

# Improbable Metropolis: How Las Vegas Beat the Odds

**T**he central mystery of Las Vegas does not have much to do with Bugsy Siegel, or whether there are indeed alien spacecraft secreted at Area 51. Rather, it is that it still exists, and thrives, in defiance of precedent and probability. For more than one hundred years Las Vegas has beaten the odds against its own survival, becoming by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the fastest growing urban area in the United States.

Much of Las Vegas's early history echoed or imitated that of countless towns in Nevada and the West: its fortunes rose and fell, usually precipitously, on the depth

of ore bodies and the decisions of distant railroad magnates. Why should Las Vegas have survived even as Candelaria blew away, as Ely declined, as Caliente languished? In their heydays Virginia City and Goldfield matched modern Las Vegas in opulence and wild abandon; neither can now sustain a decent restaurant or two-story hotel.

## The Unique Geography of "The Meadows"

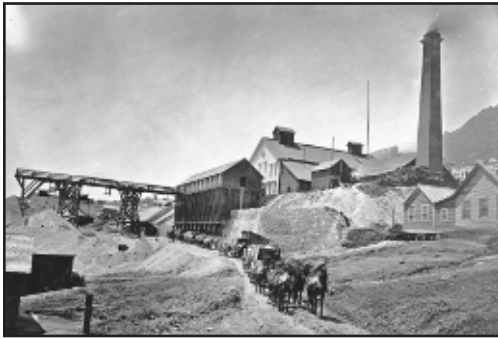
What did Las Vegas have that those failed towns and so many others like them did not have or could not muster? What allowed Las Vegas to snatch itself back repeatedly from the brink? Perhaps its boosters were extraordinarily optimistic or tenacious. Perhaps it was destiny, as the boosters always claimed, or just dumb luck.

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*Las Vegas's unique sense of place arises in part from its location in the heart of the Mojave Desert. See article at right. Las Vegas will be the site of the 2009 AAG Annual Meeting. [www.aag.org](http://www.aag.org).*

A better explanation for Las Vegas's astonishing staying power is its particular history and geography. Its long string of busts would have killed off a town less well-situated, or less a creature of its landscape. Las Vegas survived because it was already a place long before it became a town, a place with a particularly felicitous set of contradictions: an oasis in the desert, an isolated spot nonetheless connected to the world beyond it.



CREDIT: THE SULLIVAN (PHOTO 1897), U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Although founded on the availability of water, mining drove the early development of Las Vegas and other Nevada towns in the Nineteenth Century.

## Founded on Water

The founding geographic feature of Las Vegas is its water: the only reliable springs and year-round creek within several days' journey of anywhere. Water and the meadows it fed marked Las Vegas as a specific somewhere in the middle of the once trackless and nearly uncrossable desert between the Wasatch and the southern Sierra Nevada, which even today can feel like nowhere.

The sweet water that once bubbled to its meadows' surface made Las Vegas an oasis for a long series of travelers. For centuries the nomadic Paiute and other bands had known and cherished this place. They had it pretty much to themselves until 1830, when Mexican traders happened upon it and connected it to the Old Spanish Trail (this northern branch was known as the Horse Thief Trail). By the 1850s, the route through this rare grassy spot was regularly traveled by the California bound: Latter Day Saints on their mission to extend Deseret to the sea; the federal troops and mail carriers on the Salt Lake to San Diego road; miners and farmers heading for their respective diggings. A few hardy souls even established ranches, irrigating the hard,

alkali soil with spring water. Grateful travelers enjoyed their peaches and rested in the cool shade of the big cottonwoods by the creek.

## A Place with Connections

Like a thousand Nevada ghost towns, Las Vegas owed its early prosperity mainly to mines and prospects of mines, but it was the springs that connected it to the larger world. It was the springs that led William Clark to route his railroad, the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake, through the tiny green spot in 1902. Clark's tracks connected Las Vegas to major population centers to the east and west, putting it on the all-important rail maps and allowing it to become the region's main supply center. While the nearby gold and silver bonanzas were short-lived, they lasted long enough, and brought enough business to and through Las Vegas, to strengthen its bid for continued existence.

The railroad was, of course, critical to this bid, and with the rails came telegraph service. For decades, these together represented Las Vegas's best physical connection with the world beyond Nevada. But the important linkages went beyond infrastructure. Many of Las Vegas's "pioneer" families and businessmen hailed from Los Angeles, and they astutely hitched much of the new town's future to Southern California's own ascendancy. Many others were Mormons with strong ties to Salt Lake, helping early on to establish the crucial perception of a 'respectable,' conservative, and stable business foundation.

Las Vegas, in fact, would not have survived without those connections to Salt Lake and Los Angeles. Boulder (Hoover) Dam, which helped Las Vegas withstand the blow of losing its major railroad operations in the '20s, was a project driven primarily by California's thirst for water and power. When the bonanzas from dam construction and tourism began to fade in the late 1930s, it was again California that came to the rescue. L.A. Mayor Fletcher Bowron's anti-vice campaigns drove many practitioners, from small-time cardsharps to Benjamin Siegel, eastward to Nevada, where suddenly they were legitimate businessmen. Soon the

more perspicacious executives of the New York, Chicago, and Cleveland organizations came to see Las Vegas as a place far from scrutiny but sufficiently close, and connected, to Los Angeles, by then well on its way to its own iconic status.

