

# THE FIRST 100

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Portraits of the Men and Women  
Who Shaped Las Vegas

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*edited by A.D. Hopkins and K.J. Evans*

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Who Shaped Las Vegas



**HUNTINGTON PRESS • LAS VEGAS**

*Dedicated to the memories of K.J. Evans and W.V. Wright,  
kindred spirits in their love for Nevada and its history.*

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# Introduction

*The First 100* was originally published as a three-part package in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, marking the approaching end of the century in which Las Vegas was born.

Sherman R. Frederick, publisher of the *Review-Journal*, conceived the project as a means of capturing memories of the community's formative years and founders while those memories were still relatively fresh.

"Las Vegas is unusual in that it was created entirely in the 20th century," Frederick pointed out in announcing the project in March 1998. "Many of those who made the important decisions remain alive, while immediate relatives and close acquaintances of others still survive. This gives the *Review-Journal* a special opportunity to portray them and their accomplishments with authentic detail, which newspapers and historians in other cities would envy."

The strategy adopted in this book is to tell the community's story through the lives of 100 people who

played significant roles in it. Historians, journalists, and the newspaper's readers were invited to nominate people who should be profiled in *The First 100*.

More than 300 people were nominated, and most would have made interesting and historically significant stories. But since time and resources limited the number of profiles to 100, editors had to make hard choices about which to leave out.

Because such choices were necessary, the *Review-Journal* has never represented that the 100 chosen are the most important who could have been selected; the newspaper does, however, represent that all are significant and interesting people. Nor did the editors attempt to rank the relative importance of the 100 people chosen. Instead, they are presented in a logical order, approximating the chronology of their contributions.

Condensing the stories into a hardbound book for permanent addition to the libraries and homes of Las Vegas was not an afterthought, but part of Frederick's original intention. Huntington Press was the writers' first choice as publisher, because of its track record for producing quality books about Las Vegas, chosen and edited by people who understand the city.



Downtown's Vegas Vic is one of Young Electric Sign Company's (Yesco) best-known creations, with its Marlboro-like visage that stands above Fremont Street. (Courtesy Yesco)



"Ol' Blue Eyes" himself, Frank Sinatra

## ***Introduction Continued ...***

Special Projects Editor A.D. Hopkins and writer K.J. Evans worked full time on the project for more than 17 months. Both had been editors of *Nevadan*, a Sunday magazine formerly published by the *Review-Journal*, which specialized in historical pieces and in-depth profiles. Hopkins also asked certain local historians and some of the *Review-Journal's* star writers to contribute stories.

Historical consultants for the project were Robert Faiss, former city editor of the *Las Vegas Sun* and now an attorney specializing in gaming law; Michael Green, a history professor at Community College of Southern Nevada; Eugene Moehring, a history professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and the author of a respected history of Las Vegas; Frank Wright, curator at the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society; and W.V. "Bill" Wright, former chairman of the museum's board.

W.V. Wright, who was also the former general manager of the *Review-Journal* before his retirement in 1981, died in August 1998 after a short illness. He continued his involvement with *The First 100* until a few weeks prior to his death. Ken-



*Yesco's neon creations, like the one for the Mint, became the trademark for Las Vegas, and their glare could be spotted by astronauts orbiting the Earth. (Courtesy Yesco)*

*In 1931, when nearly everybody had given up on Prohibition, even Las Vegas' elite were unafraid to be photographed in the Meadows speakeasy. (UNLV Special Collections)*

neth J. Evans died on September 10, 1999, the day the authors turned over the last story to Huntington Press.

Others greatly helpful to the project include the staffs of UNLV Special Collections and the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society; historian Elizabeth Warren; and Joanne L. Goodwin, an oral history teacher at UNLV.

The original *First 100* three-part series published in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* would not have been possible without the sponsorship of the following: MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, Mirage Resorts, Del Webb Corporation, Howard Hughes Corporation, Park Towers at Hughes Center, the A.G. Spanos Companies, Palm Mortuary Inc., the Buzard Eye Institute, JHC Health Center, American Pacific Corp., Harrison Door Company, Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino, Jim Marsh Jeep Eagle Mazda Volvo, Mission Industries, Nest Featherings Interior Decorating, Sam's Town Hotel and Casino, Southwest Gas Corp., Sunrise Hospital, and Walker Furniture.



# Editors and Authors

A.D. Hopkins is a 30-year resident of Las Vegas and for 12 years edited *Nevadan*, the Sunday magazine formerly published by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. As special projects editor for the *Review-Journal*, Hopkins directed the newspaper's original *First 100* project, the forerunner of this book.

