

## Frank Floor Talk

# Black lives matter, but they didn't matter that much in early casinos

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Most of us working in casinos today mercifully never knew the days when gaming was rooted in blatant segregation and Jim Crow prohibitions. That history is largely also Nevada's, since the state held a national monopoly on legalized betting from 1931 until 1976. And while we can now say with pride that our industry has made great strides toward racial equality, we should also be aware of our shameful history and let it act as a reminder that there is still some work to be done.



*Bertha Woodard and Eddie Scott are part of a protest in March of 1961 (Reno Gazette photo).*

At first, Nevada didn't seem destined to earn the title "Mississippi of the West," but the moniker was later proven to be well-deserved. In the beginning, neither the early Mormon settlers of the late 1840s nor the miners that followed in the 1850s permitted slavery. In fact, the Silver State played a key role in the Union's victory in the Civil War by providing gold and silver to fund the war effort, and, perhaps more importantly, giving the president two more Union votes in the Senate. Our population at the time was far below the requirement set for statehood, but Congress and President Lincoln rushed Nevada into the Union in 1864.

Nevada, like much of the frontier west, focused its xenophobia on the Chinese, despite their critical role in the success of the Comstock mines of Virginia City and the transcontinental railroad they hammered through the Sierra. There were even some early signs that the state might be truly progressive when the Nevada Supreme Court ruled in 1872 that excluding African Americans from public schools was unconstitutional. But, in a harbinger of things to come, the same ruling also declared that Nevada schools could be segregated by race.

As statues of Confederate generals are being removed across the country today, some of Nevada's most prominent citizens are also coming under scrutiny. Pat McCarran, the namesake of the Las Vegas airport, is honored as one of two Nevada statues in the U.S. Capitol building. But the state's Democratic Congressional delegation recently asked the governor to recommend its removal.

"While Sen. McCarran fought for workers' rights and sponsored legislation that helped shape the modern air travel industry, his dark legacy of virulent racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia have no place representing Nevada, especially in the United States Capitol," says the letter, which was signed by Democratic Reps. Dina Titus, Steven Horsford and Susie Lee and Democratic Senators Jacky Rosen and Catherine Cortez Masto.

Northern Nevada hasn't escaped the retrospective either. Senator Francis G. Newlands has both a prominent neighborhood and a park named in his honor. His 1905 Newlands Reclamation Project is credited with turning 57,000 acres of desert into productive farmland in the Fernley and Fallon areas. But critics are now calling for removal of his name from the Reno park. A letter to the *Reno Gazette Journal* cited his history as "an avowed white supremacist, a mean-spirited and virulent racist even by the standards of the era in which he lived." (Newlands lived from 1846 to 1917.)



But it was the state's casinos, more than their senators, that earned the headline "Negros can't win in Las Vegas" in the March 1954 edition of *Ebony* magazine. "The Negro finds little welcome anywhere," author James Goodrich wrote. "He is barred from practically every place whites go for entertainment or services. He cannot live outside a segregated, slum-like community (known then as the Westside). He is relegated to the most menial jobs. For the Negro, Vegas is as bad as towns come... Negroes rate no better than second-class citizenship there."

Things didn't much improve until African-American pioneers like the Las Vegas dentist James McMillan threatened to march on the Strip for integration (Here's [an article about the proposed march](#) from the *Nevada Law Journal*). It took a lot of courage to continue the fight. "They told me to stop what I was doing," McMillan said, "or they would drop me in Lake Mead." Due to his and others' determined efforts, Strip hotel owners grudgingly opened their businesses to black customers on March 26, 1960.

McMillan joined with another heroine of the era, Bertha Woodard, the “matriarch of the Reno-Sparks NAACP.” In the late 1950s, she filed discrimination charges against the El Capitan Casino in Hawthorne, NV. She was a registered nurse and a tireless advocate for ending racism, determined to bring an end to signs in casinos and restaurants in Reno that proclaimed, “No Indians, Negroes or dogs.”<sup>[1]</sup> She marched on the Carson City state capitol in 1961 to promote reform alongside McMillan. She and McMillan now have schools in the state named in their honor.



The NAACP had plenty of reasons to protest.

