

ROBERT CAMERON'S

ABOVE LAS VEGAS

ITS CANYONS AND MOUNTAINS



TEXT BY JACK SHEEHAN

ABOVE LAS VEGAS

ITS CANYONS AND MOUNTAINS

BY ROBERT CAMERON

CAMERON AND COMPANY, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA



LAS VEGAS STRIP

text on page 160

(opposite) MOUNT CHARLESTON







GRAND CANYON

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Then and Now	8
Casinos	18
Downtown	40
A Community Matures	48
Helicopter Tour	76
Lake Mead	94
The Utah Canyons	120
Las Vegas West	136

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INTRODUCTION

Riding shotgun in a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter over the Las Vegas Strip, I turn back to observe a distinguished older gentleman in sportcoat and ascot, balancing a heavy camera on a gyro-stabilizer out the window. His nimble body is positioned much like any craftsman at his table, all limbs and senses involved in the task of completing his work. In this case, it is capturing the precise image on film that he's had in his mind's eye all along. The photographer will argue with me later that what he does with his camera from the sky is not art. I'll argue that it is.

As you graze through the following pages, decide for yourself whether Robert Cameron or I have the more convincing argument.

Collaborating on this book reinforced my love for Las Vegas, some 20 years after settling here, and left me more intrigued than ever with this percolating, dynamic, and endlessly original city.

Most people settle in Las Vegas for a good reason. Mine was that I had to get away — from a job and a girlfriend and a city that didn't seem to need me anymore. I was in my 20s then and I knew I wanted to be a writer, but it wasn't a literary siren that called me to the desert. Rather it was total diversion, 24 hours a day, with gambling and golf courses and girls to get my mind off matters, that lured me away from the Pacific Northwest, down 1100 miles of torn-up two-lane highway, to my eventual destiny.

The drive into this desert requires dodging jackrabbits and burros and cattle, who will stare you down as you approach at 75 miles per hour, as if to say, "Go ahead and run over me. I'll wreck your car out here on one of the loneliest roads in America and then see if you can get out alive!"

But arrive I did, on a balmy January day in 1976, and when I phoned my mother from an off-Strip fleabag and told her I thought I had found my new home — Las Vegas — she paused for a long moment, and said, "But what will I tell your father?"

I took the inevitable dealing job at a downtown hotel — the daunting 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. shift — as a way to make rent while magazine editors from coast to coast rejected my submissions. And I came to learn about Las Vegas from the inside out, from the belly of the beast, if you will.

That summer I'd sleep until about two-thirty in the afternoon, then awaken to temperatures between 105-115 degrees. Staggering out onto the balcony of my apartment, I'd stare at the swimming pool that was too hot to swim in, much less lie beside, then retire to the relative darkness of the living room, where I would read the morning paper, knowing that the news wasn't news anymore — it was already half a day outdated. I found it all rather disorienting.

Although I didn't relish that job, or that blur of time, I look back at it now with a surreal splendor, through an incandescent rear-view mirror that shows not the road I actually traveled, but a highway from another place, from another map, from another life. Francis Ford Coppola captured the setting perfectly in his film *One From the Heart*, when he showed a collection of misfits and Felliniesque characters dancing and reveling in the streets of the downtown Las Vegas intersection called Glitter Gulch.

On my 15-minute breaks from dealing, I'd lean against a trash basin outside the casino and watch the faces passing by. Each was so distinct, bathed as it was in the fluorescent light from the 45 miles of neon that wraps itself around the casino core. Those people had all come to this unlikely patch of earth for a good reason, just as I had. For a variety of other motives illustrated in this volume, they've never stopped coming.

In my case, Las Vegas was the perfect crash-pad for a writer, with its bold landscapes and its eclectic blend of schemers and dreamers whose stories are as vivid and bizarre as the backdrop. Moviemakers are magnetized by the city, and no fewer than a dozen first-rate feature films — from the *Godfather Part 2*, to *The Electric Horseman*, to *Bugsy*, to *Casino*, to *Melvin and Howard*, to *Leaving Las Vegas* (something I'll never permanently do) — have added dimension to the collective awareness of the town. Perhaps no city on earth brings a quicker smile of recognition to people on every continent than Las Vegas.