A lifelong Nevadan, Kenneth J. Evans was a reporter and editor for several Nevada newspapers, including the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, before being appointed media relations manager for the Nevada Commission on Tourism in 1992. Returning to the *Review-Journal* in 1998 to work on *The First 100*, Evans died on September 10, 1999, shortly after the project was completed.

Alan Balboni teaches at the Com-

munity College of Southern Nevada, where his subjects include American immigration history and American government. Balboni's book, *Beyond the Mafia: Italian Americans and the Development of Las Vegas*, was published by the University of Nevada Press in 1996.

Dick Benoit is a publicity coordinator and speech instructor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. A 26-year U.S. Navy and Air Force veteran, he served as the public-affairs officer for Nellis Air Force Base from 1984 to 1987. Also a freelance writer, Benoit was a regular contributor to the *Review-Journal's* former Sunday magazine, *Nevadan*.

Dave Berns has been with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* since 1994 and has written about the casino indus-

try for the past three years. A graduate of the University of Oregon, Berns previously worked as a reporter for the *Statesman-Journal* in Salem, Oregon.

A business writer for the *Review-Journal*, John G. Edwards is currently working on a book about investing in casino operating companies. His free-lance articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Dallas Morning News*.

Dennis McBride is a Boulder City writer who specializes in local history. His published books include *Boulder City: How it Began and Hard Work and Far From Home: The Civilian Conservation Corps at Lake Mead*.

Award-winning entertainment columnist Michael Paskevich joined the *Review-Journal* in 1989 and is considered Las Vegas' toughest entertainment critic. A graduate of the University of California-Berkeley (MA 1976), Paskevich worked nearly two decades for California newspapers before moving to Las Vegas where, in addition to his *R-J* columns, he is writing a book about the oddities of cover-



*To eye pictures of Yesco's oldest offerings, such as the sign for the now-defunct Thunderbird, is akin to scanning the pages of a scrapbook. (Courtesy Yesco)*

## ***Editors and Authors Continued ...***



*Liberace at practice in Montreal, late 1940s*  
(Liberace Museum)

ing “the entertainment capital of the world.”

*Review-Journal* columnist John L. Smith is a native Nevadan with family roots dating back to 1881. His most recent books are *Las Vegas Boulevard*, a column collection, and *The Animal in Hollywood*, a biography of Mafia figure Anthony Fiato. In 1998, Smith was honored for column writing by the National Headliner Awards and also was named “Outstanding Journalist” by the Nevada Press Association.

Robert A. Stoldal is general manager of Las Vegas One, a 24-hour television news source, and was news director at KLAS-TV, Channel 8, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the station consistently led lo-

cal newscasts in the Nielsen ratings. Stoldal has been a student of Southern Nevada history since his family moved here in 1957.

Ed Vogel has been with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* for 22 years and has served as the newspaper's capital bureau chief in Carson City since 1985. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan.

A graduate of the University of Missouri, Mike

Weatherford has been an entertainment reporter for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* since November 1987. Weatherford's love of the “old Vegas” led to his upcoming book *Cult Vegas*, to be published by Huntington Press in the spring of 2000.

A 13-year resident of Las Vegas, Joan Whitely earned a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University in 1982. She currently writes for the “Living” section of the *Review-Journal* and has won a coveted “Best in the West” award for feature writing.



*The statue of Benny Binion stands at the corner of Second Street and Ogden Avenue. (Review-Journal files)*

# THE FIRST 100



PART I:

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**The Early Years**

# H.M. “Hank” Greenspun

(1909–1989)

**A seasoned newspaperman with a strong sense of community, Hank Greenspun gave the good-old-boy system a run for its money.** BY A.D. HOPKINS

**N**obody who knew him was neutral about Hank Greenspun. He was hated or loved, feared or trusted, respected as a crusader or dismissed as a journalistic loose cannon, admired as an entrepreneur or advanced as an example of how not to run a business.

