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## Our Turn: Working Women In The Las Vegas Valley, 1940-1980

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OUR TURN:  
WORKING WOMEN IN THE LAS VEGAS VALLEY, 1940-1980

By

Irene Scholl Rostine

Bachelor of Arts in History  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
1997

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts in History**

**Department of History  
College of Liberal Arts  
Graduate College**

**University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Irene Scholl Rostine

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**May 2013**

## ABSTRACT

### **Our Turn: Working Women in the Las Vegas Valley, 1940-1980**

By

Irene Scholl Rostine

Dr. Joanne L. Goodwin, Examination Committee Chair  
Associate Professor of History  
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Women of the twenty-first century filled a myriad of work place positions that were once considered the domain of men. However this was not always the case. For many years a sexual division of labor existed. The social order dictated the terms of what constituted the norms for women's work. Men were breadwinners and women's place was in the home.

In the twentieth century, a catalyst for change occurred. According to many historians the greatest social transformation in American history occurred with the arrival of World War II. It blurred the sexual division of labor as it forced men and women into roles they had not previously occupied. Many women went to work in factories and foundries, munitions plants, and entered the armed forces. Once removed from the home, many of these women did not want to return to the home. They wanted to use the new skills they learned to gain upward mobility, feel good about themselves, and get out of the house and be with other people.

This thesis describes three types of working women in the Las Vegas Valley who engaged in nontraditional women's work, and serves as a microcosm of women across the United States. The first group of women was the women

war workers at the Basic Magnesium plant in Henderson, Nevada in the 1940s. “Rosie the Riveter” received a great deal of acclaim for her war efforts, but nothing has been written about the “Magnesium Maggies” who performed equally important work in the deserts of the southwest. This chapter looks at the opportunities and difficulties they experienced while working in the sanctum sanctorum of the male world; the factory. Through their oral histories they describe the work they performed, and how they balanced home life with work.

The third chapter, “Number Please,” deals with working women in the corporate structure in the 1950s. The high paying factory jobs were no longer available, so women had to seek new employment opportunities. Office work was seen as one of the growing fields that offered advancement for women. Using the local telephone company as representative of the corporate structure, this chapter describes those women who began work at entry level positions and through ingenuity and hard work rose through the ranks to work in male dominated jobs such as cable splicing, installing telephones and climbing poles. Many also broke the glass ceiling and became engineers, department heads, superintendents, and heads of entire divisions.

The fourth chapter, “Our Turn,” deals with women that chose a work path as entrepreneurs in the Las Vegas Real Estate industry. Through the women’s oral histories, it relates the experiences and challenges these women faced. It details the reason for their entry into the field, how they gained entry into the nontraditional work place, and the methods used to secure a foothold and make inroads into what was at the time, understood to be a man’s field in the Las

Vegas area. These entrepreneurial women carved their niche and became successful in the male-dominated real estate industry. They accomplished this within the arena of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors of which they were members.

While many primary and secondary sources were used in the creation of this thesis, it is the oral interviews given by the women who lived the experience that puts a human face on this thesis. While many of these oral interviews have yet to be transcribed, they are all nonetheless, safely deposited with the Las Vegas Women Oral History Project at the Women's Research Institute of Nevada at the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people inspired and supported me in writing this thesis. I was an undergraduate in Dr. Jay Coughtry's history class, when he encouraged to write a paper on a local subject. I choose to write about the women war workers in Henderson, Nevada. Thus was born the first chapter of my thesis, "Magnesium Maggies." In his graduate student Thesis Class the genesis of "Number Please" emerged.

Attending classes in Dr. Joanne Goodwin's Women's history classes further piqued my interest in women's issues. This inspired me to do additional research into women's lives and the third chapter, "Our Turn" was born. Dr. Michelle Tusan, and Dr. Elspeth Whitney, who taught European History, further broadened my horizons. Many of the papers I wrote for them involved European women whose issues and interests paralleled those of the women in the United States.

I wish to thank my committee: Chair, Joanne Goodwin and committee members, Jay Coughtry and Michelle Tusan. Barb Brents also graciously agreed to serve as my graduate representative. I thank you all for your guidance and patience.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all the wonderful women interviewees who so graciously gave of their time to share their work and life experiences with me: Betty Krolak, Jessie Emmett, Hazel Hedges, Helen Naugle, Toni Carter, Winnie Prince, Lucille Palmer-Matyas, Janet Savalli, and Sheila White to name just a



few. Their stories provided a unique window through which to view life in the early years of the Las Vegas valley.

I am deeply indebted to my friend Dr. Caryll Batt Dziedziak, without whose help I could not have succeeded. She was the source of ceaseless encouragement, aid, support, and patience. Another good friend, Claytee White, was also a constant source of encouragement that kept me motivated.

This past year proved incredibly challenging as I found myself hospitalized on fifteen separate occasions. My doctors simply saved my life! Foremost is my Primary Care Physician, Dr. Dara Welborn. Dr. Welborn's care was exceptional! She constantly scoured my labs results and other diagnostics with a fierce determination to help me regain my health. Dr. Mike Bensler was the cardiologist who cared for me when paramedics rushed me into the Emergency Room last summer. I thank him for my deluxe pacemaker that keeps me going! And cardiologist Dr. Jeanette Nee's decisive actions have kept me from lapsing back into more cardiac difficulties. I thank them all.

Finally, I thank my wonderful sons, William and Michael McPhaden and their fantastic wives, Bonnie and Betsy, and my granddaughter, Megan, for their belief in my ability to accomplish what seemed, to me, like an insurmountable task.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Hazel Hedges said that that she always read that you were supposed to stay home with the kids until they were big enough. She said she stayed home until he (her son) was big enough, a junior in high school, did the PTA stuff, and she figured he was going to make it. She was dying to go to work, to do something and it was her turn. Little did she realize that her words were echoed by women from coast to coast who had the same ambitions.<sup>1</sup>

Women of the twenty-first century filled a myriad of work place positions that were once considered the domain of men. However, this was not always the case. From antiquity to the present there has been a sexual division of labor that designated the appropriate work for women and for men. Work is important and more than mere economics, a means of survival, it embodies a deeper more emotional concept. According to sociologists and psychologists, work is defined as an essential component of one's identity, and it is the ethos of the human spirit. Women's work, with its changing nature over the centuries, at times valued, at other times devalued, is central to women's lives and is an integral part of their psyche. Work is who you are. More relevant than economics is the sense of satisfaction, self-worth and accomplishment that one derives from one's work. It establishes the worker's niche in society. As the worker garners society's approval of their work, it is an indicator that the worker is a needed and necessary member of the social order. It is the social order that has always dictated the terms of what constituted traditional norms for women's work.

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Hedges, Interview by author, Tape recording, 29 October 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

Work in early nineteenth century American society was circumscribed through a division of labor that assigned separate spheres for women and men, defining their work patterns. Men were consigned to the public sphere as breadwinners and women were relegated to the private sphere to work as mothers, homemakers and protectors of the moral fabric of society. During the shifting social order of the nineteenth century, women employed reform and charitable work to bridge the gap between the two spheres, thus creating a role for themselves in the public sphere. Industrialization with its attendant class structuring and urbanization, politics, depressions, and wars were the factors that kept society in a state of flux and impacted the changing nature of women's work.

Early in the twentieth century, World War I proved to be a powerful force that undermined the prescribed norms of traditional work for women. Women entered the bastions of the male realm and worked at non-traditional women's jobs as men took up arms in defense of their country. In the aftermath of World War I, women bobbed their hair, shortened their skirts, danced the Charleston, and smoked cigarettes. However, despite these new found freedoms women's work remained structured by the prevailing mores of the era that defined women's status within the workplace. When the war emergency was over, women were expected to return to their traditional female positions.

The greatest social transformation in American history occurred with the arrival of World War II. It blurred society's sexual division of labor when Government propaganda encouraged women to cross the line of the sexual division of labor and to again engage in nontraditional war work. Women

defense workers performed jobs as welders, riveters, and munitions makers. Many, like their male counterparts, enlisted in the armed forces and served as WACS, WAAVES, in the Coast Guard and as Marines. As a result of their valuable work experiences and the knowledge of a job well done, they gained confidence and a sense of self-worth. Their legacy, viewed in the aftermath of World War II, was a major stepping stone for women that created a wedge to the world of non-traditional women's work.

At the onset of World War II Las Vegas was less than forty years old. The population was approximately eighty-four hundred residents.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the mature, large metropolitan cities of the East and West Coasts; it was in its infancy. Incorporated as a city in 1905, it was originally a sleepy railroad whistle stop that rapidly became a tourist city that never sleeps. Las Vegas was declared a defense area during World War II. The Government established the Army Air Corps Gunnery School (currently Nellis Air Force Base); Indian Springs Air Force base was fifty miles to the north, Boulder Dam was a few short miles south of Las Vegas, and Camp Silbert, a marine base, was established to guard Boulder Dam. Henderson Nevada, the home of the Basic Magnesium Incorporated plant (BMI) was non-existent until 1941 when the government brought workers to area to build the plant and a town to house the workers. BMI manufactured magnesium for airplanes, bombs and shells, and the war workers greatly increased the population of the area.<sup>3</sup> The influx of war workers and

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 84.

military personnel expanded Southern Nevada's population to approximately twenty thousand people during the war.<sup>4</sup> Many of the war workers were women; wives of the soldiers or the men who came to the area for work at the Basic Magnesium plant. Against this background, the woman war worker emerged in Southern Nevada.

The decade of the 1950s was the age of casinos, nuclear testing, and population explosion in Southern Nevada. Many who came to the area for war work left and returned to their homes, but there were many who fell in love with the deserts of the southwest and remained. Southern Nevada lacked the sophistication, commerce, and industries; the large factories, mills and foundries found in the older cities across the country. However, there was a growing casino and gaming industry. The Nevada Test Site, the home of atomic bomb testing was established fifty miles north of Las Vegas. Workers from many other areas were lured to area to work at the Test Site. Service and support industries were also springing up. Those who remained realized the potential of the growth opportunities and wanted to take advantage of ground floor possibilities that it offered. War work now had ended, and women had to make different employment choices. Office work, in the corporate structure, was one of the growing fields of work that offered advancement for women.

