the slot

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141 Ibid.

machines, the money converted into chips and the absence of clocks all helped the gambler to forget about the value of money as well as time. The hotels' fabricated atmosphere and the cocktail waitresses' presence were instrumental in keeping the gambler gambling.

During the gambler's time on the casino floor, the cocktail waitress's attentiveness to his drinking needs yielded her an important supplemental income, her tip money. It was known throughout the Las Vegas Strip and beyond that the casino server's job was very lucrative. It was also the most favored transitional job for the Strip's showgirls. According to Jillian Hroshowy, an ex-showgirl from the 1960s, showgirls believed they could perform forever. Unfortunately, by the age of forty their careers were over. The shift from performing in a show to performing as a cocktail waitress was easy. These women were already accustomed to wearing very revealing costumes. The new job's reward came in the tips received. As Hroshowy put it, "You made good money, tips." Like the showgirls, the cocktail waitress also experienced age restrictions and discrimination in addition to weight requirements and forced leaves or job relocation during pregnancy. Michael Nelson, the Imperial Palace's personnel director, wrote "The scantily clad female employee is a symbol of all that is popular and expected in Las Vegas." An important part of the job was having a "beautiful body and [being] willing to expose

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143 Ibid, 2.
144 Joyce Marshall, An Interview with Jillian Hroshowy (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Las Vegas, 1995), 30.
that body and wear apparatus to make it even more beautiful like high heels and
push-up bras.”

Cocktail waitresses quickly evolved into an accepted fixture in the casinos, the
lounges, and the showrooms. These women became a type of “mini-entertainment”
for casino customers. Cocktail waitresses could be easily spotted as their costumes
and duties set them apart from their clientele. Their mission was to serve customers,
smile, and wish them luck while adding glamour, sexuality, and a touch of
excitement to the evening.

In a collection of essays looking at the countercultural aspects of the 1950s,
Joel Foreman’s *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons*, an
essay by Jackie Byars on Kim Novak’s career refers to Hollywood’s dual image of
women in movies as either virgins or whores. Actress Kim Novak’s screen test
proved that she had “limited acting experience,” but Columbia Studio executives
were “impressed by her ‘star quality,’ her looks.” Like film icons Brigitte Bardot
and Jayne Mansfield, Novak’s box office sex appeal conformed to Hugh Hefner’s
concept of “woman as [a] sex toy.” During this time, movies often associated the
image of “working-class women” with harlots or prostitutes. Like these women,
the Las Vegas cocktail waitress was part of a sisterhood of working-class women and,
therefore, she too was subject to the same treatment as other “working girls.”

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146 Ibid.
147 Jackie Byars, “The Prime of Miss Kim Novak: Struggling Over the Feminine in the Star Image,” in Joel
Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Chicago: University
of Illinois Press, 1997), 203.
148 Ibid, 19.
149 Ibid.
After all, as was written in John L. Smith's column in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, "Casinos have a tradition of making cocktail waitresses dress like hookers." This tradition of dressing in skimpy outfits, applying heavy make-up, and soliciting orders for free drinks caused cocktail waitresses to be cast in the image of prostitutes. The cocktail waitresses' sexualized image ironically, however, secured a lucrative position for them on the Strip.

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II: How bad is the casino industry when the job requirements of a prostitute are more humane and less degrading than those for cocktail servers?  
Kicket Martinez, 2001

In our civilization a woman's beauty is a capital asset. With so many other roads barred to her, a beautiful woman must use her body, her face, her charm as a means to riches. Women are encouraged to do so by men.  
Mario Puzo, 1975

Sexy outfits have always been a part of cocktail waitresses' history in Las Vegas. According to Joyce Marshall, an ex-cocktail waitress at the MGM Hotel during the 1970s, image was everything to the bosses. They wanted the servers to show as much flesh as possible. Marshall stated that the "rationale was that men would order more drinks from a pretty, Sexy waitress and as he was loosening up, so would his wallet." She further stated, "That is pretty much the way we felt also."151 Marshall claimed it was financially beneficial for cocktail waitresses to comply with their bosses' wishes. "The nicer we were, the bigger the smile, the sexier the look, the touch on a hand, the better the tip."152

Marshall's merrywidow-styled costume was similar to a corset that was laced up either in the front or the back. She recalled her reactions when first issued her costume:

The seamstress handed me the outfit. I just stood there staring at her, waiting for the rest of it. There was no rest of it. I started laughing and almost went home. I had bathing suits that covered

151 Author interview with Joyce Marshall, 6 Feb. 2002.
152 Ibid.
The outfit did not cover much and Marshall needed the assistance of the dressing room dresser to help her lace it up. Marshall also recalled that it was difficult to wear her “traditional” styled underwear. Tights that she and other servers wore were “high-cut and that didn’t work.” The hotel’s seamstress solved the underwear problem; she custom fit a type of g-string underwear for Marshall and the other cocktail waitresses. Marshall stated that at first she felt naked, but within a few months “it was no longer a big deal.” After all, she and several other women were dressed in the exact same sexy uniform.

The teenage son of Mindy Vanucci, a cocktail waitress at Caesars Palace, did not approve of his mother’s costume. Mindy Vanucci wore a white, one-sided and off the shoulder short pleated dress with gold trim and a gold belt. Vanucci’s son stated in Amie Williams 1998 documentary, Stripped and Teased: Tales From Las Vegas Women, “To me, I don’t like it, but hey maybe she could wear a longer dress or something. She does look pretty cute in it.” To understand better the young man’s confused attitude toward his mother’s sexy outfit, Mindy Vanucci explained in the documentary that when she left her home for work, she was dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt. When she arrived at Caesars Palace, she under went a transformation into what she referred to as a “Goddess.”

Vanucci credited Caesars Palace’s female dressers for her and the other

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153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 ibid.
157 Stripped and Teased.
servers' transformed beauty. Vanucci claimed, "These girls fuss over us trying to make us look as pretty as possible." Of course, these women began the process of transformation as they applied their make-up, attached cone-shaped hair pieces to the top of their heads, slipped into their short, revealing outfits, and then finally stepped into their 2 to 3-inch high-heeled shoes. Although Vanucci enjoyed her job, not all cocktail waitresses were in agreement with the styles of costumes they were required to wear. In 1999, more than half of the MGM Grand Hotel's cocktail waitresses voiced their complaints.

"To wear or not to wear," was the dilemma facing many of the MGM Grand casino cocktail waitresses. According to Dave Bern's article published in the Las Vegas Review Journal on February 9, 1999, he received an anonymous server's letter complaining about a proposed new uniform. The server wrote that the uniforms exposed "our entire buttocks as well as plenty of cleavage." She also claimed that 100 of the 180 cocktail waitresses at the MGM "do not want to wear these costumes." The protesting servers stated that "We do not work in a topless bar."

Cocktail waitresses at the MGM were not the first of the servers to undergo a drastic costume change. The Rio Hotel cocktail waitresses were already wearing costumes that revealed a substantial amount of their cleavage as well as their buttocks. The outfit's bottom portion was referred to as "butt-floss." In other

158 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid.
words, the cocktail waitresses’ buttocks were completely exposed except for a very small portion of the center where the buttocks meet. According to the server’s letter, the women who opposed the new costumes expressed that it “degrades, demeans, and humiliates us.”\textsuperscript{163}

Some cocktail waitresses, though, were not opposed to the g-string bottoms. Columnist John L. Smith of the \textit{Las Vegas Review Journal} quoted a woman at the Rio Hotel who said of waitresses there: “They loved their uniforms, thought they looked sexy and knew a little flank flesh flashing meant healthier tips from customers.”\textsuperscript{164} All of the past and current costumes have revealed women’s bodies in ways that could be considered a form of sexual exploitation. Yet, as was previously noted by Joyce Marshall, these women realized that “the nicer we were, the bigger the smile, the sexier the look, the touch on a hand, the better the tip.”\textsuperscript{165} These women were fully aware that they were being exploited and yet at the same time they were exploiting their customers. As the men ordered more drinks from these sexy waitresses, the larger the tips became. For this exploitation of their customers, cocktail waitresses were generously paid.

Also, the exploitation of women was not a new phenomenon in Las Vegas. Women’s bodies have long been visibly displayed in Las Vegas. Taxicabs have mounted signs on the roofs and sides that show women sprawled in very seductive positions. There are also billboards and hotel signs advertising women in revealing outfits, especially those promoting showgirls. The exploitation of female bodies can

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Smith, 2.
\textsuperscript{165} Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
also be seen in the costumes worn since the 1950s by cocktail waitresses, showgirls, and Keno girls. According to Smith, Las Vegas has been sexually exploiting its working women since the building of the casinos, and it has been a "billion-dollar legal racket."\footnote{John L. Smith "Las Vegas has a long way to go in dealing with sexual harassment," \textit{Las Vegas Review Journal}, 2001, 1. Taken from website \url{www.lvrj.com} on 10 Oct. 2001.}

Marshall stated that exploitation was a "double edged sword."\footnote{Author interview with Joyce Marshall.} Women who sought employment as a cocktail waitress understood the importance of looking sexy. After all, to get the job it was important to wear the right interviewing outfit. For many women, it was an outfit that was not part of their wardrobe. Both Lynn Snowden, author of \textit{Nine Lives: From Stripper to Schoolteacher}, and Joyce Marshall recalled the advice their friends gave them regarding a sexy interview outfit.