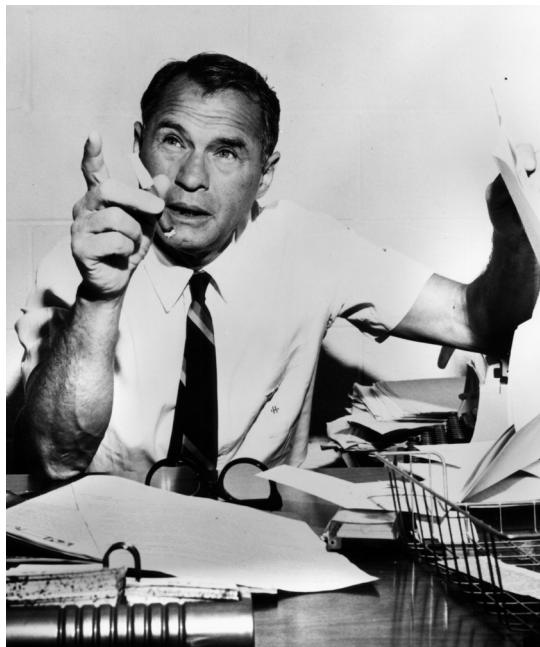
Greenspun was born August 27, 1909, in Brooklyn, New York. His father was a Talmudic scholar too kind and idealistic to succeed at business; his mother was a practical merchant. In his 1966 autobiography *Where I Stand*, Greenspun described what happened when a customer on his paper route refused to pay and added anti-Semitic insult to financial injury.

Mrs. Greenspun scolded her 8-year-old son: “You let him insult you? And you didn’t even insult him back? What’s the matter with you?” She marched Hank back to confront the customer, who hurled hot water on mother and son. But Mrs. Greenspun charged in, slapping and claw-

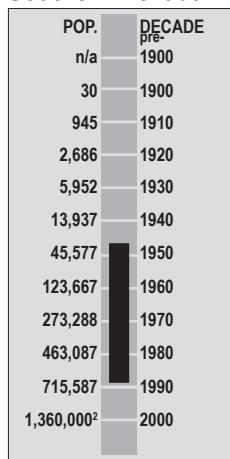
ing, while the boy kicked the offender’s shins. They collected the bill and an apology.

Greenspun became a lawyer but disliked it, and drifted into business before being drafted into the Army. He spent most of World War II as a captain in the ordnance corps, responsible for maintaining weapons, ammunition, and related equipment. In Northern Ireland he met Barbara Ritchie and married her in 1943.

Greenspun visited Las Vegas in 1946, ran into a college buddy, Ralph



## Greenspun in Southern Nevada



■ Time spent in S. Nev.

<sup>2</sup> — Estimate

*H.M. “Hank” Greenspun chose this photo for the cover of his autobiography, *Where I Stand*, published in 1966. The gesture and pose were typical of Greenspun who used them in making a point with a reporter or responding to threats of libel litigation. (Courtesy Barbara Greenspun)*

Pearl, and became his partner in *Las Vegas Life*, a weekly entertainment magazine. They lost money, so Hank took a job as publicity agent for the new Flamingo Hotel, operated by Ben "Bugsy" Siegel. When Siegel was murdered, Greenspun quit the Flamingo and became a partner in a new radio station, KRAM. Later he founded Las Vegas' CBS affiliate station, KLAS-TV, Channel 8, which he sold to Howard Hughes in the late 1960s.

In late 1947, Greenspun was recruited by Haganah, the Jewish self-defense organization. The nation of Israel was to be re-established in 1948 as a homeland for Jews. War with the Arabs was certain.

His autobiography describes clandestine expeditions to buy artillery and rifles in Latin America, and airplane engines and machine guns from a surplus yard in Hawaii. Greenspun got caught and in 1950 pleaded guilty to violating the Neutrality Act. He was fined \$10,000 but the judge, attributing the crime to noble motives, refused to sentence him to prison.

Meanwhile, the International Typographical Union, during a labor dispute with the daily *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, had launched its own competing tri-weekly newspaper. Greenspun bought it in 1950 for \$1,000 down on a total purchase price of \$104,000, renamed it the *Las Vegas Sun*, and turned it into a daily.

"If he hadn't done that, Las Vegas would have remained a community completely in the grip of people who ... were focused on their own interests, instead of those of the community," said Brian, Greenspun's son and now editor of the *Sun*. "The good old boys didn't want competi-

tion. Every time they tried to close a door, he kicked it down. If somebody hadn't done that—and people capable of doing it were rare—we would not have had the second generation of

*"Every time they tried to close a door, he kicked it down. If somebody hadn't done that—and people capable of doing it were rare—we would not have had the second generation of builders, the Steve Wynns and the Kerkorians, who came here confident they would be allowed to fulfill their dreams. They would have gone somewhere else."*

—Brian Greenspun, Talking about his father

builders, the Steve Wynns and the Kerkorians, who came here confident they would be allowed to fulfill their dreams. They would have gone somewhere else."

The most famous vested interest he tackled was Nevada's U.S. Senator Pat McCarran and the political machine he used to control Nevada. Greenspun's anti-McCarran campaign escalated to include McCarran's ill-chosen ally, the red-baiting Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin. When a Greenspun column predicted that McCarthy would be slain by some unfortunate McCarthy had ruined, Greenspun was indicted for publishing and mailing matter "tending to incite murder or assassination." He was acquitted.

