“Long after Las Vegas’ influence as a gambling heaven has gone, Las Vegas’ forms and symbols will be influencing American life. That fantastic skyline! Las Vegas’ neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story-high display signs, parabolas, boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids, and all the rest of it, are already the staple design of the American landscape outside the oldest parts of the oldest cities. They are all over every suburb, every subdivision, every highway . . . they are the new landmarks of America, the new guideposts, the new way Americans get their bearings.”


The Landmark Hotel. Howard Hughes Collection.
Since 1967, UNLV Libraries’ Special Collections has played a critical role in documenting the history, culture and environment of the city of Las Vegas. It is now the largest and most widely used repository and provider of original historical material from and about Las Vegas and its unlikely environmental setting in Southern Nevada in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

From its initial collecting of pioneer “Nevadiana” in which the city of Las Vegas was viewed as a frontier outpost, the focus of the department has shifted to a view of Las Vegas as a unique American cultural phenomenon, a subject of research, not only for traditional local historians and preservationists, but also for a growing number of faculty and students in architecture, urban planning, landscape design, sociology, business and economics, ecology, and labor and industrial relations. And it continues to provide fodder for the popular media’s continued fascination with Las Vegas as a subject or setting for documentaries, movies, and TV shows.

Be our guest and become immersed in the extraordinary history of this fabled desert city – from a famous Renaissance gambler to dam workers scaling the Black Canyon; from scientists detonating nuclear devices while tourists watched from hotel pools (and Howard Hughes hid in the Desert Inn) to showgirls rehearsing with a young Frank Sinatra on the Copa Room stage or strutting in a blaze of feathers and rhinestones on the stage of the MGM Grand’s Ziegfeld Room.

Our collections are inclusive, eclectic,
multidimensional, traditional, and outré. They are captured and stored in words, pictures, voices, and moving images.

The Region

May 3, 1844—“After a day’s journey of 18 miles, in a northeasterly direction, we encamped in the midst of another very large basin, at a camping ground called las Vegas—a term which the Spaniards use to signify fertile or marshy plains. . . . Two narrow streams of clear water, four or five feet deep, gush suddenly, with a quick current, from two singularly large springs; these, and other waters of the basin, pass out in a gap to the eastward. The taste of the water is good, but rather too warm to be agreeable. . . . they, however, afforded a delightful bathing place.”

—John C. Fremont, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains

The exploration of the Spanish and American West served as the backdrop for the development of Las Vegas. Since the 19th century, when the U.S. government sent scientific expeditions to explore and map the West, a voluminous record has been made of this landscape and man’s interaction with it. Whether through ranching, agriculture, dams, railroads, highways, towns and cities, or federal installations, the people of Nevada have challenged the environment. And because considerable federal and state involvement in the development of Nevada generated massive numbers of reports, this phenomenon is remarkably well documented.

The collections include multivolume reports of the 19th-century geological and geographic expeditions, travel diaries, and accompanying maps and atlases. These reports covered all fields of 19th-century natural science and contain artist renderings of the region’s physical characteristics as well as its flora and fauna. The perceived potential for agricultural development prompted considerable study of the region’s hydrogeology and the feasibility of irrigation.

Modern environmental collections include environmental impact studies and technical and scientific reports conducted by or for governmental agencies and the university on Yucca Mountain, the Nevada Test Site, Lake Mead, water resources and waste management, soil and irrigation, and transportation.

Mining in Southern Nevada

“Folkses—I am lucky to have a room. . . . A whole train load of people come in here every night. The train does not get in until about 12:00 to 3:00 at night and most of them have to go to saloons and lay on the floor or any old place they can find under a roof until

“. . . I could get night for half of my $5.00 to $10.00 every bed if I wanted.”

—Earle Rinker, 1906
Ore trucks advertising the opening of the extension of the Tonopah Railroad to Goldfield.
Goldfield Tonopah Photo Album.
morning. The depot is about 2 miles out of the main part of town. People are coming in here and paying $10.00 a night for a cot and a couple of comforts and darned glad to get it at that. Everyone that had beds to rent are taking advantage of the rush. I could get $5.00 to $10.00 every night for half of my bed if I wanted.”