So it was high time that the foremost aerial photographer in the world, a man who has been celebrating landscapes and seascapes from the sky for 35 years by preserving incredible images shot out of the open door or windows of jazzy helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, would aim his lens on Las Vegas and its spectacular surroundings. Robert Cameron, a spry 85-year-old, certainly took his time getting around to documenting this place, but his excuse was that he was busy capturing other great cities and geographic wonders. His bibliography of "Above" books include *Paris*, *New York*, *London*, *Washington (D.C.)*, his hometown of *San Francisco* three times, *Yosemite*, *Carmel-Monterey-Big Sur*, *Taboe-Reno*, *Seattle*, *Chicago*, *Mackinac*, *Los Angeles*, *San Diego* and *Hawaii*. Las Vegas is honored to be joining their company. And so am I.

How did Cameron pick 1996 as the year to document Las Vegas? "It just seemed like the right time," he says. "But I must say after seeing all the spectacular sights, I perhaps should have come earlier. The variety is just astounding."

Cameron allowed me to take two excursions with him — sun up and sun down — to see firsthand many of the images set forth on these pages, and to get a peek at his method. My first flight, a chopper hop down the Las Vegas Strip at night, drew a big laugh from Cameron. "What a baptism!" he chuckled. "You're spoiled forever."

Through our headphones, we chatted about the relevance to our project of certain structures along the Strip, but Cameron had done his homework. Although he knew in general what he wanted, he was always hopeful of being surprised by some fabulous unexpected landscape or geological formation. Unlike the modern-day photographer, with his propensity to shoot five rolls of film to capture that one precious shot, Bob would often take just one photograph of a site we knew would be included. When I inquired about that, he borrowed a line from his late friend Ansel Adams. "Photographically I am a fly fisherman," he said. "I do not need to dynamite the stream."

To some, it may seem that hanging out of helicopters is a risky way for an octogenarian to make a living. A few years ago, Cameron

was shooting *Above Yosemite*, and he had captured an image of climbers pasted like flies halfway up a 3,300-foot sheer rock wall. Later, down on the valley floor, one of the climbers said: "So you were the guy photographing us from a chopper; man, I wouldn't do that for all the tea in China."

Cameron replied that he wouldn't be scaling El Capitan anytime soon, either.

Danger, to an aficionado, is a relative term.

What strikes one in observing Bob Cameron's photos of the southern Nevada area and its surrounding canyons and mountains, is the cohesive blending of man and nature, and how even when man's presence was most intrusive, it doesn't offend when viewed from above. Take Hoover Dam, for instance. From the sky, this white wedge interrupting the even blue flow of the Colorado River appears as natural and wonderful as the water that provides hydroelectric power and nourishment to the valley below.

And the Luxor pyramid, located right next to the Excalibur kingdom, across the street from the New York-New York megalopolis and the MGM Grand theme park. There's no logic to how this hyperbolic architecture raised to the umpteenth power all works together, but somehow it does. Then get out of town, and revel in the rose and crimson of Red Rock Canyon, or explore the white peaks of Mount Charleston, or go east to the cathedral spires of Bryce Canyon and Zion, and you'll grasp the vastness and antiquity of the region. These wonders were formed over millions of years, and yet the Strip is just 50 years old. Geologists fear not; mankind has barely made a dent in any of it.

The Las Vegas area, both geographically and economically, is one of extremes, to be sure. Las Vegas has been the fastest growing city in the country for two decades. The county population surpassed 1 million residents in 1995, having jumped from well under 500,000 just 20 years ago. The school district is also setting growth records, nearly doubling in size in the last 10 years. And the oldest population boom is keeping pace with the youngsters, as over half of the 150,000 retirees have lived in Las Vegas less than 10 years. They were lured here by lush retirement communities and the attractive Nevada tax climate. The convention industry also continues its steady surge with record numbers of conventions and attendees, two of which brought over 130,000 delegates to town in 1996.

Indeed the city has almost become respectable — we shudder at the thought — so much so that *Time* magazine not long ago did a cover story calling Las Vegas the All-American City. Mobster and showgirl movies, once the staple of Las Vegas, are even making room for titles like *Honey*, *I Blew Up the Baby*, and *Vegas Vacation*, in which Chevy Chase and his film family of dweebs come to town for some wholesome fun.