When Snowden announced her plans to be a Las Vegas cocktail waitress, a male friend told her it was very important to have a good push-up bra. She dressed herself in what her friend Sandy said to be "a good interview outfit." Over her push-up bra Snowden had a "leopard-print turtleneck, a black miniskirt, sheer black hose, and black pumps, and an awful lot of makeup." In Snowden's writing, she wrote that the interview outfit made her feel like a "delinquent hooker."\footnote{Snowden, 113.}

Marshall, who had never worn shorts until after she married, enlisted the help of her friend Judy to find the right mix of clothes. At Frederick's of Hollywood, Marshall purchased a bra that she claimed "pulled every inch of skin on my body into those two cups."\footnote{Author interview with Joyce Marshall.} After finding the right bra, Marshall and Judy shopped for
an outfit that was both low-cut and short. To make herself appear taller, Marshall also bought a pair of platform shoes. She was now ready for her big interview with the “five head guys Benninger, Benidict, Yeager, Rothkauf and Litwak.”

While Marshall waited in the hallway of the personnel office, she turned around and behind her stood a “tall, thin, beautiful girl with the biggest boobs” she had ever seen. Marshall remembered thinking, “I didn’t have a chance of getting this job.” To Marshall’s surprise, she received a call about a week after her interview to fit for a uniform.

Marshall, like many other women who sought employment as cocktail waitresses, was advised to look the part. It was the woman’s pretty face and sexy body that were being “interviewed.” Since there was no required job experience, cocktail waitressing was a lucrative means of income for many women who lacked other job skills. Yet for decades the image of cocktail waitresses was associated with prostitutes. Despite this criminalized reputation, cocktail waitresses have benefited from inflated service gratuities and profited from the overt display of their bodies.

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170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
III: Then there are the cocktail waitresses. Pretty girls can earn enormous tips and in earlier days they were expected to become bedmates to favored gamblers if a Pit Boss gave them the word.

Mario Puzo, 1976

In Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media, Susan Douglas reported that in the 1970s “only one percent of the 31 million working women earned $10,000 or more.”¹⁷² According to Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, authors of The Green Felt Jungle, cocktail waitresses of the Las Vegas Strip during the 1960s were earning over $20,000.00 a year. Their base salary was only $8.00 per day, which equaled an annual salary of $2000.00 per year. It was the supplemental tip income that made cocktail waitressing a lucrative form of employment on the Strip. Most cocktail waitresses expressed a desire to work in the casino’s pit area, where tips were heaviest. In that area, the smallest denomination of money circulated was the cartwheel or “silver dollar.”¹⁷³ This was a time when men were the dominant gamblers. This near-exclusively male environment, combined with close contact with the scantily dressed, beautiful cocktail waitresses, fostered an ego-style of heavy tipping. Bill Bonner, a news syndicate writer, explained that the male gambler equated money with courage and while gambling, they entered a “gaming trance” believing they were wiser than the house (casino). To reach this full ecstasy,

¹⁷² Susan Douglas, 176.
¹⁷³ Ed Reid, 93.
money was freely flashed about and the cocktail waitress was one of the lucky recipients.174

The gaming table section of the casino was and continues to be the most lucrative tipping area. Joyce Marshall remembered one of her “really really good customers, Mack.”175 During the 1970s, he visited the MGM once a month. According to Marshall, Mack was a green chip guy. In casinos, red chips were worth $5.00, green chips $25.00, black chips $100.00 and pink chips $500.00. Marshall recalled, “Mack was good for $25.00 with every drink.”176 On an average day, Marshall claimed to have earned $200.00 or more in tip money while working in the pit area of the casino.177 Cindy Trudell, another cocktail waitress of the 1970s, reminisced about the $300.00 a night in tips she easily earned.178 Of course, not every area of the casino was as lucrative as the pit.

In the lounge area during the 1970s, cocktail waitresses could receive tips of around $50.00 a night, equaling $250 a week.179 The hotel’s showroom section was considered the lowest tip yielding area. Stella Iaconis, a former cocktail waitress, worked the Sahara Hotel’s showroom during the 1950s. In an interview with Kay Long, a student at University of Nevada Las Vegas, she recalled that the smallest tip she remembered receiving was from billionaire Howard Hughes. When he and his

174 Bonner, as cited in Vogliotti, 240.
175 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
179 Reid, 97.
friends were seated, Iaconis was told, “You’ve got to take care of Howard Hughes.”\(^\text{180}\) She remembered him being very particular regarding the food he ate. That night he was the only one on the table of six or eight who did not have dinner. At the end of the night, Iaconis recalled Hughes “took care of the bill and he gave me a ten cent tip.”\(^\text{181}\) This was not a typical tip received for dinner shows or cocktail shows in the 1950s, but it illustrated in its extremity how small a tip could be given in this work area.

The showroom’s atmosphere and appearance were similar to that of a restaurant, and people normally tipped according to the suggested tip scale of ten-percent of the bill. Today, the tipping scale has changed to 15-20 percent of the bill. The casino areas, in contrast, were always rumbling with more excitement and spontaneity. The clanging of coins, the roars from crap tables, and the close contact with cocktail waitresses created a different atmosphere for generous tips.

Conditions changed and by the 1980s, corporations had taken over the Strip. Architecturally, the Strip began to look like an amusement park attracting families. According to Trudell, “Family entertainment has ruined Las Vegas.”\(^\text{182}\) The new gamblers are not solely interested in gambling. They are pushing strollers and are on a tight budget. When asked if they want a cocktail, they reply, “How much?”\(^\text{183}\) Also, many wives accompany their husbands to the casino floor, gambling side by side, and that usually lessens the amount of the tip a male gambler might have dropped on the cocktail waitress’s tray. All of this has had a negative effect on the

\(^{181}\) Ibid, 71. 
\(^{182}\) Trudell, 1. 
\(^{183}\) Ibid.
cocktail waitresses’ service gratuities. Despite the “tip reduction,” however, she continues to be scantily clad while serving the gambling clientele. The mob’s influence on costumes for the cocktail waitresses, a relaxed hiring policy, as well as illegally reporting less revenue than what was originally earned, left their legacies in Las Vegas. Since the takeover by corporations, though, the city and county of Las Vegas have implemented a work card requirement.

An article in the 1998 *Las Vegas Review Journal* by Chris Di Edoardo explained that the work card’s purpose was specifically to keep “miscreants like Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegel out of the modern Las Vegas work force.”^184^ To obtain this card, applicants were required to pay a processing fee, be fingerprinted, photographed, and submit to a criminal background check. If the individual had a felony record, she/he would not receive work clearance from the city and county of Las Vegas. According to the Assistant City Attorney John Redlein, a person’s “character counts.”^185^ 

Former cocktail waitress Bobbi Dugan recalled, “When the mob ran this town, if you were a felon, all they cared about was if you were a good employee, the rest didn’t matter.”^186^ Di Edoardo recounted the story of an anonymous woman whose application for employment as a cocktail waitress had been denied because of her “lengthy history of prostitution.”^187^ Redlein, a member of the State Bar of Nevada’s Character and Fitness Committee, defended the city’s decision, stating, “In

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^185^ Ibid, 2.

^186^ Snowden, 116.

^187^ Di Edoardo, 2.
this town, we know that being a cocktail waitress is an honorable occupation.”\textsuperscript{188}

The exclusion of this applicant from a job that projected an image of sex was not engineered to prevent a woman from returning to her old ways; rather, it was to keep the gaming district free of any questionable employees. Obviously, the woman denied a working card had not been discrete during her prior employment and any direct solicitation actions on her part could have proven detrimental to the Strip’s establishments. After all, according to Bill Bonner, there was a discrete system in place that handled prostitution on the Strip. Therefore, known free-lancers were not welcomed.\textsuperscript{189}

The implications or popular assumptions that cocktail waitresses also served as prostitutes derived from the hotel and casino management’s early clandestine promotion of sex for sale. In \textit{The Girls of Nevada}, Gabriel Vogliotti revealed that the big hotels on the Strip agreed to “suggest sex but not reach a point where anything can be called vulgar.”\textsuperscript{190} In the mid-1940s, gangster Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel invented a formula that, according to Vogliotti, “could be put this way”:\textsuperscript{191}

There must be girls, as many as the men demand. If this gets you in to the astronomy of how many girls are needed for three or six million men a year, well, accept the figures. You can’t be so vulgar that you offend the middle-class America which fills your hotels. It must not become so open, so raw that it hurts the real business, which is gambling. Separately, since so many of the babes are criminals, who will blackmail, rob, or maim a customer, the hotel, the sheriff, the D.A. (District Attorney) must protect him for consequences. But the town, the state itself, must accept the fact that it is in the sex business, and that all must push the sex image.\textsuperscript{192}

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Vogliotti, 225.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 235.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
In the early 1970s, Bonner traveled to Las Vegas to gather information for a story on prostitution. He opted to go straight to the source—"call-girls, showgirls, cocktail waitress"—who all gave him the same line, "Who me?" Bonner noted that he found a "vast, smooth mendacity, a universal conspiracy to deny." Among the women he interviewed, none were willing to expose themselves, or to admit any knowledge of sex for sale. Bonner did uncover evidence that the gambling industry had developed rules that allowed prostitution on the Strip without the hotel owners' direct involvement.

To prevent any reflection of illegality and/or immorality on the part of hotel owners, explicit orders were sent through the chain of command. Bonner also noted that the sex system entailed "an understanding between casino manager and his pit bosses, and harmony between bar manager, and his captains and waiters." Others involved included "security men, waiters, maitreds, and vice presidents." All were to be discrete in their actions and make no reference to the owners' knowledge or involvement. Despite the hush-hush rule, Bonner found several self-declared experts who claimed to know "how many girls were on the call list of the Sands," and who would be able to "break them down by age, weight, and bust size."