— Earle Rinker, October/November 1906

In 1906, Earle Rinker, a stenographer and clerk from Indiana, arrives in the gold-rush town of Goldfield to make his fortune and begins a regular correspondence with his mother. The day after he arrives, he witnesses a shooting in front of his office. He begins speculating in mining stocks and ultimately loses all his money and lives in a shack with two friends from Indiana. Rinker goes prospecting with three friends, and as they show off their six-shooters, one of them is accidentally shot. They race back to Goldfield in their buckboard wagon with their wounded friend, who dies the next day. He describes the strikes and coming of federal troops. He tells his mother that the newspapers do not report the bad things going on in Goldfield but only promote and “boom” the town.

Southern Nevada: the Boomtown Years is an online digital collection drawing on a broad range of our special collections. It tells the story of Southern Nevada’s mining boom and bust, the coming of the railroad, and the unlikely survival of the last Nevada boomtown, Las Vegas. A grant funded by the Library Services and Technology Act enabled the Libraries to digitize a wealth of rarely seen and rarely used letters, newspapers, maps, drawings, and more than 1,000 photographs. The Boomtown Years provides online the largest collection ever brought together of primary historical material on the history of Southern Nevada; the Tonopah-Goldfield gold strike; and the transient life of ranchers, speculators, mining camps, and boomtowns. Letters from fortune hunters and railroad agents tell stories never heard. Newspapers “boom” the camps and the mines, mining stocks soar and then crash, and photographs capture a disappearing frontier – the 20th-century American West of wandering people looking to make a fortune or simply a living when the automobile was replacing the horse, children rode burros in the streets and water was delivered in wagons – a racial melting pot where everyone was a migrant. http://digital.library.unlv.edu/boomtown/.

The Town: Ranch to Depot to Resort

“I think the Las Vegas Valley will be some kind of resort place for sick people from the East and there got to be quite a town somewhere on the new Railway line.”

— A.J. Drothzen, California nurseryman and orchardist, 1904

“SHE IS . . . The center of millions of acres of undeveloped lands and the Hub of a mineral territory as rich as lies out of doors . . . She is the Gateway of the Great Boulder Dam Project . . . and is destined to be the future home of teeming thousands.”

— Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, 1924
At a crossroads of wagon trails to scattered ranches and mining camps, the town of Las Vegas was brought into being by the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City Railroad (later the Union Pacific), which needed to water its trains between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. It bought the Stewart Ranch with its springs and creek and built a town around its depot, machine shops, and ice house. Las Vegas was a company town, and the railroad was the company. The corporate archives of the Union Pacific Railroad’s Las Vegas operations are one of the keystones of Special Collections. The railroad did more than simply run a railroad; it built and promoted a town, owned and operated its water and utilities, and was its major employer. Its archives constitute the most comprehensive historical collection documenting the beginning of the city of Las Vegas. The more personal side of that history is provided by the collections of Helen Stewart, Charles “Pop” Squires, John S. Park, Walter Bracken, John Ferron, Fred and Maurine Wilson, and others, who settled, built and led the community.
Hoover Dam

“Las Vegas was nothing. It was just a wide spot in the road. . . . I remember Fremont street – all dirt. Not a paved road anywhere.”

— Dean Pulsipher, dam worker

“Probably every second or third building on Fremont Street from the Union Pacific depot down to Fourth Street was a saloon or gambling hall, or both. This was during Prohibition. They never closed them – they operated day and night.”

— Bruce Eaton, dam worker

“It was terrifically hot. My God, it was terribly hot and dusty. None of the roads were paved in those days. It was just ungodly, it was so hot . . . We’ve got to get out of here. We just absolutely got to get out of here . . .”

— Erma Godbey, wife of dam worker, on arriving in Ragtown, the dam workers’ camp.

“They hired anyone who didn’t have brains enough to be scared. You was 900 feet up in the air. It took a lot of guts.”

— Jake Dieleman, on the high scalers
The building of Hoover Dam is a central and defining phenomenon of the history of Las Vegas and the American West. Special Collections houses the largest collection of material relating to Hoover Dam, including film footage, maps, government publications on the planning and construction of the dam, and well over a thousand photos taken by photographers working for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation or for the Six Companies, the consortium that constructed the dam. The issues and controversies behind controlling the river and sharing the electricity it produced were overshadowed by the sheer immensity and physical wonder of the dam.