The next decade in Las Vegas, the 1960s, was one of continued population growth, urbanization and suburbanization. Fueled by construction of new housing subdivisions in the west and south side, the growing Las Vegas

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<sup>4</sup> Moehring and Green 84,101-104.

strip, and many commercial developments such as the Boulevard shopping mall on Maryland Parkway, the downtown area was giving way to the suburbs. Building and construction supported a lively real estate market. Therefore, there was the potential for fortunes to be made in real estate dealings.<sup>5</sup> It was an opportune moment for women entrepreneurs who wished to build their own businesses.

During the 1970s and 1980s the area continued to grow. These were decades of exponential population growth in the Las Vegas valley. Thousands of people migrated to the area each month. Henderson's population was 16,000 in 1970.<sup>6</sup> According to the Census, population in Clark County increased from 127,016 in 1960 to 273,288 in 1970 to 463,087 in 1980.<sup>7</sup> Las Vegas was now a full-fledged metropolis.

World War II forced men and women into new undertakings that changed not only the social fabric of the country but the status of working women. World War II and the post-war period piqued the interest of many historians who have produced a large body of literature exploring the ramifications of the period and its effects on the women worker. William Chafe claims World War II was a watershed in the history of working women. Women war workers exhibited exceptional skill and ingenuity and shouldered their new duties with such ease that they dispelled many of the stereotypes of women's work. He gave the

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<sup>5</sup> *Moehring and Green*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L Forstall ed., *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20233, <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nv190090.txt>, accessed 6 August 2011.

example of the beautician who became a switch woman and handled a 600 car train. Barriers to women in business and the professions were also eased. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute enrolled its first woman student; Curtis-Wright Company enrolled 800 women engineering trainees in college; and corporations such as Monsanto, DuPont and Standard Oil began hiring women chemists. Wall Street exerted an effort to recruit female analysts and statisticians.<sup>8</sup>

Karen Anderson's *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* produced a multi-city study of women war workers. She explored three areas engaged in war production; Puget Sound on the west coast, Detroit in the central states and Baltimore on the east coast. Her study proposed to assess the type and complexity of the wartime changes and their impact on women's status, family life, and values in order to determine the significance of the war as a force for change. She concluded that World War II was an extremely powerful event in American social history. It was a turning point for women. It was the point which dispelled the notion that wage work and household duties were incompatible. Thus, it began a process of adjustment between family and work, and led to a greater measure of choice for the American women.<sup>9</sup>

Continuing the conversation on women war workers and the impact of World War II on women, Amy Kesselman's *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and*

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<sup>8</sup> William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 136-141.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 19, 174.



*Reconversion* surveyed women shipyard workers in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington. Through the use of oral interviews, she reconstructed women's experiences during the war and the reconversion period. Anderson found that women shipyard workers were primarily welders; with many even attaining journeymen status.<sup>10</sup> She concurred with Anderson regarding the opportunities and obstacles that women war workers faced. She concluded that the wartime expectations of women and their postwar realities were worlds apart. After the war, work in the shipyards disappeared; forcing women to return to their pre-war traditional women's jobs in restaurants and typing pools.<sup>11</sup>

In the postwar period, society's traditional concept of the family slowly changed and would no longer be representative of the American family structure. The utopian concept of suburban domesticity, with the husband as a breadwinner and the wife as a housewife and mother, peaked in the 1950s; then slowly disappeared. The attitude toward wage work by females and working mothers was changing and gaining cultural acceptance.<sup>12</sup> The number of working women increased exponentially between 1940 and 1960. By the 1960s, the baby boomers, a product of World War II, began to mature and created a counter-culture that took up the many social issues that challenged the status quo.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities*, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Woman's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) 9,10.

Women's historian, Joanne Goodwin, relates that in Las Vegas, women's participation in the labor force was higher than that of women nationwide; including a higher percentage of married working women.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Southern Nevada followed, and in some instances, exceeded the national trends.

In the ordinary course of historical events, only distinguished or famous women who have made extraordinary, bold, or conspicuous contributions to American society have been deemed worthy of historical documentation. At the beginning of World War II little of note had been recorded about the millions of ordinary, average, middling working women who contributed to the American social fabric. Even less had been recorded about the women who lived in fledgling cities in the deserts of Southern Nevada. Historians' focus on Southern Nevada had been primarily on the glitz and glamour of the region; the growth of hotel/casinos on the fabulous Las Vegas Strip, the idea of a "sin city," the history of gaming, and glamorous showgirls. This thesis is an effort to fill that void and bring the experiences of middle-class working women of Southern Nevada to public recognition. And, although Southern Nevada is unique, their work experiences can nonetheless, be viewed as a microcosm with which to reflect women's experiences nationwide. This thesis explores the experiences of these women who transgressed the boundaries of the sexual division of labor from 1940 through 1980; making inroads into the male-dominated realms of industry, real estate, and corporate America. Thus, they created a widening presence for women in nontraditional occupations.

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<sup>14</sup> Joanne L. Goodwin, "She Works Hard For Her Money," in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter*, ed. Hal Rothman and Mike Davis (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 2002), 251.

In the absence of written records, my research relied on the oral testimonies of Southern Nevada women who lived the experience. These oral interviews opened a window on the past as women shared both the obstacles and the opportunities they faced. They furnish a glimpse of what life was like for the working woman in strange and unfamiliar industrial settings, and unveil the unique and ingenious coping methods working women used to juggle home, children, and work. It attempts to show that although economics were part of the motivation that brought women into non-traditional work; economics was not the prime incentive. The stimulus ran deeper in women's persona. It was the need to develop an identity of their own and achieve a sense of themselves as a person by opening up previously closed worlds.

This thesis is both thematic and chronological. The subject matter is divided into three chapters. The first, titled "Magnesium Maggie," places us in the war years of the 1940s when women filled job vacancies created by the need for military manpower. Southern Nevada was declared a defense area and many different facets of war work were carried on by the women living in the valley. Women pumped gas, worked in factories, welded and riveted. For the first time they were employed by Western Union to learn the teletype and fill vacancies left by deployed service men. They manned switchboards, worked at the USO and made bandages for the Red Cross. Virtually all labor, whether paid or voluntary, was considered war work.

The next chapter, "Number Please," examines the experiences of women who worked in the corporate structure and rose to top management in fields of

non- traditional work. An overwhelming number of Southern Nevada women chose not to spend their work life as entrepreneurs, working in production, or as teachers, nurses and in other fields of work. They selected a work path in the corporate world. Societal norms of the 1950s viewed women's employment as an interim step between graduation, marriage, and motherhood; transgression of those gender boundaries was met with resistance. Women of that era were raised in a social and economic milieu that established overt obstacles to women's job advancement. Prominent social opinion of that time deemed the expense for higher education for women destined for motherhood as unnecessary.

Women working in the corporate structure looked for ways to break out of the oppressive work patterns society and corporate management imposed on them during this time period. They refused to be trapped in an ideology of entry level positions for women as clerks, typists, and telephone operators normally assigned to women of this era. Many women regarded the corporate structure as the venue to pursue their aspirations and realize their ambitions.

Using the local communications industry as a microcosm of the national trend, my research argues that through their work ethic and ingenuity, women were able to advance themselves to positions of authority and push against the glass ceiling. Thus, through this path of upward corporate mobility these women found the same satisfaction, fulfillment, and rewards as women who worked as entrepreneurs and in other fields of work.

The last chapter, titled “Our Turn,” explores the roles of women entrepreneurs who opened their own businesses after World War II and despite facing extraordinary odds; they became successful. The focus is on the local real estate industry in the 1960s and describes the methods used by these local entrepreneurs to break through the glass ceiling and stake their claim in an industry previously dominated by men.

Due to a paucity of local written sources, I have made extensive use of oral interviews given by the women who lived this experience. Additional primary and secondary sources helped map regional and national trends. Newspaper articles from *The Las Vegas Review Journal*, publications including the newsletter of Basic Magnesium Incorporated *The Basic Bombardier*, the *Southern Nevada Realtor*, Greater Las Vegas Board of Realtors publication, and the *Circuit Chatter*, the company newsletters from Central Telephone Company revealed additional undocumented details in the lives of these working women. Unpublished histories, theses, government documents, including census reports were employed.

As a teenager in Buffalo, New York, I worked on the tail cone of the B-17. Yes, I was a “Rosie-the-Riveter.” Years later living in Las Vegas, Nevada I was drawn to the stories of women who had also done war work during World War II. My husband and mother-in-law had worked at the Basic Magnesium Incorporated plant in Henderson, Nevada and provided an entry for me to interview those working women. Indeed, “Magnesium Maggies” is the name I gave them as a local response to the better known “Rosie-the-Riveter.” As a

young woman living in Las Vegas, Nevada I also worked for the Southern Nevada Telephone Company; back in the days when the sidewalks of Las Vegas only reached sixth street. Years later, I opened my own real estate company, Shamrock Realty. Thus from my own work experiences, I chose my three groups of women workers: women war workers from Basic Magnesium Incorporated, women working for the phone company, and entrepreneurs who ventured out into real estate. So, this thesis is my story too.

In addition, I utilized a plethora of secondary books by historians who chronicle working women in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America; including William Chafe, Karen Anderson, Amy Kesselman, Dorothy Sue Cobble, D'Ann Campbell, Elizabeth Baker-Faulkner, Marion May Dilts, Phillip S. Foner, James Hulse, Louise Kapp-Howe, Allan M. Winkler, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Janet Pearl Davis. Lastly, the works of local historians Eugene Moehring, Michael Green, Joanne Goodwin, and Jay Coughtry completed the grounding of this thesis. However, oral interviews gave a greater insight into the many facets of the lives of these working women, and put a human face on the history of the period. I had the opportunity to interview many working women of this era, who shared the details of their working lives with me and filled the voids previously left untouched by historians.