According to Bonner, those involved in the Strip's sale of sex had what is referred to as a "register" and a "card file." The register was a list of showgirl names and the card files contained the names of cocktail waitresses. The women on these registers and in these files had expressed an interest in servicing the casino's

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193 Bonner, as cited in Vogliotti, 219.
194 Ibid, 223.
195 Ibid, 238.
clientele. The existence of these lists helped to support Bonner's inference that not all provocatively dressed working women in Las Vegas were prostitutes.\textsuperscript{196} Yet, the mere fact that these women walked the casino floors dressed in revealing costumes also contributed to stereotyping all of them as prostitutes.

During Joyce Marshall's employment as a cocktail waitress in the 1970s, she recalled that the "casino bosses and bell-man had their own girls.\textsuperscript{197} Marshall stated:

\begin{quote}
There were times when a boss would ask you if you were interested in going out with a certain player because that player had shown an interest in taking you to dinner (or bed) or whatever, but we were never pressured into doing it. It was just 'yes' or 'no.'\textsuperscript{198}
\end{quote}

For Marshall and most of the day shift waitresses with whom she was acquainted, the answer was no. They had husbands and children waiting for them at home. She did remember one cocktail waitress who was supposed to be a "very high priced hooker."\textsuperscript{199} This assumption was made since she was very pretty, lived very well, and most important, the cocktail waitress had a close relationship with a bell captain. He, according to Marshall, "was noted for being the best at what he did.\textsuperscript{200}

The image of prostitution strongly attached to the cocktail waitresses' costumes. In a 1960 photograph, a cocktail waitress is wearing a fitted, short, one-piece outfit. The skirt barely covers her buttocks and the blouse is cut extremely low in the front as well as the back. Over the decades, the cocktail waitresses' costumes

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{197} Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
\item\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
progressively exposed more of the women’s cleavage and buttocks. Vogliotti stated that casino owners and their managers “were quick to learn that pretty whores do pull in the men, and that a lot of pretty girls are as good a way of attracting males as paying Frank Sinatra $1000 a minute.” Las Vegas casinos did not have a place for women who looked heavy or pregnant in the cocktail waitresses’ uniform.

Pilar Martinez, a cocktail waitress at the Imperial Palace in 1990s, was offered several options when she announced that she was pregnant. She could either “take a job as a bar-back or showroom waitress or take unpaid leave.” Martinez’s attorney, Richard Segerblom, stated that an employer “can legally transfer women to other positions if they can’t perform the essential function of the job during the pregnancy.” Yet, Martinez noted that “her ability to safely serve drinks was never an issue.” Work in the bar-backs and showrooms is actually much more strenuous. During a cocktail waitress’s pregnancy, she had to be accommodated with a maternity outfit and allowed the use of flat-heeled shoes. The Imperial Palace believed, though, that an important part of the job was having a “beautiful body” and being “willing to expose that body and wear apparatus to make it even more beautiful like high heels and push-up bras.” Attorney Segerblom insisted in the pregnancy case that “the bottom line is it’s sexual discrimination.”

In the 1970s, Marshall remembered having constantly to monitor her weight. MGM Hotel rules stated that no cocktail waitress was allowed to weigh more than ten pounds over her weight at hire. She and the other cocktail waitresses had their

\[201\] Vogliotti, 15.
\[203\] Ibid, 2.
bodies measured by a casino employee on a regular basis and were weighed once a month.\textsuperscript{204} The monitoring of the cocktail waitresses' weight continued to be an important requirement. Casino owners have always required cocktail waitresses to be sexually attractive in their costumes.

In the late 1990s, Mirage Hotel cocktail waitresses attacked casino founder Steve Wynn for criticizing them for having, in his opinion, "fat asses"\textsuperscript{205} and for claiming that "they were too fat to serve drinks."\textsuperscript{206} According to Attorney Pamela Thompson, cocktail waitresses were required to "sign a policy [statement] that they will not gain more than six pounds over their body weight at the time of hire."\textsuperscript{207} As the Imperial Palace's personnel director, Michael Nelson, had written, "The scantily clad female employee is a symbol of all that is popular and expected in Las Vegas."\textsuperscript{208}

In response to lawsuits over the contractual issues relating to pregnancy and weight, Ron Harper, a resident of Las Vegas, stated to the editor of the \textit{Las Vegas Review-Journal} that the look of the cocktail waitress was very important. When Harper "drives down the Strip, the sexiness of the cocktail waitresses is one of the main factors"\textsuperscript{209} in his decision as to where he will spend time gambling. A pregnant server would not fulfill his image of "sexy." He agreed with the hotel's assessment that a cocktail waitress's job description involves more than merely serving drinks.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{204} Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
\item \textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
The glamour image of the cocktail waitress was considered to be a large part of her function on the casino floor. She must be able to maintain the job-required standard while continuing to project a sexy image. This requirement has been part of the cocktail waitress's job description since the opening of the Strip's casinos in the 1940s.

Cocktail waitresses were dressed in revealing outfits that earned them a reputation for being prostitutes. Despite these illicit connotations linked to cocktail waitresses, their scantily-clad look contributed to their lucrative supplemental tip income. They continued to be a welcomed fixture in the casino as well as the bearers of the burden of male fantasy working and dealing with clients' sexual advances. As John L. Smith stated in his column in the Las Vegas Review Journal, "She [the cocktail waitress] is one part gambling goddess, one part booze-hauling ballerina as she negotiates a gauntlet of obstacles and insults."\footnote{John L. Smith, “Stationized or else: Many longtime Santa Fe cocktail waitresses await fate,” Las Vegas Review Journal, 1999, 1. Taken from website www.lvrj.com on 10 Oct. 2001.}
IV: "The bosses" is the Las Vegas equivalent of "the Man," covering every rank of power from a floor supervisor to a casino manager to the Mob to God. The bosses are, almost without exception, men.

Jane O'Reilly

The social milieu in which the cocktail waitress performed her job was predominately regimented by men. There were the male casino floor bosses, male bartenders, and male clients who for decades viewed women as objects. As stated by Amie Williams, director of Stripped and Teased: Tales from Las Vegas Women, the "women of Las Vegas have always been the objects and never the subjects." As objects these women were not taken seriously, but they were admired and desired. As objects, these women were technically controlled and directed by their male "superiors."

On the casino floor, pit bosses have complete control as to when the cocktail waitress can enter his area and take beverage orders. According to Sally Anne Fowler, author of How To Become a Casino Cocktail Waitress, it was important for the cocktail waitress to confer with her section's boss to see if she can "just go" or if she must wait for his signal. Fowler explained that "just go" meant the cocktail waitress was allowed to keep circling her station without waiting for signals from the

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211 Stripped and Teased.
212 Spradley, 11.
pit boss. The pit bosses' known authority could be used against a cocktail waitress, preventing her from serving customers from whom in turn she would have received service gratuities that greatly supplemented her income.

Joyce Marshall, an ex-cocktail waitress of the 1970s, recalled pit bosses who did not like certain cocktail waitresses and would keep them out of the station all day. This made it impossible for the server to earn tips. She stated that “they are the ones [who] determined if you could take a round of drinks.”214 The pit boss would stand in the center of his station and if a customer requested a drink he would then either clap his hands or use some type of clicking noise maker to signal the cocktail waitress to approach his area.

When the cocktail waitress was given the “just go” signal, she became, as Fowler put it, “A master juggler, not only of drinks, but of personalities.”215 Her mind had to be constantly moving. In the pit area, she had to service ten blackjack tables: at full capacity that was sixty people. Fowler’s manual explained that timing was very important and that the cocktail waitress must serve all beverages from the inside, standing away from the dealer. She must not take orders when bets or pay-outs were in progress. Once the table’s order was taken, the server should place a napkin in front of the ordering customer. Upon returning with the drinks, the cocktail waitress must wait and again make sure that the customer was not placing a bet, the dealer was not dealing cards or removing bets or paying-off bets. Although her work was important, she was the object and not the subject. She must wait until

214 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
215 Fowler, 5.
everyone else’s actions were completed before she could perform her job. In the midst of all the hustle and bustle of the casino, Marshall stated that it was the responsibility of the cocktail waitress to make sure that the pit bosses had “their bottle of water, coffee, tea, the way they wanted it.”

Cocktail waitresses had to stroke the male ego of the pit bosses, while negotiating the masculine dominance in the casino. Marshall also claimed that they needed to “give them a big hello and always tell them how great they looked.” Fowler recommended that no matter how chaotic the casino, cocktail waitresses should “try to maintain a steady and sane pace.”

There were times when remaining calm was virtually impossible for the cocktail waitress. Pit bosses have been known to command the immediate attention of the cocktail waitress if a “high roller” signaled for service. As instructed in Fowler's manual, cocktail waitresses were to adhere to the boss's orders and later return to her previous order. This of course could cause problems for the server who had already taken another table's beverage order. Those customers awaiting their drinks may have become agitated because of the lengthy wait time and the cocktail waitress’s service gratuity could be affected. Of course pit bosses' interference with the cocktail waitresses' service routine was not the only time that she might not be able to service her customers on a timely basis. Bartenders, who

216 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
219 Fowler, 9.
also had a special type of authority over the cocktail waitress, could refuse to fill an order for various reasons, sending the cocktail waitress to the back of the line.\textsuperscript{220}

Besides being subjected to the whims of the casino pit bosses, the cocktail waitress also had to contend with the whims of bartenders whose position could, as stated by Marshall, either “make or break the cocktail waitress.”\textsuperscript{221} During Marshall’s employment in the 1970s, she stated that there were “no women bartenders in the MGM or anywhere.”\textsuperscript{222} The male bartender ruled in Las Vegas. Studies reported in James Spradley’s book, \textit{The Cocktail Waitress: Woman’s Work in a Man’s World}, revealed that:

Waitresses recognize their low status in the bar and need to be subordinate to the bartenders. They learn that it is necessary to operate within the confines of the general handicap rule. They know that the needs of bartenders must come first, even before their own or those of customers.\textsuperscript{223}

The bartender was in control of how fast a cocktail waitress could deliver her customers’ drinks. To remain on the bartender’s good side, she needed to place her beverage orders according to same types of alcohol and remember to tip him generously.