"They hired anyone who didn't have brains enough to be scared. You was 900 feet up in the air. It took a lot of guts."
It was the entertainers who made Las Vegas a legend...
The Strip

“Passing through Las Vegas is Route 91, the archetype of the commercial strip, the phenomenon at its purest and most intense. We believe a careful documentation and analysis of its physical form is as important to architects and urbanists today as were the studies of medieval Europe and ancient Rome and Greece to earlier generations. Such a study will help to define a new type of urban form emerging in America and Europe, radically different from that we have known; one that we have been ill-equipped to deal with and that, from ignorance, we define today as urban sprawl. An aim of this studio will be, through open-minded and nonjudgmental investigation, to come to understand this new form and to begin to evolve techniques for its handling.”

— Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, 1972

The Las Vegas Strip, with its megaresorts, has developed a distinctive architectural style that other gaming and resort cities have copied. Not only has this architecture transformed the physical environment of Las Vegas, but it also has become a leitmotif for postmodern architecture. Aesthetically eclectic, it has become a hallmark of the themed amusement-park style that characterizes new urban entertainment and recreational centers. The architectural records of the development of the Strip properties found in the collections of architects Martin Stern Jr. and Homer Rissman constitute an important record of urban design and have proven a rich resource for students of architecture and design from around the world.

Dean Martin’s opening night as a solo act in the Copa Room, March 6, 1957. Jack Benny is in the front row. Also in the audience are Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Debbie Reynolds and Jack Entratter. Sands Hotel Collection.
In 1952, the Sands Hotel opened under the baton of Entertainment Director, Vice President and, later, President, Jack Entratter, the night club impresario from New York’s Copacabana Club. Entratter brought the biggest names in show business to the Sands by offering the biggest money. Entratter’s headliners included Danny Thomas, Tallulah Bankhead, Tony Bennett, Edith Piaf, Lena Horne, and of course, Frank Sinatra. Sinatra, in turn, brought his friends, notably Sammy Davis Jr., Joey Bishop, and Dean Martin. Sinatra’s Rat Pack presided over the Sands in its heyday, lending their glamour to a town dominated by gambling and the mob. It was the entertainers who made Las Vegas a legitimate resort town.

“We are giving the public what it wants. This is the type of show that customers want to see, and I think you will see more of it. It will soon be nothing to see a nude girl. All of the showgirls along the Strip are going to be replaced by nudes... to meet the entertainment demands of such modern advancements along the strip as the development of the convention hall.”

— Barry Ashton, producer at the El Rancho Hotel, 1958
perhaps most associated with the “Frenchified” showgirls of the Lido de Paris and Follies Bergere. This is the culture that attracts tourists and still dominates the tone of the city. UNLV’s entertainment collections include local magazines such as “Fabulous Las Vegas” and files from public relations and entertainment departments of hotels like the Sands, home to Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack; the Stardust, home of the Lido show; the Dunes; the Frontier; and the Thunderbird.

The Arnold Shaw popular music collection contains interviews, correspondence, musical arrangements, and recorded music of popular and jazz musicians who performed in Las Vegas. The

“To sum it up, Hallelujah Hollywood! is everything old Hollywood has come to represent — glitter, gaudiness, glamour — turned out with that special perversity only Vegas can provide.”

— Playboy magazine, 1974

While Las Vegas is known primarily as a gaming resort, its entertainment industry is just as important to its tourism. Las Vegas has, in a sense, lived up to its self-promotion as the entertainment capital of the world. From a venue for New York nightclub shows in the first Strip hotels where the entertainment director took precedence over the casino boss, Las Vegas has developed a unique and distinctive genre of adult entertainment

Nat King Cole performing in the Copa Room, 1957. Sands Hotel Collection.
"How would you like to hold my hand?"

“I assume you are aware that there is open gambling in the state of Nevada . . .”
Donn Arden collection documents a remarkable entertainment career spanning more than 40 years through photographs, costume and set designs, programs and posters, business correspondence, contracts, budgets, music, and scripts. This collection further distinguishes UNLV Library’s Special Collections as the premier repository of material on the history of American entertainment.