## CHAPTER TWO: MAGNESIUM MAGGIES

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 plunged the United States into World War II. The mood of the American people was felt as a great crescendo of voices cried out in a duet of outrage and patriotism. Americans were outraged because the vicious, violent attack occurred at the very time Japanese envoys were in Washington, D. C. making peace proposals to the United States. A surge of patriotism overtook the country as Americans clamored to do their part in the defense of their country. An all-out effort was launched as men, young and old, rushed to enlist in the armed services. The great industrial giants quickly switched from the manufacture of consumer goods and geared up for the manufacture and production of the materials needed to win a war. With the bulk of the men in the armed forces manning tanks, ships, guns, and airplanes, where would the manpower come from to run these industries, to drive the trucks that transported the goods, to pump the gas that ran the trucks? The answer became clear and the word “manpower” quickly changed to “womanpower” as the “Rosies” of World War II emerged to replace the men in these fields.

A tremendous amount has been written about the “Rosies” who riveted the airplanes, the “Wandas” who welded the ships, the women munitions workers, and those women who worked in foundries and factories in the great industrial metropolises. However, there has been little or nothing written about the “Maggies,” the women who worked in a remote and little known area in the deserts of the Southwestern United States, or of the extremely vital work they

performed. focus of This chapter focuses on who these women were; to reconstruct their specific job functions, to examine the conditions under which they performed the jobs, and to survey the demobilization period and its effect on the women workers. Lastly, it will define the legacy of these women who stepped over the lines of the sexual division of labor and ventured into the predominately male realm of industrial production.

The War Manpower Commission classified the Southern Nevada as a Defense Center.<sup>15</sup> Because of the unique character of the Southern Nevada area, it would appear to be a very unlikely location for defense work. However, influenced by the arguments of Senator Pat McCarran, it became home to the Las Vegas Gunnery School (now Nellis Air force Base), and Basic Magnesium Inc. In addition he also urged the implementation of a small marine base near Boulder City, Camp Siebert, to guard Boulder Dam.<sup>16</sup> Indian Springs Air Force base (now Creech Air force Base) was located some fifty miles north of Las Vegas. The bulk of the population of Southern Nevada and wartime defense work was concentrated in Clark County; a barren, rocky, sage brush dotted stretch of desert containing the neighboring cities of Las Vegas and Boulder City.

Each city had its own distinct personality. Boulder City was still under the wing of the Federal Government, therefore drinking gambling and prostitution were forbidden. However, its sister-city, Las Vegas, was a wide-open, no-holds-barred, rough and ready, neon-lit, rowdy city of 10,000 residents which supported

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<sup>15</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 4 January 1943, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Moehring and Green, 101-104.



legalized gambling and prostitution. It was known for its quick divorces which required just six weeks residency as well as quick marriages which required no waiting period.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the area contributed as much to the war effort as the more publicized, industrialized areas of the northeast and northwest.

At the onset of World War II in 1942, women in Southern Nevada worked predominately in traditional women's jobs, such as clerks, typist and secretarial jobs. As the demand for manpower for the Armed Forces increased, women were thrust into what was considered non-traditional work for that time period. Examples of the non-traditional work can be found in the Help Wanted-Female section of the *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*.

"Vital War Industry wants young ladies, high school graduates, typists to attend school to learn automatic printer operations. Paid while training. Appointment when graduated. Good opportunity and future. Western Union Telegraph Co."<sup>18</sup>

Another advertisement read:

ATTRACTIVE GIRLS  
\$117 for the first month's training  
\$130--\$150 second month  
Healthy active Interesting  
Outside work in Union Oil Co.'s  
Attractive Service Stations

Age 20-35 preferred  
An opportunity to relieve a man for the armed forces and  
Help in the war effort in the vital field of Transportation. If you are  
employed in a defense industry, please do not apply.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James W. Hulse, *The Nevada Adventure: a History* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1966), 218, 254.

<sup>18</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 7 January 1943, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 January 1943, 9.

As important as manning the gas pumps, fixing flat tires or operating Western Union's printer machines, the work performed at the huge industrial complex in the desert of Southern Nevada would prove far more critical to the war effort. In September 1941, midway between the cities of Las Vegas and Boulder City, ground was broken for the huge industrial complex that would become Basic Magnesium Incorporated (BMI); a plant that sprawled one and three-quarter miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide.<sup>20</sup> This site was chosen because of a plentiful supply of power and water made available by the proximity of Boulder Dam, and the supply of magnesite at Gabbs, Nevada located about three hundred miles to the north.<sup>21</sup> What appeared to be a miracle equal to the building of Boulder Dam had taken place, for by August of 1942 the production of magnesium had begun. The BMI complex was completed on May 14, 1943.<sup>22</sup>

Magnesium was a lightweight metal; two-thirds the weight of aluminum and used for incendiary bombs and airplane parts. It was so vital to the war effort that Hulse in the *Nevada Adventure*, states, "the government was so eager to stimulate rapid production that it engaged 12,000 men to erect the factory and a town to house its workers."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Big Job*, July 1942, 1.

<sup>21</sup> James W. Hulse, *The Nevada Adventure: a History*, 230.

<sup>22</sup> Elmer Hilsinger, Interview with author, tape recording, 2 October 1991, Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas.

<sup>23</sup> Hulse, 230.

Housing for families at Basic Magnesium Incorporated was non-existent when production began. Many workers had to commute from Las Vegas, North Las Vegas and Boulder City.<sup>24</sup> Many lived in makeshift housing which resembled a “Rag Town” dotted the highway between Las Vegas and Henderson.<sup>25</sup> An advertisement in the *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal* dated January 12, 1943 illustrates the proportions of the situation:

“Framed tent, 14 x16 ft., partly furnished. Earl’s Camp, Back of Green Shack”<sup>26</sup>

Another advertisement read:

“Room, \$1.00 per night for two. Phone 1633J. Uppedyke Ranch.”<sup>27</sup>

Elmer Hilsinger tells of renting a screened in 8 x10 porch in Boulder City for he and his wife. It had two bunk beds and a chest of drawers. When his mother-in-law decided to come for visit, he had to move out and live at Anderson’s Camp dormitory in Henderson.<sup>28</sup> As these makeshift lifestyles were taking place, the federal government hired contractors to build temporary housing for the workers. They broke ground for 1000 frame houses on February 17, 1942 and were rushed to complete the Townsite homes, located at the southwest

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<sup>24</sup> Elgin (Peggy) Hamblin, Interview with author, tape recording, 25 October 1991, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>25</sup> Maryellen Vallier Sandovich, “Basic Magnesium Incorporated and the Industrialization of Southern Nevada During World War II” (MA Thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1971), 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 12 January 1943, 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 January 1943, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

corner of Lake Mead Drive and Boulder Highway.<sup>29</sup> These homes had flat roofs and were painted in pastel colors to blend with the desert landscape.<sup>30</sup> By May 1942, the first group of houses was completed. Three hundred and forty-six families moved into their new homes.<sup>31</sup>

#### WHITE WOMEN WORKERS

Women war workers in Southern Nevada were a potpourri of housewives, mothers, single women, and married women; both young and old. The workers came from many diverse backgrounds and many different sections of the country. Paul Harris, a worker in the refinery at BMI stated, "There were people from all over the country and many ethnic groups were brought in by the government..."<sup>32</sup> Jean Arkell, who worked in the Engineering Department at BMI, said, "There were people from so many situations: so many backgrounds. Some were so cosmopolitan and some were from very poor backgrounds."<sup>33</sup> Some women workers arrived in Las Vegas with their husbands who had been hired to work at BMI. Others were the wives of servicemen stationed at the Army Air Corp Gunnery School. There were also those who came for a six week "quickie" divorce and found war work an excellent way to earn a temporary income for their "duration."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sandovich, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>31</sup> Sandovich, 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Henderson Home News*, 22 May 1971.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

The motivation which brought these women into a seeming wilderness to participate in war work was as varied as the backgrounds from which they came. The government made concerted efforts to recruit women for defense work. Public opinion was swayed by propaganda in the form of patriot songs, posters and slogans, and women were urged to do their part in the war effort. Franklin Roosevelt stated in his State of the Union address on January 1, 1943, "Our progress in this war has depended upon our progress on the production front."<sup>35</sup> The economy was emerging from more than a decade of depression into an era of war-created prosperity, and the head of household women wage workers wanted the large paychecks defense work would bring. For many women defense work was an opportunity to learn a new skill which would lead to upward economic mobility. Still others saw it as an expression of self and the chance to assert their independence. Although many were working because they had husbands, sweethearts or brothers in the Armed Forces and felt they were doing their part to end the war and speed their loved one's return, the greatest incentive luring women into war work was the large salaries that could be earned.<sup>36</sup>

When production began at BMI, women performed only the traditionally female-dominated jobs such as secretarial, personnel, and industrial relations work. They worked as waitresses and food preparers. They manned the busy switchboard, which handled four hundred long distance calls per day and thirty-

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<sup>35</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 7 January 1943, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 104.

six hundred intra-plant calls an hour.<sup>37</sup> Ruth Anderson, whose son was a Marine fighting in the Marshall Islands and daughter was in nurse's training, was one of the operators who worked on the switchboard. She was described in the *Big Job*, Basic Magnesium's weekly news publication, as being a typical American who wanted to do her bit.<sup>38</sup> D'Ann Campbell describes the importance of women's traditional work in *Women at War With America*, when she states that "World War II was fought with typewriters and telephones as much as bombers and bazookas."<sup>39</sup>

Southern Nevada suffered from a severe labor shortage. Evidence in the form of an article in the *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, dated January 4, 1943, attests to the magnitude of the labor shortage in Southern Nevada area. Art Phillips, representing the Railroad Brotherhoods of the Union Pacific Railroad which served the area by moving food supplies and war materials stated, "We must get men now....or face a crisis which might jeopardize the entire war program. We are not advocating that the clubs and taverns be closed, but that's what it might come to if men who can be used in industry aren't released."<sup>40</sup> Oddly, despite the grave shortage of manpower, there was never any suggestion of hiring women to replace men workers in the clubs and hotels. The club owners were adamant in their feeling that the gaming industry was not the place for

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<sup>37</sup> *Big Job*, 25 March 1943, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Big Job*, 21 December 1942, 2.