Lynn Snowden, author of \textit{Nine Lives: From Stripper to Schoolteacher} and an ex-cocktail waitress of the 1990s, recalled her friend Bobbi’s last minute advice:

The bartender can screw you up real bad; you’re dead if you can’t make up to this guy. You have to order the drinks, do all the work, and then you have to toke [tip] him. And he makes twice as much as you by just walking in the door!\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{223} Spradley, 88.
\textsuperscript{224} Snowden, 121.
Snowden described him as the “all-powerful bartender” and it was a position that she claimed to be “almost always male.” As a cocktail waitress approached the bar, she needed to rearrange her beverage order so that the bartender could hold both drink guns, “one for liquor and one for mixers,”225 one in each hand. The ordering system was instituted when bourbon was the popular drink. According to the manual, drinks were called without actually using the word bourbon; drinks were called out “Water! Soda! Ginger!” This meant bourbon with water, with soda, and with ginger ale. Then the waitress ordered drinks in the following order: scotch, brandy, rum, vodka, gin, and tequila. Orders for beer and wine were placed last. If a cocktail waitress called her drinks out of order, the bartender would usually stop and send her to the back of the line. In Marshall’s experience, she found that “if he put out 300 drinks for you and you give him $10.00, the next day when you go in you will be hard pressed to get any service.”226 The entire relationship between the bartender and the cocktail waitress was designed to make the bartender’s job as easy as possible and, at the same, to ensure that he benefited from her job. The cocktail waitress worked in an almost entirely male-dominated sphere. These masculine surroundings could have encouraged male customers to make sexual advances and abusive comments more freely, and to initiate physical contact with cocktail waitresses.

225 Ibid. 122.
226 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
Cocktail waitresses experienced sexual abuse in various ways. Snowden recalled that late one morning a male customer ordered drinks for his table. He ordered “Four Screaming Orgasms” and insisted that she repeat his order, giggling all the while. She also stated that a table of men who had just left a bachelor party decided to check if she was a real woman. One of the married men, according to Snowden, “Decided to put his head up my skirt while I was taking their drink orders.” When she reacted, another customer stated, “He’s just makin’ sure she’s a real woman!” What stopped Snowden from slugging the customer was the Tropicana Hotel’s motto: “The Friendliest Employees in Las Vegas!”

Marshall also recalled being grabbed by a customer. She had just finished taking orders from a woman playing at one of the tables and was moving to walk away when a man grabbed her arm. According to Marshall, “That is a huge NO. Customers were not allowed to touch the servers. When Marshall looked at him, he told her to bring him a Tom Collins. After she wrote it down, he grabbed her again saying, “Try to get it here this week will ya.” Marshall’s tray was too full, so she did not bring that individual’s drink on the first round. The pit boss, Jimmy Yager, clapped and Marshall responded. When she got to Yager, that “nasty individual” was standing next to him. Yager proceeded to question Marshall, inquiring where the man’s drink was. Marshall’s responded, “I had too many drinks, and he wasn’t playing and since he told me to bring it this week, I put him

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227 Snowden, 120.
228 Ibid.
229 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
down for Tuesday." \textsuperscript{230} Both she and Yager had a hard time keeping a straight face, but eventually she did bring the customer a drink.

Not all customers were physically abusive, although there were those in the lounge areas who felt it was okay to put their arms around the cocktail waitress. It was done under the pretense that the music was too loud for the cocktail waitress to hear the order. Snowden had a customer who put his arm around her waist and pulled her in close to him all the while placing an order. The disgusting part of that night, as expressed by Snowden, was that she endured hours of loud lounge music and "creepy fat guys" putting their arms around her waist for a "lousy $56.00 in tips." \textsuperscript{231}

Las Vegas is continuously changing, but since casinos first opened their doors females have dominated the position of cocktail waitress. This history has not pertained to pit bosses and bartenders. Women began moving into jobs previously occupied by males, but cocktail waitresses have remained exclusively female. While men may continue to view servers as objects and not subjects, the servers have defined themselves as subjects and have exploited their employment for material gain, agents of their own vaguely illicit empowerment.

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{231} Snowden, 118.
Joyce Marshall felt empowered in her sexy costume. She stated that a conservative costume would have probably “hurt our tips. We would have resorted to wearing tight blouses, unbuttoned half way down. Sad, but true, sex sells.” A lot of the female empowerment in Las Vegas came from the amount of money a cocktail waitress could earn. Those who decided to earn a $100.00 per day could relax once that amount was earned. Cocktail waitresses were like entrepreneurs; the faster they worked, the more money they could earn.

Despite the cocktail waitresses’ important and vital involvement in Las Vegas’s successful growth, these waitresses did not work in a secure environment. At any given time and for almost any reason, they could be let go. Joyce Marshall experienced that very threat. She approached her boss and asked for time off because her uniform’s stays were cutting into her side and she was bleeding. He replied: “If you walk off the floor, I have 700 girls waiting for your job.” A cocktail waitress’s position was and continues to be in high demand.

She lends compassion to the distraught player who has lost all his money as well as congratulations to the excited winner. She is a server, a friend, and a witness, all the while balancing drinks on her tray and walking on spiked heels. Players have

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232 Author interview with Joyce Marshall.
233 Ibid, 6.
become so accustomed to the “pretty and sympathetic sounds that they find in her presence”\textsuperscript{234} that they consider her an added feature of the casino environment.

The cocktail waitress’s contributions to the success of the casinos, lounges, and showrooms have yet to be fully recognized and appreciated. Society’s desire for more leisure activities and the welcomed presence of a scantily-dressed cocktail waitress have nonetheless aided her continued popularity and prosperity. Cocktail waitresses have financially prospered in a job that required no educational skill, only the ability and willingness to wear sexy costumes in spiked high heels. She remains a sexual outlaw, of sorts, “An accessory to the world’s most sophisticated, most flattering larceny”\textsuperscript{235} as Vogliotti testified in 1975.

Both showgirls and cocktail waitresses demonstrated the ability to negotiate their liminal spaces in Las Vegas; they managed to tread a fine line between respectable and disreputable sexuality, between legality and lawlessness. They exploited their sexual physicality and their bodies for profit and empowerment, despite male domination over their employment and in spite of male misunderstandings of the female uses of their own sexuality—as in the case of vaguely “criminalized” inferences that cocktail waitresses also served as prostitutes. The limits to this liberating strategy for female success in Las Vegas, suggested in part by the age-imposed time limits on their careers, became even more evident as women attempted to enter a job market not exclusive to females: gaming. Female dealers encountered discrimination on many levels as they pursued careers inside

\textsuperscript{234} Vogliotti, 240.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.

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gambling arenas. They also discovered just how threatening their sexuality was for the men of Las Vegas.
The headline in a 1966 Las Vegas local newspaper proclaimed "Topless 21 Dealers Hit" a real "hit" the day after Jaelynn Lee and five other female dealers took off their casino-issued white blouses and dealt cards topless at the Silver Nugget Casino. Major Riddle, part-owner of the casino, thought up this crowd-drawing gimmick that was sure to cause a media frenzy in Las Vegas. The Silver Nugget was the first and only casino in Las Vegas to have topless female 21 or Blackjack dealers. Riddle had decided to use women dealers and showgirls as the lures to draw customers to his casino. He adopted a back-to-the-basics approach--beautiful women--to boost the casino's business.

A year prior to Riddle's topless gimmick, he had placed an ad in the Reno newspaper because that area had a large labor pool of female card dealers and that was what he wanted, female 21 dealers. In 1965, the Silver Nugget Casino opened its doors in Las Vegas with only women 21 dealers in the casino. After a year in business, Riddle approached the women dealers and proposed his scheme. He explained that he wanted the graveyard shift of the 21 dealers to perform their jobs.

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236 Delores Marconi, "Taking it from the top," Las Vegas Style, August 1994, 36.
237 Ibid.
topless. Lee remembered that she and the others questioned the idea but thought it to be “outrageous enough to be fun.” According to Lee, “A lot of us had stars in our eyes.”238 Going topless might have been a way to fame, or it might have been a way to move up in their careers. Lee also noted that there were many rumors circulating about women dealers who did not go topless possibly losing their jobs. She claimed, however, that there was no pressure to go topless nor any threat of being fired. Riddle had left it up to the individual. Those who decided to go topless did so after a lot of thought and approached the novel idea, according to Lee, with the attitude of “why not?”

Lee designed the new top that she and the other female dealers would wear. She stated, “What I came up with was made to look like the Playboy bunny costume, cut high on the sides, but topless and with pasties.” Lee further commented that going topless went hand-in-hand with the Silver Nugget’s slogan, “Where our only product is your pleasure.” This attitude mirrored the casino’s printed brochure, which featured a young woman in “made-for-walkin’ knee-high boots, her backside wrapped in red mesh stockings.” Riddle’s newest gimmick of topless female dealers did not go unnoticed by Las Vegas’s city and county officials or by state officers. It was the hottest issue in Las Vegas and state officials vowed to shut down the casino.