**Gaming Collections**

“I assume you are aware that there is open gambling in the state of Nevada and the liquor license in Nevada is also very light there would be a great many saloons started and great many of the saloons would also run gambling games, which would virtually make the town a gambling hell.”

— J. Ross Clark, vice president
San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake City Railroad, 1904

The gaming collection is perhaps the most internationally recognized of all of UNLV’s special collections. This collection was established as a repository of materials and information relating to gambling and commercial gaming. It provides important documentation of the history of gaming, a critical facet in the development of Las Vegas.

The historical collection, the largest such collection in the world, documents the history of games and gambling and their social context and includes many rare volumes, pamphlets, and broadsides, dating from the 17th century. The modern collection focuses on all facets of the global business of gaming: financial reports; market analyses; the economics and regulation of the gaming industry; the psychological, social, and political effects of gambling, public policy, regulation and legislation, marketing, advertising and publicity, casino management, security, and various techniques and general guides on how to win. Significant collections have been
developed in the specific and related fields of organized crime and prostitution.

The Center for Gaming Research, located within Special Collections, supports the scholarly analysis of gambling and gaming issues. With its extensive gaming collections, it serves as an unparalleled resource for students, faculty, and independent scholars. Through the website, gaming.unlv.edu, the center offers unique research tools and guides to gaming research.

University Archives

The primary purpose of the university archives is to provide an historical record of the university. The archives are an obvious reflection of collegiate life: campus events, student life and activities, faculty research, theater, dance, and music. But beyond the traditional photos of sporting events and campus buildings, the planning of an urban campus is a major architectural enterprise with enormous impact on local neighborhoods. The local politics in which the urban university is constantly engaged and which are documented in its records are an important part not just of the history of the university, but also of its urban setting. The impact of a campus extends beyond its physical presence. The development of its academic, research, professional, and athletic programs has a considerable influence on the community it serves and is, in turn, directly affected by the community.

Claes Oldenburg’s “The Flashlight” at UNLV Performing Arts Center. UNLV Photo.
"...the planning of an urban campus is a major architectural enterprise with enormous impact on local neighborhoods."
Oral History

Often the best record of Las Vegas’ actual past, given its unique history and the nature of the businesses on which it was built, is in the memories of people who live here. A determined attempt to capture that record is needed to complement the traditional written record. The Oral History Research Center was established as part of Special Collections in 2003 through the generous support of Dr. Harold Boyer. The mission of the center is not only to identify and select subjects, conduct interviews, transcribe, and preserve those memories but also to train students and volunteers, promote and assist community oral history projects, and demonstrate how oral history contributes to a fuller understanding and appreciation of a history that captures and preserves the voices of a community.

Projects undertaken and underway include histories of early Las Vegas,
UNLV for its 50th anniversary, medical workers, residents of the historic John S. Park neighborhood, women in gaming and entertainment, jazz musicians, the civil rights movement in Las Vegas, Holocaust survivors, Las Vegas POWs, and Hurricane Katrina refugees. The center has assisted other community groups, agencies, and organizations such as the Blue Diamond History Committee, the Junior League of Las Vegas, the city of Las Vegas, and Clark County.

Special Collections currently houses 1,600 recorded interviews, including interviews done by other oral historians before the center was established, with significant collections on the history of the Nevada Test Site, the building of Hoover Dam, and the gay and lesbian community. The Oral History Research Center, http://www.library.unlv.edu/oral_histories/index.html, has become a highly visible and recognized enterprise of community-university collaboration and engagement.
Special Collections includes pictorial, non-photographic collections, and examples of the book arts. Depictions and renderings, be they of 19th-century landscapes drawn by the artists who accompanied scientific expeditions of exploration or of proposed hotels drawn by architects to present to their clients, provide an imagined picture of Las Vegas and its region. Movie posters, prints, book jackets, and menus are examples of art as a commercial medium designed to catch the eye, a blending of the art of illustration and advertising.