<sup>39</sup> D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War With America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 104.

<sup>40</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 4 January 1943, 10.

women.<sup>41</sup> As the war progressed and more and more men were drafted into the Armed Forces, the supply of manpower sank to new lows, and women were now urged to enter into the Sanctum Sanctorum, the stronghold of the men's world; the plant.

On February 11, 1943, Edna Mae Pierce became the first woman production worker in the BMI plant, hired as an ingot handler on an experimental basis to determine what jobs women could handle.<sup>42</sup> The experiment proved successful and many more women followed Edna's lead. Peggy Hamblin, also an ingot handler, removed hot ingots from the conveyor belts, stacked them on pallets on tow motors and drove them to storage. Although the ingots were light, about five pounds, this bending and lifting became back breaking when repeated over an eight hour shift.<sup>43</sup>

Other opportunities for women at BMI were jobs driving trucks, forklifts and jeeps. Billie Oldham, who drove a J-1 jeep called an ingot wagon which transported the magnesium ingots from the refinery to storage, had been a race car driver. Her husband was in the Army.<sup>44</sup> Girls also drove what were referred to as "taxis," "company sedans" which, due to the size of the plant, were needed to furnish transportation around the plant.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> John Burns (Director of the United States Employment Service War Manpower Commission during World War II), Interview with Jay Coughtry, transcript, 13 July 1990, Las Vegas, Nevada, transcript in possession of author, tape B.

<sup>42</sup> *Big Job*, 18 February 1943, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>44</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 7 May 1943, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

Magnesium billets were packed for shipping in the refinery shipping room. Mrs. Paul Hughes, whose son was fighting in the Solomon Islands, was a wrapper. She said that every time she wrapped a billet she felt that she was putting ammunition in his hands and that this could save his life.<sup>46</sup>

Ella Wing, a Chinese-American, became a timekeeper. Another group of women, under the supervision of Cedralia Schmidt, was kept busy repairing the gas masks, face shields, goggles, helmets and head straps that were used in the plant. Their duties also included making the asbestos gloves worn by the ingot handlers.<sup>47</sup> Ruth Ball was a chart changer whose duties consisted of changing and collecting charts used in the various instruments in the plant.<sup>48</sup>

Loretta Roach, a widow of Polish-American descent, had made magnesium bombs in Poland. These same bombs destroyed her home when the Germans bombed Poland for twenty-eight days. She was now employed at BMI in the Metal Works section working over hot molten magnesium. The work was extremely dangerous and she had to wear gloves and a gas mask as safety precautions. She compared her work around the machines, heat and fumes as being around a hot cook stove. Loretta had two brothers fighting the Axis in the Pacific theater.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Big Job*, 18 March 1943, 1.

<sup>47</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 16 July and 22 October 1943.

<sup>48</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8481.

<sup>49</sup> *Big Job*, 22 May 1943, 1.



The last bulwark of the heretofore male realm, the Chlorine Plant, was soon infiltrated by women workers called “Hydrogen women.” These women took cell voltages and cleaned the glass tubes. They also renewed the cells and placed them back into service. One of these Hydrogen women, Thelma (Linguist) Oldfield became the first woman promoted to the position of Cell attendant which was described as a “man-size” job.<sup>50</sup>

In the cell house Thelma Oldfield, better known as “Chlorine Kate,” monitored the levels of brine in the cells. If the level of brine was not properly maintained, there was the danger that the cell could explode and cause damage to the cell house and injury to the attendant. The levels had to be checked every hour. Adjustments in the level of brine were accomplished by means of a curved steel pipe called “perc pipe” inserted into the cell. Brine levels were regulated by either raising or lowering this pipe. Thelma stated, “My helper worked one side of the cell house and I worker the other side. Twice a day I took samples to the Lab to be checked for the PH balance and the specific gravity of the brine solution. I ran a tight ship, and I never lost a cell.”<sup>51</sup>

The Lab to which Thelma Oldfield took her samples was, according to the *Basic Bombardier*, the most modern laboratory in existence and covered 34,000 square feet of space. The laboratory was so wide-spread that it required its own electrical substation. The functions the laboratory dealt with were chemical and metallurgical development and control, research, and sampling. Helen Gung a

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<sup>50</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 7 May and 8 August 1943.

<sup>51</sup> Thelma (Lindquist) Oldfield, Interview with author, tape recording, 29 February 1992, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

young Chinese woman, who had recently graduated from the University of Nevada-Reno, became one of the chemists.<sup>52</sup> Toni Carter, who had previously worked at the Las Vegas Laundry, was hired as a Lab Technician on November 1, 1943 on an experimental basis. She worked in the Laboratory researching ways to improve the production of magnesium. She stated that most of the women hired for Lab work were not chemists and had no previous experience. They were hired on an experimental basis to explore the possibility that given the ingredients and instructions, much as one would mix a cake recipe, they would be able to function as pseudo-chemists. She laughingly called herself a “kitchen chemist.”<sup>53</sup>

According to all those interviewed, the women worked well together except for an occasional female type spat. They had no problem working alongside the men either. Elmer Hilsinger, who supervised the women in the Chemical division, stated, “when there are ninety percent women and ten percent men, you have no problem, but when there ten percent women and ninety percent men you have problems.” All the men wanted to stop work and talk to the women. Most of these men had left their wives back home when they came to work at the plant and so they were eager to talk with women.<sup>54</sup> Thelma Oldfield claimed, “the men thought we were one and the same. I was just one of the

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<sup>52</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 2 July 1943, 30 June 1944.

<sup>53</sup> Toni Carter, Interview with the author, Tape recording, 5 March 1992, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>54</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

boys.”<sup>55</sup> Toni Carter met, married and worked with her husband in the Laboratory, and said she found the men to be very helpful and there was never any conflict between the sexes.<sup>56</sup> Peggy Hamblin explained that she found the black men to be especially helpful. When an ingot wagon tipped over and spilled the ingots, the black men would always stop to help the women reload the wagon, but the white men workers often ignored them.<sup>57</sup>

According to Elmer Hilsinger these women workers were reliable, performed the work well, and had less absenteeism than the men he supervised.<sup>58</sup> Peggy Hamblin recalls that the day after payday was an extra day off for some of the men. While women were back on the job, many men were out with “hangovers.”<sup>59</sup>

Another contribution women made to the war effort was the formation of the “Basic Magpies” or the “Magnesi Yum-Yums.” These were young women moral boosters who worked in the plant in both non-traditional and traditional jobs and formed a hostess club. They did such things as put on parties, they traveled to nearby military installations to dance with the soldiers and they held fund raisers.<sup>60</sup> An article in the *Basic Bombardier* describes a Sunday afternoon party

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<sup>55</sup> Oldfield, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Carter, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 8 May 1943, 1.

they held at the Nevada Biltmore Hotel for the permanent service personnel of the Indian Springs Air Corps and the Gunnery School. They had plans to make future out-of-town trips that included a stop at the Hospital Corps in Kingman, Arizona and one in Camp Ibis near Needles, California.<sup>61</sup>

#### SAFETY, WORKING CONDITIONS, WAGES, AND UNION ACTIVITY

Industrial plant workers are subject to inherent hazards in all industrial plants because the nature of the work involves moving machinery, conveyer belts, heavy duty and other perilous equipment. In addition to the usual industrial hazards, the workers at BMI faced an ever present danger from chemicals and chlorine gas fumes. The women production workers at BMI were safety conscious and wore the safety equipment that was supplied them by the company, such as gas masks, gas proof safety goggles and gloves. Ingot handlers wore heavy asbestos gloves to protect their hands when picking up the hot ingots.<sup>62</sup>

The transformers for the Chlorine Plant were mounted on trucks behind the plant and had frequent failures, which caused the Chlorine compressors to stop. This, in turn, caused gas to escape into the buildings.<sup>63</sup> The women throughout the plant always had their gas masks strapped to their waist in readiness. According to Thelma Oldfield, she never entered the cell house without first strapping her gas mask to her waist. Even with taking all the precautions, on one occasion she was overcome with gas. In addition to gas

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<sup>61</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 30 July 1943, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>63</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

masks, the cell attendants wore rubber gloves and shoes to protect them from contamination from the caustic materials. The shoes also provided protection against electrocution.<sup>64</sup>

A study of the accidents reported to the State Legislature by the Inspector of Mines for the years 1943-1945 revealed that the nature and number of the women's accidents were less severe and far fewer in number than those of the men.<sup>65</sup> The *Basic Bombardier* reported that in July 1943, there were a total of 75 accidents reported. Not one was attributable to a woman worker. The same article reported that in July 1944, accidents in the plant had decreased to five; of which women were responsible for two.<sup>66</sup> The two major causes of women's accidents could be credited to dropping ingots on one's foot, or tripping and falling over objects. There was no requirement to wear safety shoes in the plant at this time.

Working conditions varied depending on which building one was assigned to work in at the plant. The smell of chlorine permeated all building. Most buildings were hot. Therefore, there were salt dispensers placed at every water fountain, and signs urged employees to take at least three salt tablets a day.<sup>67</sup> The cell house was probably the hottest building of all. It was initially designed as a natural draft building which would allow the hot air to escape through the

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<sup>64</sup> Oldfield, interview.

<sup>65</sup> State of Nevada, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Report of the State Inspector of Mines, fiscal years 1943-1944 and 1944-1945.