California gamblers dominated the new economy, but Mormon bankers from Salt Lake helped finance it. Besides the movie stars and mobsters with all their magnetic glamour and danger, California also sent the vast majority of customers, hoping for a chance to rub shoulders with a celebrity of either stripe. And, Utah, especially during the days of above ground bomb tests, provided a stalwart patriotism that refused to question the bland assurances of the federal government. Connection, then, was a critical component of Las Vegas's survival story.

## A Place of Isolation

Just as critical a connection, however, was its geographical opposite, isolation. Las Vegas functioned because of its connections to the world beyond the desert; it *worked* because the desert allowed it to seem a world unto itself.

Las Vegas lies within the Mojave Desert, a wild, windswept "waste" of Joshua trees, creosote bushes, and infrequent, bitter streams. Las Vegas is smack within the Basin and Range province, and shares most of its visual, physical, and ecological characteristics. Those characteristics helped cast Las Vegas, accurately or not, as part of an outlaw territory, a junk wilderness untraveled, unpeopled, and unredeemed. It was indeed remote, isolated from "civilization" by the chunk of Basin and Range province in which it sat, with its endless dry valleys punctuated by unforgiving lines of mountains, its seas of creosote bushes and white bursage alkali and brittlebush, its sawtooth horizons unbroken by forests or easy passes.

Even within Nevada, this southern region remained cut off from the money and power centers of Reno and Carson, and from all the mining districts north of Goldfield. Well into the twentieth century, roads, where they existed at all, were unpaved tracks through largely

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unpopulated territory; even the Los Angeles highway was but a narrow two lanes of gravel until the beginning of the Second World War. There was no long distance telephone service until the 1930s, and very few dial phones until 1955. The railroad's telegraph lines could not handle press service teletypes from Los Angeles, and until the early 40s, local newsmen relied on cryptic "pony" telegrams, or on teletype rolls flown in from Los Angeles.

But this relative isolation, the slow building of the normal infrastructure of transportation and communication, was in fact what allowed Las Vegas to create its peculiar, and peculiarly successful, identity as a self-defined and self-contained place. Isolation, or the perception of it, was crucial to the idea that whatever happened within Las Vegas or the desert around it, nothing (bad) could reverberate beyond its borders. That once there, normal rules no longer applied.

This perception of Las Vegas as isolated exception attracted to it the people and funds that would eventually build it into the improbable metropolis it has become. As a remote spot in the middle of the desert, Las Vegas drew to itself those who wanted to start from scratch, who wanted to escape surveillance, who did not want to be dropped in on. Las Vegas was for people and activities that benefited from its remoteness, but equally that depended on those connecting threads. You had to be able to get there – and you also had to be able to get out when things got too dodgy, or you just needed a little humidity. It had to be seen as easy to get to, functionally transparent, and corruption-free.

It was not just gangsters who found the remote desert alluring. In the early 1940s, the Army discovered that Las Vegas's empty blue skies were perfect for testing new gunnery pilots. And when the war ended, even as the gangsters were beginning to build their fabulous monument to luck and lucre on the highway south of town, the vast expanses of playa and sagebrush beckoned the scientists of Los Alamos, eager to test their "devices" where no one would complain.

In the 1950s, the Strip and the Nevada Test Site together transformed the desert from wasteland to useful landscape, and Las Vegas from an overoptimistic cow town to the Entertainment Capital of the World. That this "godforsaken" landscape could be thus redeemed assured a bright future for developers, dream peddlers, and opportunity seekers, and made a thriving metropolis possible in this unlikely and unlovely place.

As Eisenhower was warning the nation of the dangers of a military-industrial complex, Las Vegas seemed at last to have vanquished the threat of becoming yet another debris pile in a ghost-littered landscape. This time it was saved by the mob and the military, whose practices were nationally acceptable, and arguably necessary, as long as they were confined to a wasteland no one else wanted, the southern Nevada desert. Ironically, banishing those things to Las Vegas transformed it into a place where everyone wanted to go, and easily could.

### What Happens Here, Stays Here\*

The Las Vegas desert is now home to 2 million people and each year is visited easily and fearlessly by forty million more. McCarran Airport is one of the busiest in the country. The federally subsidized highway system can zoom you in from anywhere, though you will certainly hit grid-lock when you get to town. Still, nodding to its middle-of-nowhere history and geography, Las Vegas sells itself with the claim that, "What Happens Here, Stays Here."

Las Vegas has survived its more likely fate to become the remote but accessible, secret but safe, iconic metropolis of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. ■

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\*Official slogan of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.



CREDIT: H.W. ELLIOTT, U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

This drawing by H.W. Elliott was part of an 1869 survey of the area just north of Las Vegas, near the head of the Gallinas River.