The book arts collection at UNLV is small and regional in scope. It includes all the works of the Rainmaker Press published by UNLV’s Black Mountain Institute and UNR’s Black Rock Press. Other regional artists and presses represented include Peter Koche of San Francisco, Dan Stolpe of Santa Cruz, and miniature-book artist Jill Timm. These and other examples of the book arts, fine press, and publishers’ bindings are on permanent exhibit in the Special Collections reading room. These books reflect specialized subject areas or the culture of the Southwest, such as Dan Stolpe’s lithographic Coyote Creation cycle.

Culinary Arts

Nevada has a rich culinary history. With its many award-winning restaurants, it is now recognized for its dining almost as much as for its gaming. Special Collections has developed an extensive culinary collection that includes cookbooks, periodicals, rare books and prints, and collections from prominent chefs and national culinary organizations. Special Collections also houses one of the largest menu collections in the United States, rivaling, and in some instances surpassing, those in the New York Public Library, Los Angeles Public Library, and Cornell University.

While UNLV has collected local menus for a number of years, the collection became internationally notable with the purchase in 1970 of an important private collection of 19th- and early 20th-century menus from across Europe and the United States. The Bohn-Bettoni collection comprises approximately 1,500 menus dating from 1874 to 1933. Menus, like book covers, are works of design and art and are primary sources for students, commercial artists, and designers. They are cultural artifacts, designed to appeal and attract, to invite and promote dining.

Menus: Desert Inn *Painted Desert Room*, 1955; *Messageries Maritimes*, February 12, 1892; Italian menu, 1894.
Preservation

The Preservation/Conservation Laboratory was established in Special Collections in 1999. A leader in preservation efforts, the UNLV Libraries operates the only professionally equipped and staffed preservation laboratory in Nevada. The work of the laboratory is to protect, repair, and preserve all library materials by such means as mending, cleaning, de-acidifying, flattening, replacing book spines, binding, rebinding, paper repairing and backing, creating specialized enclosures and boxes, and encapsulating materials. Specialty work includes paper marbling, custom-made books, custom imprints, and clam-shell boxes.

An important part of the mission of preservation and conservation at UNLV Libraries is education and outreach; training students to work in the lab; and conducting workshops for library staff, professional organizations, and cultural institutions.

For more than 40 years,

UNLV Libraries Special Collections has documented Las Vegas and Southern Nevada, in all their complexities and contradictions, weaving countless stories and images captured from the many individuals, families, organizations, and businesses who have entrusted us with their history. Collecting and preserving history is, by necessity, a collaborative effort with the community. Special collections are built only through the generosity of those who share our commitment to preserve that history.

But to simply collect and preserve is not our ultimate goal. Our mission is to share the history that our collections illuminate by making those collections available to anyone who visits our reading room or, increasingly, finds our collections online. Special Collections has adopted new technologies to share its collections with a wider, global audience. The digital environment creates the unique ability to discover, link, and experience disparate collections in new ways. Digital collections, built with increasing sophistication, make our special collections accessible, searchable and, ultimately, more usable. Those who may never visit our reading rooms can now explore and discover a clearer and deeper understanding of Las Vegas — who we were, how we got here, and where we are going.
UNLV Libraries Special Collections

Naming Opportunities

A gift endowing a program or staff position enhances the Libraries’ ability to document our history and provides a named legacy of your generosity.

| Special Collections                          | $3,000,000 |
| Endowed Chair, Director of Special Collections | $2,500,000 |
| Endowed Chair, Director of the Center for Gaming Research | $2,000,000 |
| Endowed Chair, Director of the Oral History Research Center at UNLV | $2,000,000 |
| Special Collections Reading Room              | $1,000,000 |
| Oral History Research Center                  | $1,000,000 |
| Center for Gaming Research                    | $1,000,000 |
| Endowed Gaming Fellows Program                | $350,000  |
| Preservation/Conservation Lab                  | $250,000  |
| Endowed Graduate Fellowship                   | $250,000  |
| Endowed Undergraduate Fellowship              | $200,000  |
| Endowed Gaming Fellowship                     | $100,000  |
| Named Digital Project (selected collections)  | $50,000 –100,000 |

*For additional information on these opportunities, please contact the Libraries’ Development Office at 702-895-2286.*

*For additional information on donating materials to Special Collections, please contact Peter Michel, director of Special Collections, at 702-895-2243.*