<sup>66</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 11 August 1944, 1.

<sup>67</sup> John Burns, Interview with Jay Coughtry, 14 July 1990, Tape D.

ceiling. There was no air conditioning and the cells gave off tremendous heat. At times temperatures would rise to 130 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>68</sup> Thelma Oldfield relates that women thought that they wanted to work in the cell house, but once hired, most never lasted a full day. In the winter it was so cold that she would crawl on top of a cell to keep warm. This was strictly against company rules because of the ever present danger that a cell might explode. Among other inconveniences for women cell house workers was the unisex rest room. One had to wait until it was vacated or bang on the door to speed access.<sup>69</sup>

The Laboratory workers found conditions much more comfortable. Due to the nature of the work, the Lab buildings were all air conditioned. Although they shared the smell of chlorine, which was common to all buildings, they did not have to share restrooms. Separate facilities were maintained for male and female workers.<sup>70</sup> According to the *Basic Bombardier*, the Caustic Soda Plant was completely air conditioned.<sup>71</sup>

It was the consensus of all those interviewed that there was no sexual harassment by men co-workers. This was possibly due in part to the fact that many of the plant workers were drawn from a labor pool in a small, close-knit, cohesive, new community where many of the women workers had husbands who also were employed in the plant.

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<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Rostine, Interview with author, tape recording, 1 April 1992, Las Vegas, Nevada. In author's possession.

<sup>69</sup> Oldfield, interview.

<sup>70</sup> Carter, interview.

<sup>71</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 2 July 1943, 1.

In 1942, the National War Labor Board had established an equal pay principle that provided that women be compensated at the same rate of pay as a man for “work of the same quality and quantity.” It was riddled with many loopholes, which the various industrial managements used to their advantage, so very often women did not receive equal pay.<sup>72</sup> At the BMI plant however, this did not seem to be the case, for all the women interviewed stated that they received the same wage rate as their male co-workers when performing identical job functions. The pay was not based on gender but rather on the job being performed.<sup>73</sup> According to John Burns of the United States Employment Service in Las Vegas, the rate of pay for labor was ninety cents per hour.<sup>74</sup> Toni Carter recalls that her starting pay was eighty-two cents an hour. This was almost double what she had previously earned working in the Las Vegas Laundry.<sup>75</sup>

Women worked all three shifts. Neither the Nevada State Laws affecting women’s labor nor the AFL contract provided for differential pay for working night hours.<sup>76</sup> In 1937, the Nevada State laws governing women’s labor had established an eight hour day, forty-eight hour work week which provided for one day of rest. An amendment was approved and passed in 1943 which allowed for an exception to this law. It stated that when an emergency situation existed, the

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<sup>72</sup> Allen M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986) , 55.

<sup>73</sup> Hilsinger, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Burns, interview, 13 July 1990, Tape A.

<sup>75</sup> Carter, interview.

<sup>76</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8510.

employer could extend women's work hours to twelve hours per day, but they could not exceed fifty-six hours a week. It also required that time-and-one-half be paid for each additional hour worked over eight hours in one day and forty-eight hours in any one week. There were no stipulations or provisions made for lunch breaks or lunch periods.<sup>77</sup> The union contract did provide for an unpaid meal break.<sup>78</sup> For many women workers, the cafeteria was located too far from their work station, so the break was taken at her work site. Although not provided for by legislation or union contract, the women workers did take rest breaks.<sup>79</sup>

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) representing skilled crafts and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) representing the unskilled production workers were engaged in a battle to organize and represent the workers at BMI. Peggy Hamblin states that the union was always trying to get her to join. Because the plant had an "open shop" policy and membership was not required for employment, she steadfastly refused the unions attempts to recruit her.<sup>80</sup>

The union's position for recruiting women cell house workers was, due to the tremendous turnover of women production workers in the Chlorine Plant, they

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<sup>77</sup> *Nevada Compiled Laws, Supplement 1943-1949* (San Francisco: Binder Moss Co., 1950), 192.

<sup>78</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8509.

<sup>78</sup> Carter, interview; Hamblin, interview; Oldfield, interview.

<sup>80</sup> Hamblin, interview.



did not want to extend membership to them. Thelma Oldfield was the only woman union member in the cell house. The union did not want to accept her as a member. However, she was so persistent in her bid for membership that she was placed on probation for a short period of time before she was finally accepted.<sup>81</sup> Except for Thelma Oldfield it appears that most women in the plant had no real interest in joining the union. It was discovered that Ruth Ball, the chart changer, along with four other employees who were messengers, motor scooter, and automobile drivers, had been omitted from the list of eligible voters during the election to determine union representation. Except for Ball, the four employees were a fringe group and eligibility was questionable, but they could have cast a challenged vote. Not one of these workers was interested enough to even appear at the poll, and none displayed any desire to vote in the election.<sup>82</sup>

#### BLACK WOMEN

Conspicuous by their absence were black women production workers. Examination of local periodicals, including the plant newsletters, along with statements of former employees and supervisory personnel reveal that there was not a single black woman production worker at the BMI complex. Because of their omission from the production work force in the face of the critical manpower shortage, the question is posed, "Was this by their choice as has been suggested, or is their absence the result of discriminatory hiring practices on the part of the BMI management?"

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<sup>81</sup> Oldfield, interview.

<sup>82</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8481-8490.

Nationwide, it was apparent that the black woman occupied the lowest rung on the ladder of the hierarchy of job stratification. In other war industries around the country, black women were rarely hired even after completing the training programs sponsored by the government. The president of North American Aviation stated, "It is against company policy to hire them (black women) as aircraft workers or mechanics...regardless of their training...There will be some jobs as janitors for Negroes."<sup>83</sup> To appease the hostile resistance of blacks against these unfair discriminatory labor practices, the Fair Employment Practices Committee evolved.

On the local level, according to John Burns, head of the United States Employment Service in Las Vegas, Nevada, when he opened his office in the mornings there were approximately twenty black women a day looking for work. He noted that they seemed to have no interest in working at the BMI complex, but were interested only in temporary jobs or clean-up work. On his many trips to the BMI personnel office to take orders for prospective employees, no requests were made for black women. He recalled seeing only two black women at the site and they were working as janitors and cleaning crews in the offices.<sup>84</sup> A separate personnel division, headed by Helen Belloti, had been established by BMI to handle women's affairs. She was in charge of interviews, counseling,

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<sup>83</sup> Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 346.

<sup>84</sup> Burns, interview, Tape B.

hiring, placement and transfers.<sup>85</sup> One would wonder on what grounds had black women applicants, if any, been rejected?

A further indication that the management of BMI had looked askance at the selection of black women workers can be found in the Nevada Labor Department report to the state Legislature in 1945. The Employment Service records show that total placements in Las Vegas for the years 1942-1943 were 21,946.<sup>86</sup> Of that number not one black woman production worker was placed at Basic Magnesium Inc.

Experience and qualifications had little bearing on whether an applicant was accepted for hire. Because women were a new dimension in industrial production, each woman hired had to be taught her job. No one had any previous plant experience. All the women interviewed stated that the company had given them on-the-job-training and had indoctrinated them into the functions they were to perform. The various jobs had been deskilled to the point that given on-the-job training anyone could execute the necessary steps to complete their duties. Therefore, lack of qualifications or experience would not be deemed a valid reason to deny an applicant.

According to the testimony of E. E. Ward, Executive Officer of Local 629, of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, before Senator Harry S. Truman of the United States Senate Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, applicants for employment were not judged on their qualifications and

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<sup>85</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 30 June 1944, 4.

<sup>86</sup> State of Nevada, Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Forty-second Session of the Legislature of the State of Nevada Volume I, *Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, (Carson City: State Printing Office, 1945), 38.

experience. He stated, “the saying about BMI is that you get your job, you keep your job and you are promoted or demoted and terminated...not on what you know, but on who you know.”<sup>87</sup>

Several other factors would seem to point to discrimination against the hiring of black women at BMI. There was evidence that the company wanted to eliminate the black male worker. E. E. Ward in his testimony before the Senate Subcommittee Investigation quoted John Burns of the United States Employment Service in Las Vegas, Nevada as saying, “no more Negroes were to be hired at BMI.” When asked the reason, Mr. Burns stated, “they (the Company) didn’t want any more Negro workers.” Ward claims that the company’s grounds for rejecting the black applicants would be failure to pass the physical examination that was required.<sup>88</sup>

All across the country thousands of black women abandoned their jobs in service industries and in agriculture for the higher salaries they could earn in defense factories.<sup>89</sup> In other large industrial centers such as the shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, and the bomber plants at Willow Run near Detroit, they had to battle their way through the prejudice and discrimination of unions and management to secure factory positions. Once they had gained entry into these plants, they were assigned, and they accepted, the dirtiest, most undesirable,

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<sup>87</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8509.

<sup>88</sup> United States Senate, Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, Subcommittee on Aviation and Light Metals, Seventy-Eighth Congress First Session, Part 20, 10 August 1943, 8509.

<sup>89</sup> Foner, 346.

and most difficult jobs.<sup>90</sup> In view of their struggles in other areas, is one to presume that black women wage workers in Southern Nevada differed from black women workers elsewhere, and were not interested in gaining upward economic mobility or in elevating their status by means of the greater earnings that employment at the Basic Magnesium complex could provide? Many companies across the country were brought to task by the Fair Employment Practices Committee for discriminatory hiring procedures leveled at black women. In defense of their actions, many laid the blame at the feet of the white woman production worker. A statement by the vice-president of Sharon Steel Corporation in Sharon, Pennsylvania, declared, “women employees will not work with non-whites.” Five other companies under investigation claimed that “social custom, the lack of separate toilet facilities and the resistance of white employees prevented them from hiring black women.” An article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* claimed that the chief opposition to employing black women did not come from management, or from fellow employees, but rather from housewives who feared the loss of domestic help and nurses.<sup>91</sup>

There were a few complaints to the Fair Employment Practices Committee, but the absence of any major aggressive push against BMI by black women does not necessarily indicate that there was a lack of discrimination by the company. It would only serve to point out that in Las Vegas in the 1940s, the black woman, confronted with the dual discrimination of race and sex, did not

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<sup>90</sup> Kesselman, 42-43.