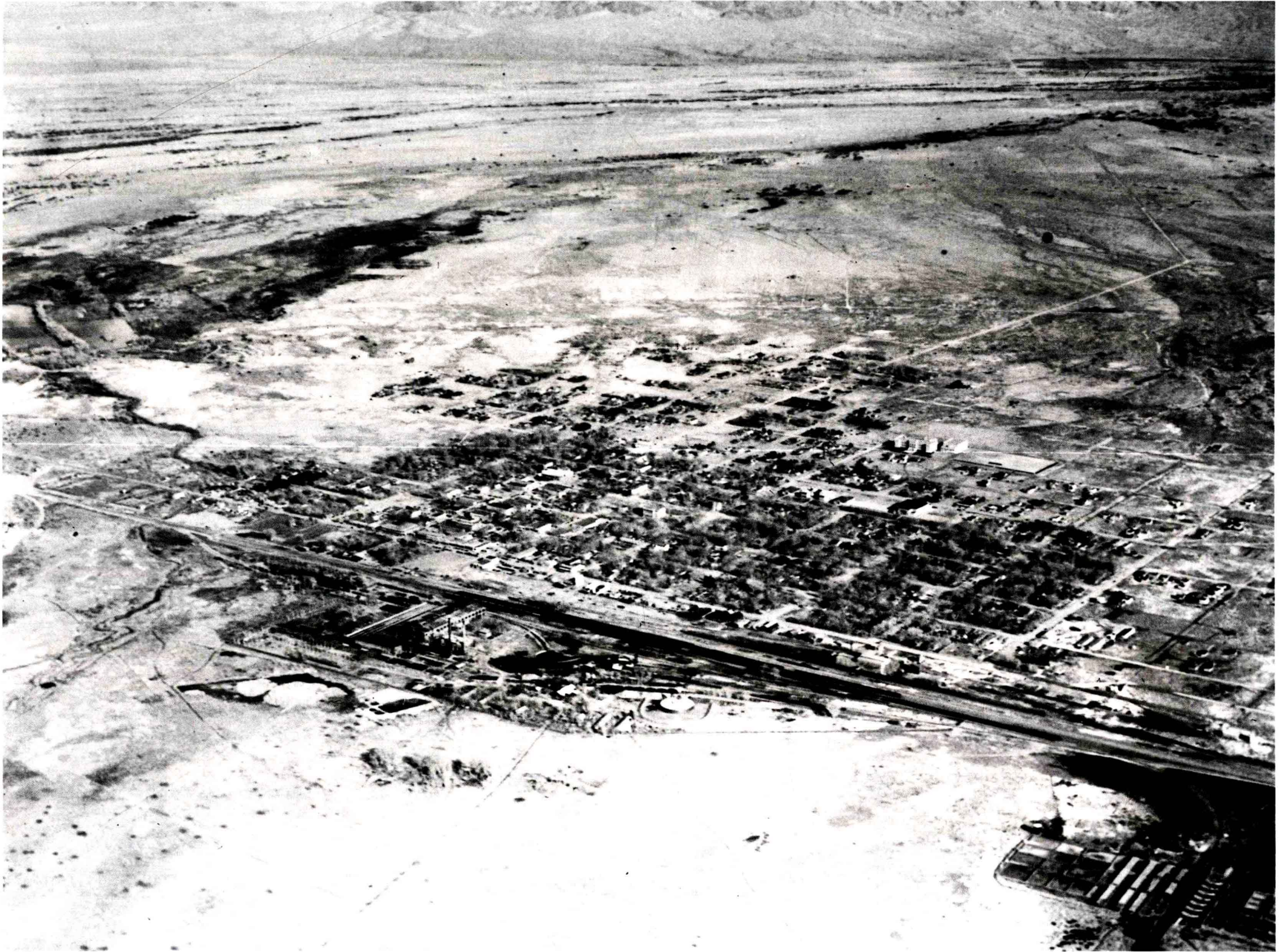
Bugsy's bullet-riddled body is rolling over in its grave.

Although the city's image may be undergoing a massage, the undeniable fact is that Las Vegas gets more intriguing, and certainly more picturesque, as we march toward the millennium.

And for that reason, Bob Cameron has every intention of returning in a few years to chronicle all the changes from above. I hope he asks me along again.

