

The Las Vegas Chronicles

Andrew J. McLean

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As a history of Las Vegas and its casinos—and the people who built, ran, gambled, worked, entertained, robbed, and murdered in America's Sin City—Andrew McLean's book strikes that rare balance between the informative and the entertaining.

The Las Vegas Chronicles is a solid piece of oral history collected by a man who lived through at least a dozen core years of the century covered by the text. McLean met, talked with, worked with, and befriended a number of the characters in the book—and characters they are, from famous entertainers like Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. to others who are celebrities in their own right, such as big-time gamblers Kerry "Prince of Whales" Packer and William Lee "The Suitcase Man" Bergstrom. The colorful cast also includes billionaire recluse Howard Hughes, mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, and many others, from all walks of life, who have made Las Vegas what it once was and is today.

Many of the people who populate McLean's book are or were living legends. The author goes behind the tabloid façade to show us the sad, the angry, and the flawed human beings who were made and oftentimes broken by Las Vegas. There are men who were "more sinner than saint" and either "the gentlest bad guy or the baddest good guy you'd ever seen." There are cheats and womanizers, sharks and killers, comics and clowns, and even a few generally good, solid, nice people—words seldom applied to those who live, work, gamble, and entertain in Las Vegas.

The organization of the book into nine major chapters, each of which contains a collection of headlined anecdotes centered on a famous person, event, job, or situation, makes the text a bit disjointed for the person looking to curl up for a long night of reading. McLean's staccato style, however, does provide a wealth of brief articles and stories ideally designed for one who wants something to read but knows his time or concentration will be limited or interrupted.

This is not McLean's first book, but it is his first history. He writes in a down-to-earth, straightforward, and easily digestible style. Whether relating the tale of a brutal murder or explaining how people try to cheat casinos, the author writes with clarity and authority. His tone is conversational rather than professorial, and the chronicle is written in solid, simple, workmanlike prose.

The Las Vegas Chronicles may not be a Pulitzer Prize winner, but it does deserve a spot on the shelves of every bookstore, souvenir shop, and tour center in or near Las Vegas.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (October 7, 2011)

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