<sup>91</sup> Foner, 346.

have sufficient organizational support to assist her in challenging for her rightful share of the job market.

When one considers that the black women were on the bottom rung of the ladder of labor, and there was an indication that hiring policies were being implemented which would preclude the higher classified black men, then the reality is that the door to the plant had been closed to them. When one views the struggle of black women to gain entrance into defense work in other areas of the country, then one must conclude that the lack of black women production workers at BMI was not due to their lack of interest. In taking into account the tremendous labor turnover and great demand for manpower, it must be concluded that the Basic Magnesium Inc. had mirrored the national attitudes of the era that placed black women worker on the lowest level in the hierarchy of job stratification and barred them from employment at the plant.

#### DEMOBILIZATION AND RECONVERSION

In November of 1944, because of a surplus stockpile of magnesium, production of magnesium ceased, the plant initiated closure, and many employees were terminated.<sup>92</sup> Only the Chlorine plant continued to operate.<sup>93</sup> Ragnald Fyhen, Secretary-Treasurer for the AFL Central Labor Council for Clark county from 1933 to 1947, stated, "Lay-off at the plant was usually followed by one week's pay."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Sandovich, 16.

<sup>93</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 20 October 1944, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ragnald Fyhen Papers, *Labor Notes*, (Las Vegas, Nevada: University of Nevada Las Vegas, Lied Libraries, Department of Special Collections), 18.

With the closure of BMI there were those who speculated as to the future of an industrial presence in Southern Nevada. Still, all the components of industrial life, water, and power and rail transportation existed in the area. However, the Chlorine plant at BMI continued its operation, and Rheem Manufacturing Company leased the machine shop at BMI to manufacture shell casings and other war materials for the Federal Government.<sup>95</sup> According to an article in the *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, the president of Rheem Manufacturing on an official visit to Las Vegas announced that the Las Vegas plant would go into production soon and manufacture 81 and 105 mm shells for the army and five inch rocket bombs for the navy.<sup>96</sup> Their pilot line operation was expected to be up and running by April 1, 1945. However, labor unrest between two America Federation of Labor unions caused plant conversion construction to come to a standstill. Carpenters, upset over the role of machinists and millwrights in tool setting, quit work, and approximately 150 other building tradesmen, plumbers, steamfitters, electricians, sheet metal worker, engineers, ironworkers, laborers and riggers, joined in the strike. The shells and rocket bombs were of vital importance to the Armed forces in the Pacific Operation, and both the navy and the army threatened to cancel Rheem's contract for their production if the labor unrest was not settled.<sup>97</sup> Once the labor unrest was

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<sup>94</sup> *Las Vegas Age*, 21 January 1945, 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 19 February 1945, 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Las Vegas Age*, 8 April 1945, 1.

settled, Rheem when in full operation, expected to have a work force of 1,250 employees.<sup>98</sup> Many of these workers were women.

One woman, Leona Hinton, came to Henderson from Washington, Utah and joined her sister, Winnie Prince, to work at Rheem. They both gave an account of the working conditions for women war workers. There were two twelve hour work shifts. Both sisters started work at 5 P.M. in the afternoon and their shift ended at 5 A.M. in the morning. Winnie worked on the Navy side making tracer bullets. She described her job as an inspector as “measuring the notches” of the tracer bullets as they came down the conveyor belt. The measurement of the notches had to be exact or they were rejected.<sup>99</sup>

Her sister, Leona, worked on the Army side putting notches in the shells. She described her job as extremely tiring. The shells came to her on a cart that was placed on her right side. With her right hand she picked up the shell and placed it on the machine, pulled a lever to make the grooves, removed it with her left hand and placed it on a cart on her left side. She continued this routine as fast as she could work for twelve hours a day except for a lunch break. She said that the shells were not terribly heavy, but they were thick and about a foot long. Leona remembered that the oil from the machines saturated her clothes, hair and shoes. The women broke out in rashes from the constant oil on their bodies and in their hair. They did not wear coveralls or safety shoes, and hair coverings were not required. They wore their own clothes in the shop, and she complained that

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<sup>98</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 5 March 1945, 1.

<sup>99</sup> Winnie Prince, Interview with author, Tape recording, 18 May 1995, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).



the oil ruined her saddle oxfords, at a time when shoes were scarce and rationed. There was no company nurse or doctor to dispense lotions or ointments to remedy the rashes. Leona joined a union, the International Association of Machinists on May 25, 1945 and paid dues of \$2.75 per month.<sup>100</sup>

Winnie and Leona, who lived together, described a typical day in their lives as war workers and mothers. In addition to Winnie's husband there were six children in the household. Winnie had five children and Leona had a baby daughter. Winnie had a Willys car and drove Leona and a neighbor home from work at five in the morning. Winnie and Leona slept until it was time to get the four oldest girls off to school. They made the older children's breakfast, as well as breakfast for Winnie's husband, and sent the girls off to school and Winnie's husband off to work.

The two small girls, who had slept all night, were now getting ready for the day. After they were fed, the kitchen cleaned, and other chores done, Winnie and Leona tried to catch a little more sleep. But, it was next to impossible with the two small girls. Leona tells of lying over the bed with her eyes half open, trying to watch her little girl and at the same time trying to get a little rest. When the older girls came home from school, it was time to prepare dinner, fix their own lunches which they took to the plant, and head back to work. Child care was unnecessary while they worked. Winnie's husband arrived home a little after 5

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<sup>100</sup> Leona Hinton, Interview with author, Tape recording, 27 September 1995 and 31 October 1995, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

P.M., and the older girls took care of the smaller ones until his arrival.<sup>101</sup>

Fortunately, the war ended in August, 1945, so the women only had to endure living these conditions for a few months.

For Della Mae Rostine working in the plant was a family affair, for her husband, Rocco was a labor foreman and her son Lawrence had been a warehouseman at BMI before joining the Armed Forces. She was hired as a machinist on July 30, 1945, and at five feet tall and a hundred pounds, she was too diminutive to handle the machines. When she attempted to pull the cover down over a machine, it lifted her off her feet. The foreman gave her a clip board and pencil and assigned her the job of tracking downtime on the machines. She noted the time a machine went out of service and the time it came back up. She said this was the most boring position she could have been given. When she complained to her foreman, he told her that this was all he had for her, and if she wanted to do her part in the war effort, that was her job.<sup>102</sup>

When a machine went down, one of the machine repairmen called was Ben Buckles. He was hired temporarily as a tool setter while home on a ninety day convalescent furlough. He was recovering from an injury he received while in the armed service. While repairing a down machine, he met Maxine Manning (Buckles). Maxine had previously worked at the bank in Boulder City. When she realized that she could make as much money in a week as she made in a month working at the bank she resigned from the bank. She was hired at Rheem as a

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<sup>101</sup> Prince, interview; Hinton, interview.

<sup>102</sup> Della Mae Rostine, Interview with the author, Tape recording, 1 November 1991, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

machinist. She car pooled from Boulder City to Henderson with five other women who took turns driving. She wore her own clothes and braided her hair because of the danger from the machines. She worked on the Navy side and operated a lath that trimmed the excess material from the tracer bullets. A marker indicated where to trim the bullet which was about 14 inches long. The work was deskilled to the point that she learned on the job. She was required to join the union which was the AFL.

When Ben came to fix her machine, he was smitten with her and asked if he could eat his lunch with her and her girlfriend, after which he did daily for the duration. After Rheem ceased operations, Maxine went back to work at the bank in Boulder City. She stated that she enjoyed working. Ben repaired Maxine's machine and later married her.<sup>103</sup>

Prior to the cessation of operations at BMI, four women and four men were interviewed on their views as to whether or not they thought women should continue to work in industry after the war. Two of the four women made such ambivalent statements as, "I like to keep busy and I like the money too, but I guess I'd rather raise a family," and "we may not like to give up good salaries, but women in love with their husbands will want to stay home." The other two women stated emphatically that a woman's place was in the home.

Three men categorically stated that a married woman's place was in the home. One of the three qualified his statement by saying that a single woman

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<sup>103</sup> Maxine Buckles, Interview with author, Tape recording, 20 September 1995, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas); and Ben Buckles, Interview with author, Tape recording, 23 September 1995, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

should be able to remain only if she was qualified. The fourth man said that if there was enough work to go around all women should be allowed to remain in industry.<sup>104</sup>

When Basic Magnesium Inc. closed, many women workers left the area to look for jobs in other parts of the country, and were assimilated into and became part of those communities. There were those workers, however, who had come to feel at home in the southern Nevada desert and decided to stay. Among others, Thelma Oilfield, Toni Carter, Peggy Hamblin, and Della Mae Rostine chose to remain. When Stauffer Chemical, the successor of the Chlorine Plant at BMI, took over, Thelma Oldfield continued in her job as a cell attendant until she retired in October, 1956.<sup>105</sup> Six months after the BMI's closure, Toni Carter was called back to the Laboratory where she continued to work as a Lab technician until she retired in 1977.<sup>106</sup>

Others who remained were not as fortunate as Thelma Oldfield and Toni Carter. They had to seek employment in more traditional occupations and take wage cuts. Because she needed the money, Peggy Hamblin went to work for Sears in Las Vegas as an auditing clerk. She now had to commute daily on an unpredictable bus from Henderson to downtown Las Vegas accompanied by her pre-school aged daughter. Arriving at work, she then left the child with the bus driver and he delivered the child to an aunt who lived in the Biltmore section of

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<sup>104</sup> *Basic Bombardier*, 7 & 14 April 1944.

<sup>105</sup> Oldfield, interview.

<sup>106</sup> Carter, interview.