Greenspun's newspaper influenced political campaigns with devastating exposés. In 1954, Greenspun accused Clark County Sheriff Glen Jones of having a financial interest in a brothel. Jones sued, so Greenspun hired an undercover agent to gather defense evidence by posing as a mobster trying to buy the brothel and the protection of Nevada politicians. Secretly recorded conversations touched on names more important than the sheriff's. Greenspun published the most damaging implications. The sheriff

withdrew his libel suit, and Lieutenant Governor Cliff Jones resigned as Democratic national committeeman for Nevada and never again held an important public office.

The *Las Vegas Sun* lost much of its youthful energy when fire destroyed the *Sun's* offices and production plant in November 1963. Investigators blamed spontaneous combustion, but Greenspun suspected arson

by labor racketeer Tom Hanley, who at the time was embroiled in a fight with the newspaper. Hanley died a convict after murdering a union boss.

By the mid-1970s hiring and salary freezes limited the *Sun's* reporting staff. There weren't enough typewriters for even those few, and stories missed deadline each day because reporters had to wait for a typewriter. Used office typewriters in perfect condition sold for \$25 at the time. Greenspun's widow, Barbara, who succeeded her late husband as publisher, said earlier this year, "We didn't have the \$25. In those days nobody was paying their advertising bills. I used to go down ... to collect \$5 at a time." In the same era, however, visitors in Greenspun's office could admire the unusual paperweights on his desk: fist-sized bars of silver bullion.

Greenspun, or his immediate family, was active in dozens of charities ranging from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to the Sun Summer Camp Fund, which solicits money from the public to provide camp for children who couldn't otherwise afford it. This year, said Barbara, the Greenspuns expect to send 1,000 children to camp at a total cost of \$185,000, and to make up the differ-

ence out of the family pocket if they fail to raise enough money.

In the final months of his life, in 1989, Greenspun helped negotiate a joint operating agreement by which the rival *Las Vegas Review-Journal* sells the advertising for the *Sun*, prints the newspaper, and distributes it. The *Sun* retains independent editorial control and demonstrates it regularly with bitter attacks on the *Review-Journal*. In mid-1999, the *Sun* had 33,466 daily circulation to the *Review-Journal's* 156,382.

The newspaper was neglected because Greenspun had other fish to fry. For years, said Barbara, every spare dime the family had went into land investments. But much of the Greenspun fortune was based on a single, controversial land deal. The city of Henderson was surrounded by federal land and had no room to grow. Congress released thousands of acres to the city, and Greenspun asked Henderson to sell him a large share of the land. Council members who opposed the deal were hammered mercilessly by the *Henderson Home News*, which was owned by Greenspun ally Morry Zenoff.

In 1971 the council sold the

most desirable land—4,720 acres lying near the upscale Paradise Valley suburb of Las Vegas—to Greenspun for \$1.3 million, or about \$280 an acre. The council did so largely because he promised to include the land in his proposed Green Valley development, increasing the city's tax base and establishing nearby residential areas and amenities, which would attract further development in the stagnating small town.

Instead, Greenspun sold much of that land right away, at \$3,000 to \$5,000 an acre, and started Green Valley in 1973 on land that he already had owned. Although Henderson had annexed this land as part of its deal with Greenspun, this meant that Green Valley became a suburb of Las Vegas, rather than of Henderson. However, Henderson did get its increased tax base and became one



*Greenspun about 1973, being interviewed by UPI Correspondent Myram Borders (far right) and a pack of TV journalists (Las Vegas News Bureau/LVCVA)*

of the fastest-growing cities in the United States.

The Greenspuns won franchises to provide cable television to most of the Las Vegas Valley. Their company, which became known as Prime Cable, began serving Las Vegas households in 1980. The company had more than 300,000 subscribers in 1998, when Cox Communications, an Atlanta-based media group, bought an 80 percent interest for \$1.3 billion.

Greenspun died of cancer in July 1989. His estate became a major benefactor of UNLV, where two institutions bear his name: The Greenspun College of Urban Affairs and the Hank Greenspun School of Communications, fitting memorials for a man who changed his city and built a fortune on the power of words. 



*Aftermath of the fire that destroyed the Las Vegas Sun in 1963. Brian Greenspun said the paper continued to publish but was unable to deliver papers in a timely fashion, and as a result fell too far behind in circulation to catch up with the competing Review-Journal. (Las Vegas News Bureau/LVCVA)*