The Nevada Attorney General Harvey Dickerson did not think much of Riddle’s midnight gimmick. Dickerson claimed that many of the casino’s other female dealers were not in agreement and had filed complaints with his office.

238 Ibid.
Dickerson warned Riddle that if the six topless women did not dress in standard white blouses while out on the casino floor, he would shut down the Silver Nugget Casino.

Both the Nevada Gaming Commission’s Chairman Milton Keifer and W. E. “Butch” Leypoldt, a Gaming Control Board member, joined in Dickerson’s campaign to bar topless female dealers. Leypoldt was quoted as saying that having topless female dealers at the Silver Nugget was “a little out of line.” In Dickerson’s frantic search for a Las Vegas ordinance that would allow him to shut down the Silver Nugget Casino, he discovered that no law existed that directly addressed the issue of topless dealers. Despite this impediment, Dickerson vowed to shut the casino down. According to Lee, Riddle did not take him seriously and he continued “to fearlessly go where no casino owner had gone before,” as writer Delores Marconi put it in a 1994 article on the subject.

Dickerson, though, was able to prove that an ordinance allowing women to dance topless did not apply to dealers. He argued that “gambling is directly involved,” and therefore all dealers must adhere to the rules regarding decency. Since dealing cards was exclusively for males, women needed to adhere to the male dress code. Eventually, Lee and the other topless dealers were forced to work in their casino-issued white blouses, but not before there had been the anticipated “frenzy in the media.” Riddle’s promotion of topless women dealers turned out to be a great advertising stunt for the Silver Nugget. The media attention also meant potential career opportunities for the legendary topless 21 dealers.

Jaelynn Lee later admitted that she had not taken full advantage of her famed
performance and the free publicity it provided. A representative of Playboy magazine approached Lee to do a centerfold shoot a short time after the media frenzy. She remembered Riddle discouraging her from such a career move. Almost thirty years later, Lee could still express chagrin at her lost opportunity: “I've been kicking myself ever since.”\(^\text{239}\) Although she turned down what many might see as the chance of a lifetime, Lee did appear in Stag magazine and Modern Man magazine. Appearing in Playboy, however, would have afforded her greater financial opportunities.

Despite the fact that Lee did not pursue her chance at a Playboy centerfold, she did rub elbows with many famous people. She recalled having dealt for high-limit games that involved the “Oakland Raiders, assorted sports stars, movie stars, and well known politicians.” Lee further stated that the Las Vegas casino business had changed over the years, for the better. She remembered how “pit bosses could get away with saying anything, especially when you were on a losing game.” Yet, Lee’s fondest memories went back to 1966, when the “tops came off.”

Major Riddle’s use of beautiful topless women to attract gamblers to his casino was not a new idea in Las Vegas. For decades, beautiful sexy women had been an integral part of the Strip’s advertisements to lure potential gamblers. Topless showgirls were already performing in Las Vegas during the 1960s and there were huge signs lit by thousands of neon light bulbs advertising these revues. Within the casino pit, lounges, and showrooms, cocktail waitresses served drinks while wearing skimpy casino-issued costumes. The use of topless and semi-topless women as employees as well as a form of advertisement was not anything new on the Las

\(^{239}\) Ibid.
Vegas Strip. What was new about Riddle's gimmick was that the topless women were dealers.

Although it was legal in 1964 for women to be employed as card dealers, it had only just become legal and these women were not readily accepted. In 1958, Las Vegas's City and County Commission had passed an ordinance that barred women from dealing cards. It was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which "laid the foundation for eventually breaking the sex barrier with casinos." Potential employees could not be denied employment because of their "sex, race, religion, and national origin." Once card dealing was opened to women, casinos provided women with yet another form of employment that increased women's opportunities for financial and sexual freedom.

This chapter examines women dealers who were employed in Las Vegas between the 1960s and the 1990s. The materials used for this examination include interviews, case studies, casino manuals, and historical photographs, among others. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section of this chapter discusses the 1958 Las Vegas City and County ordinance that banned women from dealing cards. One Las Vegas resident at the time asked, "What is going to happen to the quality of life for the men of Las Vegas if women would become dealers?" This was the major issue during the city and county's meeting that decided whether or not women should be allowed as card dealers in Las Vegas. During the 1950s, Las

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Vegas was one of the few cities that had a large number of female employees. These working women were not in the business of gambling, however. They were employed in either entertainment, service, or domestic jobs. In less than a decade, though, women were allowed to be card dealers because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The second part of this chapter discusses the multiple layers of supervision to which female dealers were subjected, where their every movement was observed. Female dealers could be openly reprimanded by their supervisors and they also had to contend with sexual harassment from both supervisors and customers. They had no job protection and could be fired for any reason. Dealers did not belong to any union, therefore they had no recourse for grievances. The chapter's third section discusses how female dealers were required to perform their jobs in a professional manner and yet still appear to be friendly. It was important that the dealers be serious, as gambling was a serious cash business.

The fourth section elaborates on the appearance of female dealers as they dealt with age discrimination, auditions, and casino-issued uniforms. It was very important that a female dealer get into the business during her early twenties and thirties. It was an unwritten rule, but many casinos did not hire dealers over the age of forty. Those who came late to the profession were allowed to audition, but were never hired. Despite the demand for youth, female dealers were not part of the casino's sexual lure; their uniforms did not enhance their beauty. Their faces and hands were the only exposed parts of their bodies. There were several manuals that explained that make-up and jewelry were to be limited and hair should be pulled
back away from the dealer's face.

The fifth and final part of this chapter, the conclusion, discloses that female dealers were stripped of their sexuality and the economic potential of combining sex and dealing. Their presence at first was not readily accepted, but overtime women dealers entered another form of Las Vegas employment that provided financial independence and that ultimately separated them from the women in Las Vegas who did exploit their sexuality. As card dealers, women's beautiful bodies and their willingness to expose themselves were not determining factors. The female dealer's dealing skills, her ability to work under layers of supervision, and perform as a professional allowed her to stake her claim as a card dealer on the Las Vegas Strip; desexualizing female dealers proved necessary to allay the fears of male dealers who saw women dealers as a real economic threat.
Therefore, be it resolved by the Board of Commissioners of the City of Las Vegas at a regular meeting thereof held on the 5th day of November 1958 that it be declared as the policy of said Board that no women be employed as "dealers", as such term is commonly understood in gambling circles, within the gambling clubs and houses of the City of Las Vegas. This prohibition is not deemed to apply to shills, check rackers, change girls, cocktail waitresses, and bingo games.

Las Vegas City Clerk, 1958

One of the telling arguments presented to the Las Vegas City Commission in its hearing on female dealers involved the claim that casinos in Reno, Nevada had experienced a substantial loss of business because of female dealers. Eddie Draper, a Las Vegas resident, testified before the commission that a Reno banker estimated that "$50,000,000.00 in gambling business has come down to Las Vegas since the advent of women dealers there." He also claimed that the wives of gamblers were jealous when their husbands sat at the tables and gambled with female dealers. The potential loss of business and the arousal of jealous wives were not the only reasons to vote for an ordinance that would prevent women from dealing in Las Vegas. Male dealers stated that if women were allowed to deal in Las Vegas, they would lose their jobs.

Ed Forsine, a new Las Vegas resident, testified that he was forced out of Reno because of female dealers. "I just came down here as the girls drove me out. Why should they hire me for $25.00 a day when they could hire a girl for $15.00?"

243 Donna Burrows, *The Woman 21 Dealer in Las Vegas: An Examination of Her Special Place in the Gaming Industry* (California: California Coast University, 1993), 82.

244 Ibid, 84.
Wage discrimination was a common and accepted practice throughout the United States, but in Las Vegas it was perceived as devastating for male dealers. As the commission’s meeting continued, several other Las Vegas residents testified in favor of employing only male dealers. One unnamed resident stated, “Las Vegas is the highest church town per capita in the United States. We favor men over women because men are the head of the family.” Still, there were many women living in Las Vegas during this time who were raising children on their own, and therefore they too could have been considered the heads of their families.

As the hearing continued, Draper asked that all male dealers present stand if they had experienced a loss of employment in either Reno or Lake Tahoe because women had replaced them. According to the minutes of the Las Vegas commission, a significant number of men in the audience stood. This physical statement overrode the previous testimony of several women dealers who were fighting to keep their dealing jobs. One of these women was Betty Cotton. She testified that she had been employed for eleven years as a dealer in Las Vegas. She agreed with the proposal of not hiring new women dealers, but felt that she should be allowed to continue in her present employment.

Another female dealer, Polly Carson, testified that the real issue behind all of the arguments had to do with wage differences. She claimed that she earned more hourly pay than some male dealers in Las Vegas did because she had been a card dealer in Las Vegas for the past ten years. Seniority was a major reason why

245 Ibid, 81.
incoming women earned less money. Connie Delaney confirmed Carson’s claim when she stood up and testified that the wage scale was supposed to be at $22.50 per day. Women started at $17.50 per day with the knowledge that eventually they would receive pay raises that would elevate their pay. She further added that the moral issues presented were ridiculous. The men who were not working were replaced because of their age. Carson stated that “the clubs on the Strip are all going to train and hire their own men and the old dealers will be out anyway.”\textsuperscript{246}

Despite all of the testimony presented, the Board of Commissioners declared the following resolution:

\begin{quote}
The employment of women as dealers in gambling houses is contrary to the best interests of the City of Las Vegas and its Citizens because such activity on the part of women creates bad publicity for the area and tends to induce certain people to gamble who would not otherwise; and from a consideration of all the facts as to the employment or non-employment of women, the Board feels that it is in the public interest and for the general welfare, protection of public safety, and for the protection of the public that women be prevented from engaging in the occupation of dealers within the gambling houses and clubs of the City of Las Vegas.\textsuperscript{247}
\end{quote}

This resolution stated that women dealers would create bad publicity. It is not clear what type of bad publicity the commission meant since Las Vegas casinos were already using advertisements that featured sexy women as a lure to Las Vegas, which was already deemed “sin city.” In publicity shots of the city, there were photographs of women who danced in the chorus line for the Frontier, Flamingo, and Thunderbird Hotels. The photographs were dated as early as the mid-1940s.