Las Vegas.<sup>107</sup> Della Mae Rostine returned to being a housewife.<sup>108</sup> Winnie Prince and Leona Hinton also returned to the domestic arena.<sup>109</sup>

At the war's end on August 1945, many women workers from Southern Nevada as well as those nationwide were ready to return to their prewar status as wives and mothers. However, many women who, because they had to work or because their situations had changed, wished to continue working in industry. Statistics gathered by a 1944 survey taken by the Department of Labor Women's Bureau indicated that 80 percent of the pre-Pearl Harbor work force and 50 percent of former homemakers intended to continue working after the war.<sup>110</sup> A second survey taken by Northwestern Life Insurance Company in 1944 showed that 71.5 percent or thirteen million women intended to continue working after the war.<sup>111</sup> Many felt that the training they received during the war would prepare them for future careers and it would become the basis for their upward economic mobility. They felt let down and disappointed at the prospect of having to exit the industrial arena and return to the low paying, menial jobs they had previously held.<sup>112</sup>

Returning war veterans viewed the woman war worker as a threat—as someone who would compete with them in the job market. Agencies were

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<sup>107</sup> Hamblin, interview.

<sup>108</sup> Della Mae Rostine, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Prince, interview; Hinton, interview.

<sup>110</sup> Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "What Ever Happened to Rosie the Riveter?" *Ms. Magazine*, June 1973, 92-94.

<sup>111</sup> *Las Evening Review Journal*, 8 October 1944, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, 92.

established to help the returning veteran in his quest for employment. The Veterans Readjustment Act enabled the returning service man to receive unemployment benefits sooner than other recipients. The benefits of veterans ran up to fifty-two weeks, while other non-veteran groups received benefits for twenty weeks. It also provided for job preference for returning service men. The Employment Security report to the State Legislature for the postwar period of 1945-1946 stated, "Veterans are a more select group in the Labor market...it may well be...a lesser percentage of veterans than non-veterans will be exposed to unemployment."<sup>113</sup>

What was the legacy these women war workers left behind? They had rallied to the call of their country and had become the "Home front Heroines." Now at the war's end many of them, because of the socialization into gender roles which supported a sexual division of labor, reluctantly returned to either their domestic duties or to previously held low paying jobs such as clerks, waitresses, domestics and jobs in small assembly. Although not immediately apparent, however, there was a far-reaching impact upon American society because of these women's venture into war work. For the first time women had a taste of economic freedom, though bittersweet, because at the war's end it was taken away from them. They became aware of their own self-worth that their talents lay not only in using pot, pans, and brooms, but that they were capable and competent and could perform well in the world of industry. Even those who worked at traditional female jobs found a new sense of self-worth as they learned

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<sup>113</sup> State of Nevada, Appendix to the Journals of Senate and Assembly of the Legislature of the State of Nevada, Forty-third session, Volume II *Report of the Nevada Employment Security Department*, Section 63, 59.

that they could manage and competently cope with problems without male assistance during the war. For many, work was not a response to economic pressures, but an expression of self.

At the end of the war, work for women in industry ceased. Industrial work for both men and women in Southern Nevada was severely limited. As the 1940s came to a close, those women who wished to remain in the work force now had to return to their former low paying women's work or search for other lines of work that would be both lucrative and satisfying.

### CHAPTER THREE: NUMBER PLEASE

At the conclusion of World War II, for the second time in the twentieth century women were discharged from highly paid jobs in industrial manufacturing. According to Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson in “Whatever Happened to Rosie the Riveter?” many of these women worked before the war at low paying jobs that were extensions of women’s work in the home; as domestics, at waitressing and as laundresses or clerks. They welcomed war work because of the good pay, union benefits, seniority rights and advancement opportunities. After the war many women industrial workers would have liked to continue working in industry, but were forced out by employment policies that deferred to returning servicemen. Their departure was not voluntary, and those who needed to work were compelled to return to their pre-war low paying jobs.<sup>114</sup>

Compared to the large metropolises like Seattle, Washington, or Portland, Oregon, Las Vegas in Southern Nevada was a fledgling city during the postwar period. Opportunities for employment in industry were extremely limited, not only for women, but also for men. Only a few women in this area, such as Thelma Oldfield and Toni Carter were fortunate enough to continue in industry. For others like Peggy Hamblin, who had to work, opportunity in Sears’ accounting department was the answer. Women now had to make different employment choices. According to Amy Kesselman, in *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War II and*

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<sup>114</sup> Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, 92-94.



*Reconversion*, office work was one of the growing fields of work that offered advancement for women.<sup>115</sup>

Many women in the Southern Nevada area sought employment within a corporate structure. Women's wage work outside the home during these years was defined and framed by the social and cultural dictates of what "women's work" should encompass: typists, stenographers, file clerks, telephone operators and their supervisors, teachers and nurses. Women's employment options and opportunities did not allow them to transcend those occupational gender boundaries. As a result, corporate hiring policies limited women to positions and occupations deemed only suitable for female workers.

However, some women were not content to work within these career constraints. They looked for ways to break out of this restrictive mold. I argue that women who went to work in the corporate structure at entry level positions, through their ingenuity, were able to transcend the mold that society had cast them in, and advance to positions of authority; that they crossed the line of the sexual division of labor and, once again, entered into male dominated positions. Using the Southern Nevada Telephone Company as a microcosm for corporate structures this chapter will show that women who entered business through the corporate structure had an avenue through which they could move from entry level positions to positions of authority and build satisfying careers. Women in the telephone company experienced the same satisfaction, fulfillment and excitement as those women who worked in real estate industry and related fields.

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<sup>115</sup> Kesselman, 116.

The telephone company in Las Vegas was not always a corporate structure. When the city of Las Vegas was incorporated in 1905 telephones were non-existent. In 1907, just two years after the 1905 land auction, the valley's first telephone was installed, a magneto (crank) telephone, in the feed store of C.P. "Pop" Squires near Fremont and Main Streets and connected to the Old Ranch.<sup>116</sup> By 1909 there were 19 telephones in the area and a company, Consolidated Power and Telephone, was created to handle the business. The switchboard was open eight hours a day, with two miles of wire. By 1919, Consolidated Power and Telephone had grown to one hundred subscribers and its wires had expanded to about thirty miles. The switchboard now operated sixteen hours a day.<sup>117</sup> Across the country the demand for telephones created a network of wires strung from poles, around buildings and across streets that created a dangerous hazard to property and the public. Often, they hampered firemen who had to remove the wires to put up their ladders.<sup>118</sup>

In Southern Nevada this cumbersome maze of wires necessitated further organization to control this hazardous system, and S. J. "Sam" Lawson, a railroad company bookkeeper, assumed the task of general manager. In this infant stage of telephony, there were no regulations of telephone rates or quality of service until 1919 when the Public Service Commission evolved from the abolished Railroad Commission. The duties of the Commission at that point

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<sup>116</sup> Woodrow Long, *A History of Southern Nevada Telephone Company*, Unpublished, in the author's possession.

<sup>117</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, *Fence Post to Fiber: Histories of the Telephone Industry in Nevada 1887-1997* (Reno: Nevada, 1998), 64-65.

<sup>118</sup> Marion May Dilts, *The Telephone in a Changing World* (New York: Longman Greene and co., 1941), 26.

encompassed “full power of supervision, regulation, and control of all such utilities.” The utilities included all municipal services and telephones.<sup>119</sup> By 1923, subscribers had doubled and the operation was moved to 109 south Second Street.<sup>120</sup>

Lucille Palmer Matyas recalls the telephone facility on Second Street. The facility was located in a building behind White Cross Drugs which faced Fremont Street. It operated on the second floor in what was once a doctor’s office. Her mother, Margaret Palmer, worked as a supervisor for the telephone company on the afternoon shift. Lucille was not allowed to go home after school and stay by herself, so she went to the telephone company and did her homework in the company lounge.<sup>121</sup>

The company usually operated only two switchboard positions. As Lucille became more acquainted with the operators, they invited her to “listen in.” Gradually, they taught her how to run the switchboards. There came a point in time that when the operators went to lunch or took a break that Lucille worked the switchboards for them. She was not on the payroll because she was not yet sixteen years old, the legal age a teenager could work, but Las Vegas was still a small fledgling town, so no one complained.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Licensing and Regulatory Boards*, Public Service Commission, [http://nsla.nevadaculture.org/index.php?option=com\\_content &task=view&id=1336&Item...](http://nsla.nevadaculture.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1336&Item...), accessed 11/10/2011.

<sup>120</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, *Fence Post to Fiber*, 64.

<sup>121</sup> Lucille Palmer-Matyas, Interview with author, digital recording, 2 December 2010, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>122</sup> Palmer-Matyas, interview.

Ed. W. Clark, was elected president of the telephone company in 1924.<sup>123</sup> Telephone usage continued to grow and in 1929 Clark separated Consolidated Power and Telephone Company into two companies, Southern Nevada Telephone Company (SNTC), and Southern Nevada Power Company. Clark remained president of both companies, and during his tenure they shared facilities, personnel, and equipment. At this point, the telephone company was now stockholder controlled. SNTC now extended switchboard service to twenty-four hours a day.<sup>124</sup>

Long distance service was a late comer. In 1929, a single copper wire connected Las Vegas with San Bernardino, and in celebration, free calls to anywhere in the nation were given.<sup>125</sup> The first long distance calls were made by the Las Vegas Rotary Club to out of town Rotary Clubs. Prior to long distance service, the telegraph, which used the Railroad telegraph lines, was used as a method to correspond with distant points. After railroad business was completed, the lines were available for public use. At times private telegrams took three days to reach their destination.<sup>126</sup>

Several events occurred in the 1930s that created a population explosion for Las Vegas and created a demand for more telephones. The first was the

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<sup>123</sup> A.D. Hopkins and K.J. Evans, eds., *The First Hundred Years: Portraits of Men and Women Who Shaped Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>124</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 64.