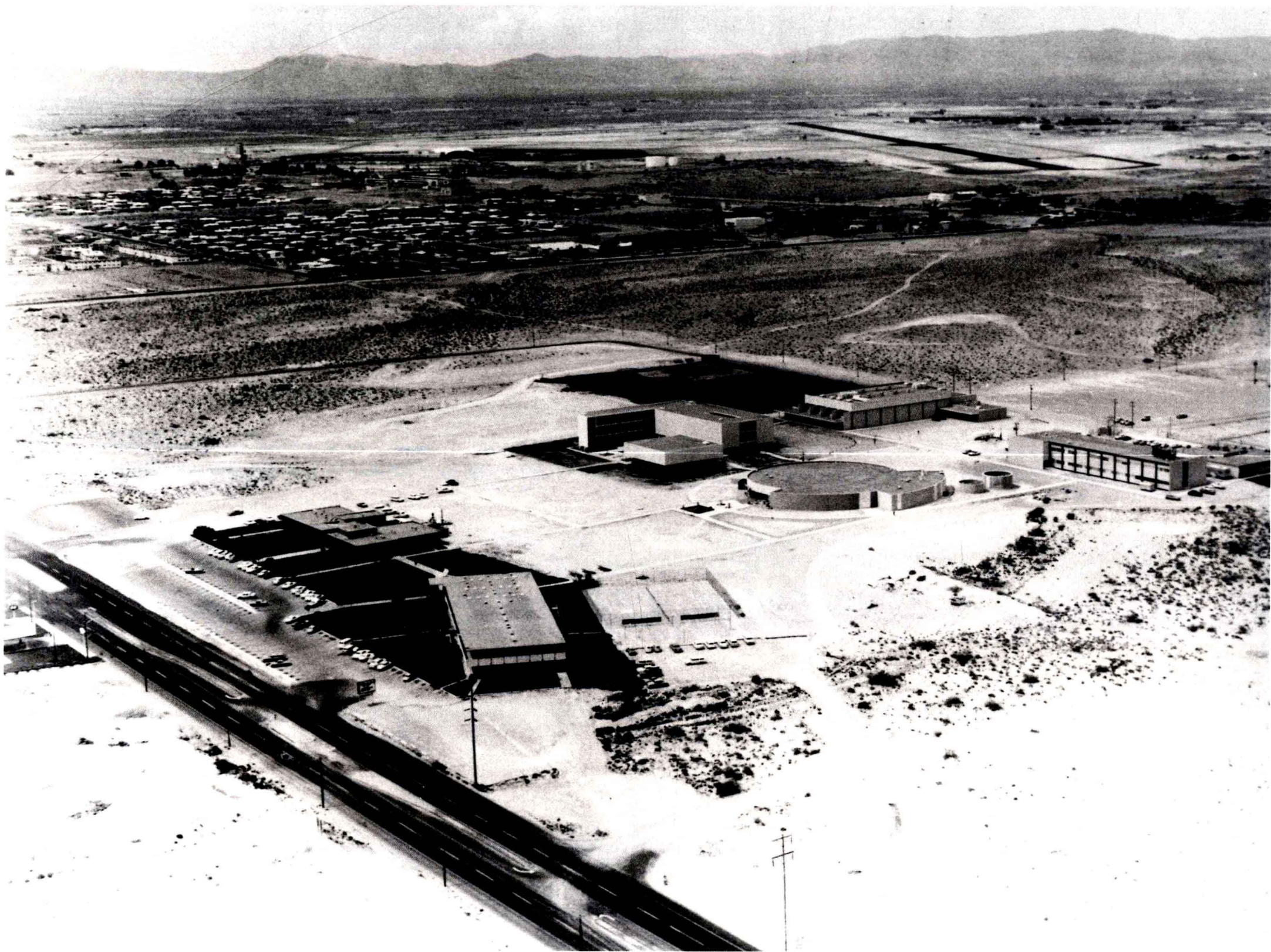
— Jack Sheehan

THEN AND NOW



(above) **DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS** in the late 1920s, prior to establishing its niche as an international entertainment and gambling mecca. The Union Pacific Railroad yard (foreground) recalls the city's origins as a whistlestop at the turn of the century. (opposite) Downtown today, some 70 years later, has evolved into a bustling area of gaming commerce and local politics. The passing trains hearken to an earlier day, when the rail line was the lifeblood of the community.