\textsuperscript{246} Ibid, 78.
\textsuperscript{247} Burrows, 85.
The women posing were dressed in costumes that revealed their full legs and were also cut low across their breasts. It is difficult to determine the type of bad publicity that women dealers would have created, especially given Las Vegas' embrace of female sexuality. The problem women dealers posed had much more to do with employment problems for male dealers.

By 1964, attention to civil rights was working in favor of forcing Las Vegas to change the 1958 city and county ordinance that barred women from employment as card dealers. Although Las Vegas's Board of Commissioners was aware of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited sexual discrimination in employment, it took the commission another 6 years before the 1958 ordinance was removed from the law books. The Strip's casinos were also slow to comply with the law, but the El Cortez Hotel, along with several other downtown Las Vegas casinos, and the Strip's Silver Nugget, did search to hire female dealers. However, there was not a large female dealer labor pool in Las Vegas, so the casinos sought female employees from Reno and Lake Tahoe. In Jaellyn Lee's case, she had been a dealer in Lake Tahoe and in 1964 she moved to Las Vegas where she later was hired by casino owner Major Riddle in 1965.

The shortage in Las Vegas's female dealer pool was due to the lack of qualified females, not surprising given the legal discrimination against hiring women dealers. According to Donna Burrows, author of *The Woman 21 Dealer in Las Vegas: An Examination of her Special Place in the Gaming Industry*, in 1966 there

248 McCracken, 67.
249 Marconi, 36.
was only one dealer school among three that existed in Las Vegas that allowed women to enroll in its classes. 250 This little city in the middle of the Mojave Desert was able legally to prevent women from attending dealer schools. After the 1958 ordinance was repealed, card-dealing institutes were compelled by law to open their doors to women students. These new pioneering women of the Strip would have to overcome many obstacles. As Michele Comeau, an ex-casino employee stated, "Women who will not or cannot develop the skills necessary to deflect unwanted advances will probably be happier working in another business." 251

With the opening of positions as card dealers, women were given another type of employment that allowed them to experience and exploit Las Vegas's booming economy and the business of gambling, but they were subjected to the masculine temperaments of gamblers, floor men, and pit bosses. They worked under various stressful conditions of surveillance that included the famous "eye in the sky." It was mentally, emotionally, and physically challenging, but those who were able to overcome these challenges experienced the benefits of free-flowing money.

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250 Burrows, 26.
251 Ibid, 27.
II: There is no job protection whatsoever... There is always that insecurity in the back of your mind. Any day, for any reason, they can come up to you and say there has been a change in personnel.

Terri Gilbert

The manual *How to Become a High Paid Las Vegas Casino Dealer*, written by Bob Kofol and Timothy A. Madden in 1986, explained that dealers work under tight and close supervision. There are several layers of supervisors, consisting of Floor Men, Pit Bosses, Shift Bosses, as well as the famous eye-in-the-sky; all observe the movements of each dealer. This type of close supervision posed a variety of problems for women dealers entering into the casino business of dealing cards.252

Donna Burrows, author of *The Woman 21 Dealer in Las Vegas*, stated that “It takes time to get used to someone standing behind you watching your every move.”253 It was the responsibility of the Floor Man to count every hand dealt. The casino expected 450 hands to be dealt per hour. The concept behind this count was that the more hands dealt, the greater the profit for the casino. Another reason for the layers of supervision was to observe the dealers and gamblers for any sign of cheating. According to Mario Puzo, author of *Mario Puzo: Inside Las Vegas*,

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252 Bob Kofol and Timothy A. Madden, *How To Become A High paid Las Vegas Casino Dealer* (Las Vegas: Scorpio Press, 1989), 1. In many cases, of course, the working conditions affected women and men equally.

253 Burrows, 13.
cheating in blackjack was ultimately done between the dealer and the gambler.\textsuperscript{254} There also were gamblers who partnered up, sat at the same table and gambled together, attempting to cheat the casino. The dealer who participated in any scam was aware of the harsh punishment to be expected if discovered.

Wallace Turner, author of \textit{Gamblers' Money}, wrote that “A dealer who cheats the house seriously may count on being severely beaten.”\textsuperscript{255} It was even rumored that there were some cheating dealers buried in unmarked graves in the desert. Turner did not provide any information to substantiate such rumors, but he did state that the mere fact that the rumors existed helped in “diminishing the natural acquisitive instincts of dealers.”\textsuperscript{256} The well-known threat against cheating dealers could have been another reason why casino owners were against the hiring of female dealers.

There was also the ever-present threat of open ridiculing that almost every female dealer experienced. Casino supervisors, both male and female, were known openly to reprimand female dealers, which caused many of them to experience the “hot, wet trickle of tears while trying to deal.”\textsuperscript{257} These same conditions likewise applied to male dealers. An unnamed male dealer, quoted by Burrows, recalled a former pit boss’s humiliating statement while he was dealing. “What nerve! He kept calling me ‘Fatty’ and ‘Big Boy’ and I couldn’t say anything.”\textsuperscript{258} Of course, this

\textsuperscript{254} Mario Puzo, \textit{Mario Puzo: Inside Las Vegas} (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1976), 168.
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid, 25.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{258} Burrows, 22.
male dealer claimed that most supervisors were a bit more careful, but when they did
go off on a dealer, they really enjoyed "direct off-color remarks, especially to female
dealers."\(^{259}\) He further stated that recipients of such remarks learned quickly not to
respond and to avoid further cause for any supervisor to continue his/her verbal
harassment.

Kofol claimed that "The worst aspect of working as a dealer arises from the
lack of job security."\(^{260}\) The keeping of a "tight lip and going along with
management" were among the most important traits of a dealer who wanted to keep
her job. Terri Gilbert, author of *Divided We Fall: The Unionization of Casino Card
Dealers*, claimed that a dealer could be fired while performing her job without notice
or reason. When reasons were given, they included suspicion of cheating, hustling of
tokes [tips], returning late from a break, or not following house procedure when
dealing.\(^{261}\) Gilbert also stated that being "unlucky" was cause for termination. A
dealer whose table was not making money was considered an "unlucky" dealer. It
was also a common trait for new managers to fire existing dealers and hire dealers of
their choosing. There was no recourse for filing appeals or grievances. Besides
verbal abuse from management, and job insecurity, female dealers also had to
contend with sexual harassment from customers, fellow dealers, and supervisors.

According to Michele Comeau, an ex-casino employee, sexual harassment

\(^{259}\) Ibid.
\(^{260}\) Kofol, 28.
\(^{261}\) Gilbert, 10.
was inevitable. She stated that

In Las Vegas we advertise beautiful, sexy, women. We bring players into a world of high arousal with the excitement of the casino, unlimited free booze, topless women in the showroom, and on top of that, we dress our cocktail waitresses in skimpy uniforms. It does not take a genius to understand why we have a problem of sexual harassment in the casinos, not only from players but from bosses.

Sexual harassment from customers, according to Burrows, rarely occurred in the casinos. She explained that when a customer did cross the line, he was “either losing heavily or drunk, or, often, both.” In either case, Burrows claimed that female dealers did not have to tolerate such treatment from their customers. Dealers were instructed immediately to alert the floor men. Once the supervisor was aware of the situation, he then decided on the extent of the harassment and whether the customer should be removed or if a short warning conversation was sufficient.

Sexual harassment from the dealers’ supervisors should not be linked to Las Vegas’s sexual hype. Supervisors are part of the business of gambling and are aware of the type of promotions used to draw in customers. Yet, the overwhelming atmosphere of the casinos appeared to have filtered into the supervisors’ personalities. Burrows wrote that casino owners were aware of sexual harassment and encouraged employees to report any incident. She even stated that supervisors

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262 Burrows, 27.
263 Ibid, 19.
were sent to training sessions regarding the “treatment of the opposite sex.” Despite management’s training and awareness, female dealers continued to work in a hostile environment. Some women dealers, according to Burrows, resorted either to “ignoring it, or laughing it off.” Others who were unable to simply let it go transferred to another shift or just quit their job.

These conditions did not apply to sexual harassment by fellow male dealers. If a complaint of sexual harassment were filed it would have probably caused the termination of the offender. Therefore, Burrows claimed, the mere threat of reporting the incident was sufficient enough to deter further harassment.

As Michele Comeau noted, Las Vegas promoted the sexual atmosphere that surrounded gamblers and casino employees. Women paraded in skimpy outfits offering free drinks and entertainment, and showgirls danced on the stage and revealed significant portions of their bodies. Some were topless and all were draped in gems and sequins. Although the atmosphere did not justify the liberties taken, it did help to explain why female dealers were not readily accepted on the Strip or in other areas of Las Vegas. The masculine atmosphere of Las Vegas further explained why women dealers faced more obstacles and discrimination than did male dealers.