Discrimination that seems unimaginable today occurred regularly at the time. Las Vegas has always been famous for its live entertainment, and many of the biggest stars of the 40s, 50s and 60s were black. While they worked the showrooms to rave reviews, they could not stay in the resort’s hotel rooms or use their facilities. *Soul of America*, a travel site for African Americans, recently recalled, “Even in the late 1950s, if Ethel Waters, Lena Horne or Dorothy Dandridge so much as touched the swimming pool, the entertainer was whisked away, white patrons were evacuated, and the pool was drained. After a quick scrubbing, it was refilled.”

In addition to the advocacy of Nevada’s NAACP, many others credit entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. with breaking barriers. In the early 50s, the Will Mastin Trio, featuring Davis, became the first Black entertainers to headline a show. He got an even better boost from megastar Frank Sinatra, who invited Sammy to open for him at the original Sands. Soon after, the Will Mastin Trio became the first African Americans offered rooms and access to the casino floor at the Frontier. When Sammy died in May 1990, they turned out the lights on the Las Vegas Strip in his honor, something done earlier for Elvis Presley and later Frank Sinatra.

Unfortunately, in those early days many Blacks never got to see Davis perform. They were only allowed in the Moulin Rouge Casino & Hotel in West Las Vegas. It opened in May 1951 and became the first casino to cater to black and white patrons equally. The top African American entertainers of the day appeared on their stage, and many white stars made the Moulin Rouge their favorite hangout after their own shows were over. In a sad bit of irony, the Moulin Rouge closed after it lost its liquor license as a result of charging African Americans more per drink than others.



Bill Fong's New China Club in Reno was also one of the few places that welcomed minorities in Northern Nevada. It was located a few blocks east of the main drag on Commercial Row, and, while it did not have the star power of the Moulin Rouge, for years the New China Club was the rare casino where African Americans and other persons of color could freely visit.

Change came slowly. Governor Grant Sawyer signed the Nevada Civil Rights Act in 1965, but it was often ignored. However, Sawyer, with support from a few casino operators like William "Bill" Harrah, used the newly formed Nevada Gaming Control Board to enforce the Act with the threat of gaming license revocations. It was six years later, in 1971, that discrimination in Nevada hotels and casinos was officially ended by state statute.



*Bertha Woodard (in white) along with other members of the NAACP attend the signing of Nevada's Civil Rights Act in 1965 by Governor Grant Sawyer.*

Another milestone was achieved in 2002, when Don Barden became the first African American to own a Las Vegas casino. The Detroit native, who started with a single record store, made his first fortune wiring homes with cable. Other businesses followed, including construction, entertainment, and real estate. After trying and failing to get permission to build a casino in Detroit, Barden bought Fitzgeralds, on Fremont Street, out of bankruptcy in December 2001, thus earning him his place in Nevada history. Unfortunately, the recession of 2008 led to hard times for Barden; in November of 2009, his Majestic Star holding company itself filed for bankruptcy. The Fitzgeralds property was sold once again, to Derek Stevens, another Detroit native; the casino is now known as the D.

There have been several other African American achievements in the state since those early dark days. Their demographic is currently the third largest in the state at 8.78% of the population. (Whites are 48.4%; Hispanics rank second at 26.9%)[2] . Joe Neal was Nevada's first Black state senator, holding office from 1972 to 2003, and served as Minority Leader. In 2004, Michael L. Douglas was appointed to the Nevada Supreme Court and has served twice as Chief Justice.



Today, over 20 African Americans have served in the state legislature. In 2019, Aaron Ford, who served as the Senate's Majority leader, was elected Attorney General.

But alas, there are few African Americans in prominent positions in casino gaming. Alexis Herman, who also served as U.S. Secretary of Labor, is on MGM's Board of Directors; Sandra Douglass Morgan is chairwoman of the Nevada Gaming Control Board; Rodney Ferguson serves as general manager at the Potawatomi Hotel & Casino in Milwaukee; and Melonie Johnson was recently appointed president of New Jersey's Borgata Hotel, Casino & Spa. But they, and just a handful of others, are among the few exceptions.

In a *Las Vegas Sun* interview in 1999, black historian and filmmaker Trish Geran said, "Yes, today you can find blacks working on the casino floors unlike in the 1950s. But go into the hotel casino executive offices and count how many blacks you see working in key executive roles or even as secretaries. You won't find many." On that front, unfortunately, not much has changed in the last 20 years.

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[1] *Nevada Women's History Project*: Alice Lucretia Smith

[2] Source: DataUSA Datawheel