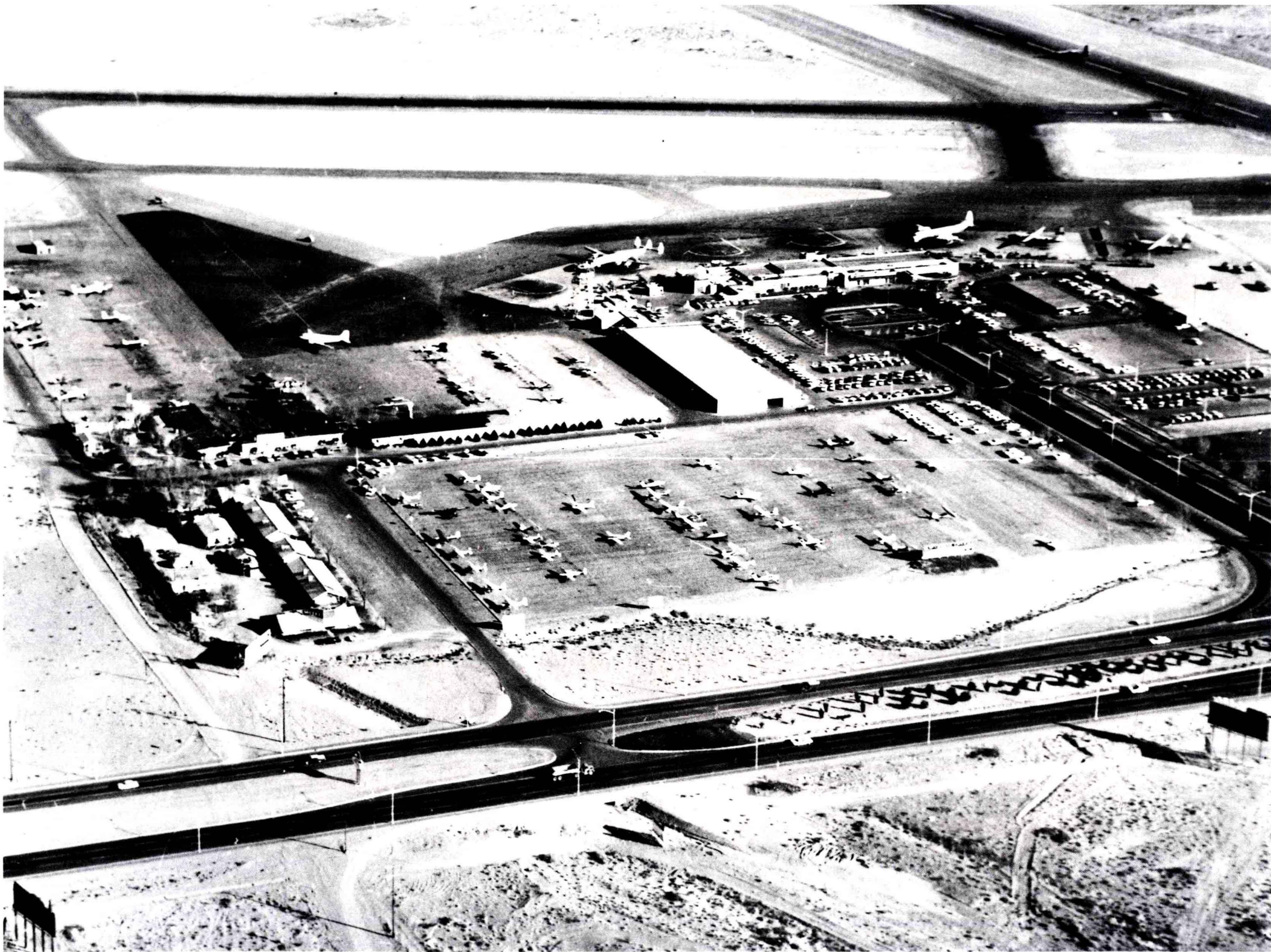
(above) **NEVADA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY**, 1965. This tiny school, shortly to become the University of Nevada Las Vegas, benefited from the foresight of civic leaders, who parcelled 335 acres to accommodate future growth. (opposite) **UNLV** today, a school which has gained prominence from its national championship basketball team (1990) and its appraisal by *U.S. News and World Report* as “a rising star in higher education.” In 1996, the university has 58 academic buildings, 19,500 students, and more than 600 faculty members.





(above) **JOE W. BROWN RACETRACK** (1964). This horseracing attraction would later receive national attention when it was developed into Las Vegas Country Club, the original host course for the PGA Tour. The Las Vegas Pro Celebrity Classic had a record million-dollar purse when it came to town in 1983. (opposite) **LAS VEGAS COUNTRY CLUB** was the first true country club in the city. Located in the heart of town, for years it defined country club living and social panache in a city desperately seeking an identity off the Strip.





(above) **McCARRAN FIELD AIRPORT** (1962). In that year, it handled 1.28 million passengers, just 4 percent of the current total. The tiny aircraft dotting the field speak as much about advances in aviation as they do the growth of Las Vegas as an international tourist destination. (opposite) Currently the 10th busiest airport in the United States, **McCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT** ranks as the 16th busiest in the world. Since 1982, McCarran has doubled in average daily scheduled flights and tripled in passenger volume, handling 30 million travelers in 1995. The airport is currently completing a \$100-million expansion and improvement.





(above) The south end of the **LAS VEGAS STRIP** in the early 1970s. The famous Stardust sign (center, left) and the Circus Circus tent were early signatures. (opposite) Nowadays, the ever-expanding and upgrading Strip has eye-catchers like Grand Slam Canyon (rounded purple building, far left) and the Stratosphere Tower standing tall and proud like an exclamation point at the end of the Strip.