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264 Ibid, 17.
265 Ibid, 18.
266 Ibid.
III: Management, while acknowledging the gaming customers' desire for friendly dealers by asking the dealers to be friendly, is also requiring the dealers to police their game or face punishment.

Donna Burrows

The more hands played, the more bets moved, and the more tokes [tips] developed.

Bob Kofol

Personal comments from customers added to the already stressful environment created by continuous surveillance. Some gamblers openly asked dealers for their assistance in winning. In Donna Burrows' work, she states that some gamblers used flattery, proposed dating, and held out the promise of a generous tip if the dealer would give them the needed edge. She also noted that "some customers treat the tip as a form of blackmail." If the dealer would give gamblers "a little extra help, they'll tip more." What most gamblers did not know was that all tips were pooled. Both Burrows and Kofol wrote that tips were divided equally among dealers. There is a "Toke Committee" consisting of dealers who worked during the same shift. They would count the chips received, exchange the chips for cash, and then distribute the cash equally to all dealers. Because all tips were shared, there was no advantage for any dealer to assist a customer who was seeking a cheating edge. A generous tip of $100.00, once divided, would amount to only a few dollars for each dealer. Therefore, as Burrows wrote, "A dealer tempted

267 Burrows, 16.
to cheat for a customer must ask herself, ‘Is losing my job worth it?’”

According to Teri Gilbert, author of *Divided We Fall: The Unionization Of Casino Card Dealers*, a majority of dealers believed that the tips received were the most rewarding parts of their job. Dealers in Gilbert’s 1980 survey claimed to have earned anywhere between $25,000.00 to $40,000.00 annually. Dealers estimated that fifty-percent of that income was derived from customer tips. In Burrows findings from 1993, a dealer was estimated to have earned between $150.00 to $200.00 a day in tips. The skills required to become a dealer coupled with the enticement of daily tip money made it a very desirable type of employment.

Burrows noted that the main reason for female dealers to continue their employment as casino dealers was “money.” According to an unnamed dealer,

> I used to be a secretary. I made $7.50 an hour. I had to know how to do everything and that included how to run a computer, keep books, make travel arrangements, take short hand, make coffee, and remember everything that had happened in the last ten years in every business deal. I had to do everything. Here I make minimum wages but my tokes bring that hourly sum to $12 an hour or more. I have great health benefits and a retirement program. They furnish my shirts here. Black pants and shoes are pretty inexpensive, so it doesn’t cost me as much for clothes. My lunch is free. My coffee and cokes are free. The work is easy and I leave it here when I go home.

Within a decade after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, women found employment opportunities as dealers in the Las Vegas gaming industry. The

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268 Burrows, 17.
269 Gilbert, 8.
270 Burrows, 52.
271 Ibid, 58.
potential of earning enormous tips appeared to have overcome any drawbacks. Yet, in the midst of the Mecca of entertainment, card dealers were expected to conduct themselves as professionals. After all, gambling was a serious business that involved large sums of cash.

Since card dealers handled the casinos' money, it was very important, according to Peter Ruchman, a manager of a bookstore in Las Vegas, that dealers be quite serious while performing their jobs. Their primary duty was to deal cards without patronizing or joking with the gamblers. Burrows also stated that a female dealer had serious responsibilities beyond "counting the cards correctly." She had to "make the right payoffs, protect the game, make change, and listen to the floormen when they tell her to 'shuffle-up' because a player is starting to win." Yet at the same time, dealers were to entertain gamblers and keep them at the table.

Linda Anne Weintraub, author of *Case Study of Blackjack Dealers: Their Work Environment and Their Relationship with Management*, further noted that besides the players' need to be entertained, they also needed to feel "appreciated, and made to feel that they are valued people." This was very important as all casinos offered the same gaming equipment and operated under the same regulations. Weintraub also stated that casino executives realized that "outstanding customer service will be required to maintain casino player patronage and loyalty."

Wanda Russell, author of *Blackjack Dealer Instruction Manual*, pointed out that

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272 "Las Vegas Dealers" Travel Channel, aired on June 1, 2002.
273 Burrows, 15.
275 Ibid.
“customers should be treated with friendliness, warmth, tolerance, and understanding.” 276 After all, repeat customers, as well as word of mouth endorsement, are what makes the dealers’ jobs possible. Russell strongly emphasized that dealers not only act friendly but also be friendly. Customers were to be greeted by a hello accompanied with a smile. Both the gambler and dealer experienced what Weintraub called “moments of truth” when they came face-to-face. At that crucial moment, it is the dealer’s complete appearance that determines if the gambler will patronize the table or leave. Edward Allen stated in his article, “Penny Ante,” published in Mike Tronnes’ book, Literary Las Vegas, that

> One reason it’s so hard to keep from getting angry tonight is that this casino has been very good to me on occasion. But tonight, everything is terrible. Nothing falls together right. I chose this dealer for her kind face, yet there seems to be ferocious hopelessness to the cards she tosses me. 277

Allen, like many other gamblers, returned to casinos where he had good experiences. The female dealers who followed instructions regarding friendliness, however, also had to be very careful that their expressed friendliness did not have the appearance of hustling customers for tips or soliciting sex.

Like many other male gamblers, Edward Allen faced the dual atmosphere of friendly female dealers and gambling. Expectations could be confused, especially given the environment described by Michele Comeau: “We bring players into a world of high arousal with the excitement of the casino, unlimited free booze, topless women in the showroom, and on top of that, we dress our cocktail waitresses in

skimpy uniforms." In the midst of a sexualized casino, it was understandable that female dealers' friendliness could be misunderstood as just a part of Las Vegas's sexual lure.

278 Burrows, 12.
IV: Those who took off their tops did it because they had thought it over and decided, why not?

Jaellyn Lee

Discrimination according to sex and age is expected by the dealers. It is often one of the first things explained in dealers’ school in terms of job expectations.

Donna Burrows

Besides having friendly dealers, casinos were also looking for youthful dealers. Bob Kofol and Timothy A. Madden, co-authors of How To Become a High Paid Las Vegas Casino Dealer, wrote that between the age of twenty-one and forty years, card dealers were considered to be in their prime. The job required dealers to have “dexterity in both hands, be trainable, and be in good physical condition.”

Another of the job requirements was that a dealer had to deal hundreds of hands per hour. A spokesperson for the Rio Hotel stated during an interview on the Travel Channel that the hotel required dealers to deal 450 hands per hour. As noted previously, the more hands dealt, the higher the potential earnings for the casino. Speed, according to the Rio Hotel spokesperson, was the number one secret for success. The Rio spokesperson also stated that it was the responsibility of the Floor Man to count how many hands the dealer moved in an hour. The casino management’s expectations were confirmed in Bob Kofol and Timothy A. Madden’s book. A dealer’s prime was considered to end at the age of forty, in large part

279 Kofol, 9.
280 Travel Channel.
because of speed.\textsuperscript{281}

Despite a casino's need for dealing speed, age discrimination was against the law. According to Burrows, a lawsuit was filed in 1983 against the Las Vegas Hilton for sex and age discrimination. At the trial Joseph Donovan, a federal analyst, testified on behalf of the Nevada Employment Security Department that of the thirty-seven dealers and floor men let go by the Hilton in September 1983, only 5 per cent of the replacement employees were over the age of forty. Donovan also stated that this was "an unusually low percentage of middle-aged workers."\textsuperscript{282} Two women dealers who gave only their initials, "J" and "B," were not part of the Hilton lawsuit but were quoted by Burrows as having experienced age discrimination in Las Vegas.

"J," a female dealer over forty years of age, who already had five years of dealing experience, fell prey to the unwritten rule of age discrimination. During an audition, "J" recalled being on the table for forty-five minutes, which according to Burrows was considered a long audition. "J" claimed that she was winning, which ultimately means the casino was making money off of her dealing skills. Although the audition went well, that casino did not immediately hire "J." She did check back with the casino regarding her application on a weekly basis. Finally, after eight weeks, a woman in the personnel office told her "They will never hire you. We are not allowed to hire dealers over thirty-five."\textsuperscript{283} "J's" assumed lack of youthfulness was considered a liability even though she had demonstrated during her long

\textsuperscript{281} Kofol, 8.
\textsuperscript{282} Burrows, 50.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid, 48.
Another female dealer “B,” who was described as an “attractive brunette aged fifty-one,” 284 auditioned at the same time as her son. She too had several years’ experience, but her son—who had just completed dealer’s school and had no experience—was the one hired. “B” was quoted by Burrows as saying, “I had heard the owner didn’t hire anyone over thirty and later, as I looked around, I saw it was true.” Both “J” and “B” had similar stories regarding age discrimination.

Nonetheless, Burrows did demonstrate that many of the more prestigious hotels on the Strip, like Caesars Palace and the Mirage, had female dealers who were over the age of forty. Although female dealers were not hired because of their looks or figures, six female dealers in 1966 had caused a media frenzy when they took off their casino issued white long sleeve shirts and dealt cards topless. 285

As discussed earlier in the chapter, these six female dealers made history in Las Vegas for about a week in 1966. They took off their casino-required white shirts and dealt cards that night with only pasties covering their nipples. They also wore sheer chiffon tops, according to Jaellyn Lee—one of the topless female dealers—“to put just a little something between the girls and their customers.” 286 This costume was short-lived. Las Vegas city and county officials were able to enforce a decency law that required the female dealers to return to their long sleeved white shirts. It had been required by all casinos that dealer auditions and work be performed in a uniform referred to as “Black and Whites.”

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284 Ibid, 49.
285 Marconi, 1.
286 Ibid, 2.
Since auditions were done in the casino on a live table, every dealer needed to be in uniform. In fact, that was the only way a potential employee could audition. The female dealers' uniform consisted of a button down long sleeve white blouse, black pants or skirt, and black shoes. According to Bob Kofol, the blouse was to be simple, "No French cuffs and no side pockets where chips might be concealed." The audition normally lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes and the dealer was evaluated solely on her dealing performance. At the conclusion of the audition, if the dealer was informed that management would place his or her application on file, that was the casino's polite way of saying, "Look somewhere else for employment."288

By the 1970s dealer jobs were open to both females and males, and the woman's beautiful sexy body was not a determining factor in employment. Push-up bras, worn under low-cut or see-through tops, and the tight short skirts that were used by showgirls and cocktail waitresses during their interviews did not secure an audition for female dealers. As stated earlier, the only way a dealer was auditioned was if she was in her "Blacks and Whites." The dealer's dress code was not flattering to the female figure. Female dealers were occupying a job that had been exclusively for males; therefore, the uniform had to mirror the look of male dealers. Female dealers would be representing the "business" of dealing and were required to dress in businesslike attire. These women were not part of the sexual lure into the

287 Kofol, 15.
288 Ibid.
casinos like showgirls and cocktail waitresses; in fact, as the repressive reaction to topless female dealers demonstrated, a desexualization of dealers proved necessary for their employment acceptability—and to mute the threat posed to male dealers.

Since female dealers were not part of the sexual lure, their costumes did not flatter or focus on the female body. Blouses were required to be buttoned up to the neckline and many were required to wear a big bow tie. Black skirts and black pants were not to be tightly fitted. The length of the skirt was to be worn between the bottom of the knee and top of the calf area. Some casinos required dealers to wear either a vest or apron with the casino's logo. Shoes were to be black and had to completely enclose both feet. Female dealers were also advised to keep whatever jewelry they wore to a bare minimum. It was also important that their hairstyles did not impair the vision of the floor men, who needed to be able to see their hands and faces at all times. These drab costumes prevented the female dealers' beauty being used as a tool in prompting gamblers to be loose with their money and their tips.

In Mario Puzo's book, *Mario Puzo: Inside Las Vegas*, published in 1976, there is a picture of a woman employee standing in front of the roulette wheel. Her casino-required uniform does not flatter her figure. She is dressed in a plain white long-sleeved shirt with a big black bow tie attached. She does not appear to have on any jewelry and her make-up is very natural looking. Another photo of a female casino employee, in front of a blackjack table, was taken from an overhead shot. Looking down at the woman, there is nothing revealing on her body. In both of
these pictures, only the female dealer's face and hands were revealed. It is obvious that female dealers' continued employment as card dealers was attributed first to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and then to their desexualization, which was the only way for women to stake their place in the lucrative but male-dominated business of gambling.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Puzo, 105.
Casino dealing offers a real career opportunity in Las Vegas, if you can become one of those who potential employers find attractive. It is not a romantic illusion or a 'pie in the sky' proposition.

Bob Kofol and Timothy A. Madden

Women dealers' continued employment in Las Vegas is a visible sign of a different sort of female empowerment in Las Vegas. It is their ordinary appearance that has made female dealers part of the mainstream in the business of gambling. They have had to rely on their skills and not on their visible body parts to secure their place on the Strip.

According to Donna Burrows, as female dealers' gain more experience, they are able to relocate to other casinos. After completing dealer school, female dealers were referred to as "break-in dealers." They normally started working in smaller casinos known as a "Break-In Joints" or "Grind Joints."

These places, according to Kofol, were minus the "schmooze." Break-in joint owners realize that beginning dealers only have the fundamental skills to perform the minimal requirements. The more popular and luxurious hotels are referred to as "Carpet Joints."

For new dealers, it will take time and patience and experience before they will be able to secure a job at one of the luxurious casinos.

As break-in dealers work toward perfection, they may be employed at many different casinos. With each move toward a more prestigious casino, female dealers...
are also moving up the stepladder toward more "tokes."293 During the various moves made, female dealers are also climbing what Kofol refers to as the "career ladders for dealers."294

There are four layers of management over dealers: Floor Man, Pit Boss, Shift Boss, and Casino Manager. Any of these positions are open to any dealer who chooses to advance. Many dealers naturally have the blend of skills and talents necessary to obtain the position of Floor Man. Others can attend classes at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. The university, according to Kofol, provides a "Bachelors degree in Hotel Management with an emphasis on Casino Management."295 Kofol further states that UNLV's graduating students are beginning to filter into the Strip's casinos. These classes are an added help to female dealers if they choose to make an investment in managerial positions.

Since the repeal of the Las Vegas City and County 1958 ordinance that barred women from dealing cards, female dealers have advanced to the point where they "comprise a majority in dealer numbers."296 Female dealers' have become a normal feature in the casino pits. Although they are now the majority of dealers, females are not well represented in casino managerial positions. Despite their professionalism and desexualization, females still face discrimination in casinos.

Female dealers, according to Burrows, "Seem to enjoy an advantage over men when it comes to securing positions as dealers."297 There are no longer any

293 Burrows, 40.
294 Kofol, 30.
295 Ibid.
296 Burrows, 59.
297 Ibid.
obvious differences in securing a dealing job. Both males and females do the same job under the same conditions. Yet men continue to have the advantage when it comes to securing management positions. Although women dealers have overcome the obstacle of the 1958 ordinance, they still need to continue their fight for equal representation in managerial positions.

Since female dealers started dealing cards in Las Vegas, their uniforms have basically remained the same. Female dealers continue to perform their jobs in "sin city" in uniforms that are not flattering to the female body. Their button-down, long sleeved white shirts are neatly tucked into their loosely fitted black skirts or pants. Many wear either vests or aprons that have casino logos. Female dealers blend unobtrusively into the geography of the casino, having forsaken sexuality for employment opportunity and having muted their gender in order to allay fears about "the quality of life for the men of Las Vegas."
"I'm a part of Las Vegas."
Tina Lokosis

"Living in Las Vegas is a process of working through the contradictions about Las Vegas women. But it's exciting, too: You're part of a work in progress."

This is how Arnie Williams, director of the 1998 documentary *Stripped and Teased: Tales From Las Vegas Women*, expressed her female understanding of life in Las Vegas. Williams' documentary deals with the "erotic icons" that are associated with women in Las Vegas, but it also features women who "live mostly outside the mass-media spotlight." None of these women was openly credited with the successful growth of Las Vegas; showgirls, cocktail waitresses, card dealers, construction workers, maids, taxi drivers, and corporate vice presidents have only recently gained any recognition for their contributions to the history of Las Vegas.

According to a *Las Vegas Sun* article on Williams' documentary, "The women who built Las Vegas," these women "were as much a part of postwar Las Vegas as the gangsters, the gamblers and the good ol' boy politicians. They were the

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299 Ibid.
Las Vegas women who came, who worked, who stayed.”

Tina Lokosis, a construction worker in Las Vegas since the 1980s, affirmed this in her interview with Williams atop the Strip’s Stratosphere Hotel-Casino in 1998: “I guess I feel like I’m a part of Las Vegas. I built a lot of these buildings from the ground up.” From a woman’s point of view, female workers in Las Vegas belonged in the city, and in fact were a part of the city.

Lokosis’s experience as a construction worker proved similar to what female card dealers experienced in the mid-1960s. In both cases, women were not readily welcomed in employment that was once exclusively for men. Lokosis’s working appearance also desexualized the female image in Las Vegas. She wore a hard hat, a plaid long-sleeved shirt, a pair of jeans, a tool belt, and steel-toe boots. There was nothing overtly sexy about her appearance. Lokosis also allowed Williams to film her rough, scarred hands, and she explained that she was proud of her hands. After all, Lokosis had carved her name and that of her daughter in “tons of concrete” in every Strip establishment she built. She stated that “finally after years of doing it, I finally made it.”

Andrea Stuart, author of Showgirls, offered a more academic treatment of women in Las Vegas, albeit focusing exclusively on showgirls. Her observations about showgirls nonetheless have larger application for women in this city. Stuart pointed out very clearly how the female body had come to define women in Las Vegas. She noted that the showgirl was always seen as a “fetish object” divided into

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301 Stripped and Teased.
302 Story detailed in Stripped and Teased.
body parts. She was dismembered into “eyelashes, breasts, legs, and hair.” This sexualized vision of the female body affected most working women in Las Vegas, even those not part of the occupations that demanded bodily display. Women in Las Vegas managed, however, to overcome and at the same time to profit from their status as fetish objects. They negotiated the extremes of sexualization and desexualization, and learned to inhabit rather comfortably the liminal spaces assigned to them in Las Vegas. They experienced financial empowerment, sexual and economic liberation, and a sense of self-satisfaction, despite a continued desire by men to reduce them to fetishes.

The men who made Las Vegas very often did not see women beyond sexual commodities, but the women in Las Vegas perceived themselves in much more complicated ways. Showgirls, cocktail waitresses, and female card dealers have all in their own ways “made it” in Las Vegas. Whether they transformed themselves by revealing a significant portion of their bodies or by dressing in unisex attire that mirrored the look of their male co-workers, they have all found their places on the Strip. No matter how harsh the masculinized environment was, “Las Vegas gave women economic equality,” as Joyce Marshall argued. Despite how historically invisible women tended to be in histories of Las Vegas, the women discussed in this study made notable contributions to the city and to challenging gender expectations both in Las Vegas and the United States. Like the construction worker featured in Stripped and Teased, they too were a part of Las Vegas.

303 Stuart, 220.
304 Joyce Marshall, as quoted in Merilyn Potters, 3.
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