<sup>125</sup> Woodrow Long, *A History of Southern Nevada Telephone Co*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> "Young Las Vegas, 1905-1931: Before the Future Found Us" Chapter Six, 2. Review Journal.com, 3 April 2005, [http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj\\_home/2005/Apr-3-Sun-2005/living/26158997.html](http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2005/Apr-3-Sun-2005/living/26158997.html), accessed 7/28/2011.

building of Boulder Dam. Thousands of men and their families came to the area to find work at the Dam and escape the depression that blanketed the rest of the country. According to Woodrow Long, Chief Accountant at SNTC until his retirement in 1978, in order to provide service to the Big Six Companies, contractors for the dam, and to the Bureau of Reclamation, a PABX switchboard was installed at 506 Ash Street in Boulder city on land leased from the government. The building of homes in Boulder City created further demand for telephones, although not as much as was thought, since many workers lived in Las Vegas in tents and other makeshift housing along Boulder Highway; so did not require service. Edith R. Gregory, who operated the Magneto switchboard in Las Vegas from 1923 until 1929 transferred to Boulder City to operate the PABX board as Chief Operator, Office manager and, as required, repairman until she retired in 1958.<sup>127</sup>

The second event that fostered growth was the legalization of gambling by the Nevada State Legislature in 1931. Las Vegas had the reputation of an old western town and many Dude ranches sprang up. They were playgrounds for tourists who could dress in western clothes and play cowboys and cowgirls for a while. This created a further need for telephones as the number of subscribers increased to 1142 by the close of 1932.<sup>128</sup> Las Vegas became the divorce and marriage capital of the world. A “quickie” divorce was easy and could be

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<sup>127</sup> Long, 4,5.

<sup>128</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 65.

obtained in just six weeks.<sup>129</sup> The Marriage License Bureau was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and there was no waiting period to get married.<sup>130</sup>

World War II in 1941 created the next major milestone that spurred population growth in Las Vegas and added additional stress on the telephone company. The Basic Magnesium plant in Henderson brought 12,000 men to the area for its construction, and the Government established the Army Air Corps Gunnery School (now Nellis Air Force Base). The genesis of a casino industry began to take root in the early 1940's. Las Vegas' earliest casinos opened during this period. The El Cortez was built downtown at 6<sup>th</sup> and Fremont Streets in 1941.<sup>131</sup> The El Rancho was built at Sahara and Las Vegas Boulevard, (5<sup>th</sup> Street) in 1941.<sup>132</sup> The Last Frontier was built in 1942 on the old Los Angeles Highway; a two lane highway with nothing between the Last Frontier and California.<sup>133</sup> These businesses, along with numerous motels and casinos along Fremont Street, required additional telephone cable and equipment and operators to man the switchboards. By this time the telephone company relocated to a building on an alley on Carson Avenue between Fifth Street (now

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<sup>129</sup> "History," Official City of Las Vegas Web site, <http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/FactsStatistics/history.html>.

<sup>130</sup> "Sleepless Marriage Clerks Encounter Confusion Nightly," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 21 November 1954, Sunday Features, 18.

<sup>131</sup> Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 138.

<sup>132</sup> UNLV Center for Gaming Research, "History; The El Rancho Vegas Story," <http://gaming.unlv.edu/EIRanchoVegas/story.html> 4/24/2012, accessed 6/5/2012.

<sup>133</sup> Barbara and Myrick Land, *A Short History of Las Vegas*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1999), 89.

Las Vegas Boulevard) and Sixth Street. All departments, wire chief, equipment room, repair, and switchboards were housed in this small facility. A business office was established at a different location where customers could conduct business and take care of billing and other matters.

At this point the telephone company, an independent telephone company, was the only telephone facility in the whole of Southern Nevada. It served not only Las Vegas, but Boulder City, Indian Springs, the Las Vegas Gunnery School, the Basic Magnesium plant in Henderson, Mount Charleston, and the Moapa Valley. The switchboard in Moapa was located in the living room of a Mrs. Lyons. Often, Mrs. Lyons' children answered the switchboard when Mrs. Lyons was busy with laundry or other household chores. A staunch Mormon, Mrs. Lyons would close the switchboard every Sunday morning while her family attended Sunday school.<sup>134</sup>

Due to Las Vegas' proximity to Boulder Dam, the Las Vegas Gunnery School, Basic Magnesium and Indian Springs Air Force, Southern Nevada was declared a defense center by the War Manpower Commission during World War II. Communications were considered so vital to the war effort that many viewed communications as war work. Women's historian, D'Ann Campbell, wrote in her book, *Women at War With America*, that World War II was fought with typewriters and telephones as much as bombers and bazookas.<sup>135</sup> This work was so essential to the war effort that operators had to take an oath of secrecy, which

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<sup>134</sup> Palmer-Matyas, interview.

<sup>135</sup> D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984), 104.

meant they would not discuss or disclose any information they accidentally overheard in the course of their duties. In addition, codes were devised that gave priority to calls in the order of their importance. A “Priority One” call meant an attack by the enemy or a national disaster such as a bombing. “Priority Two” calls were used by high ranking military personnel such as Generals making important military calls. The last priority, “Priority Three” calls were reserved for manufacturers of war materials. Howard Hughes was one such manufacturer residing in Las Vegas at the time who made many “priority three” calls because of his airplane industry.<sup>136</sup> Only authorized personnel were allowed to enter the telephone building. Fear of an enemy attack created the necessity for a secret code in order for operators to gain access to the building. A telephone was installed at the outside door to the building and the operator gained access by calling in a secret code, which happened to be each operator’s birth date.<sup>137</sup>

The women who operated the switchboards in Las Vegas during World War II were a diverse group. Many were housewives; the wives of men stationed at the Las Vegas Gunnery School or the wives of men who worked at the Basic Magnesium plant in Henderson. Others were women who had come for a “quickie” six week divorce, local students and a variety of single girls. Higher education was not a factor. It was neither required nor expected. Many were high school graduates, but some were not. Many operators whose husbands had

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<sup>136</sup> Irene Rostine, *Unpublished Memoirs*, Las Vegas, Nevada, in author’s possession.

<sup>137</sup> Palmer-Matyas, interview.



shipped overseas left the area and returned to their home towns, which created a large turnover that left many openings

### THE OPERATORS

In the nascent telephone industry, the earliest operators were men who walked back and forth with cords to connect the calls on huge switchboard exchanges that covered an entire wall. However, male operators oftentimes were abusive, rude and vulgar with the subscribers and were soon replaced by women. The operator personified the company. To the public they were the telephone company. Early young women operators who were willing to work on Sundays and give up their day of worship were often viewed as “angels of mercy.” These women were the “Voice with a Smile.” In addition to making connections, they provided assistance in emergencies pre 911, answered questions and provided weather reports, and helped locate lost children or parents.<sup>138</sup>

According to Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, in the early years of telephony, “telephone service became ‘women’s work.’” Many companies patterned themselves after the Lowell textile mills and wanted to attract “well-bred women” young, above average and ambitious. The attraction for “educated young women” was opportunity, pleasant working surroundings, shorter hours, and more varied duties than found in factory work.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Marion May Dilts, 24,32,33,104.

<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, *Technology and Women’s Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 68-69.

In Las Vegas, one of these young women, a local girl, Lucille (Palmer) Matyas who had unofficially worked the local switchboard at the Second Street location had just turned sixteen in 1941 when she was officially hired during World War II to work on the local switchboard, now located on Carson Street. Her entire telephone vocabulary consisted of “number please” and “thank you.” She would then make the desired connection. There were about nine local positions and ten long distance boards at this time. A peg count was taken every hour that divulged the number of calls each operator had taken. Lucille’s mother, who was still the supervisor, informed Lucille that she had to excel and be a leader in the number of calls produced. Young, energetic, strong and tall, Lucille had no difficulty lifting the back boards from the rear of the switchboards. Due to the manpower shortage, she was assigned the task of removing the back boards, and maintaining and making repairs to the switchboard. The cords were in pairs; two yellow, two green and two red. She would usually work one switchboard at a time and cut the frayed ends from the cords and replace them. This was a man’s job. Lucille, nonetheless, received no extra pay for the work and adding insult to injury, had to buy her own equipment. She complained to management; but to no avail.<sup>140</sup>

Unfortunately, at this time union protection for telephone operators in Las Vegas, a city less than forty years old, was non-existent. Unlike huge conglomerates such as AT&T, that included the Bell Operating systems and other subsidiaries in the larger east coast and California cities, Southern Nevada

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<sup>140</sup> Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, *Technology and Women’s Work*, 68-69; Palmer-Matyas, interview.

Telephone Company was a small independent telephone company. Union organization for telephone operators in those larger cities dated back to the Progressive era where telephone operators established a Telephone Operator Department within the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). By the 1930s most operators from the larger cities belonged to company run unions that, like AT&T and its subsidiaries, offered operators “genteel respectability, white collar status and an elaborate benefit plan.”<sup>141</sup>

In the Southern Nevada area, the first union agreement was signed between Southern Nevada Telephone Company and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) covering switchboard workers in June, 1943. It covered only the Boulder City Exchange which was part of Southern Nevada Telephone System. The agreement established the pay scale of \$100 per month starting pay following a three weeks training period at three dollars a day. After two years the top pay was capped at \$135 per month. The agreement provided for time and a half for overtime, vacations with pay, six paid holidays, and thirty to fifty cents differential pay for evening and night work.<sup>142</sup>

Before the advent of unions in telecommunications in Las Vegas the operators and other employees were at the mercy of the company. During the 1940s, operators trained for the job at their own expense. When the company felt the operators were competent enough to operate the boards on their own, they

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<sup>141</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 20, 21.

<sup>142</sup> *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 14 June 1943, 6.

were paid. Hours, wages, and promotions, were at the discretion of the company. These things depended on who you knew, or who liked you. There were no benefit packages, no overtime pay, and bidding for better working hours and jobs according to seniority was unheard of. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was the first union recognized for Las Vegas operators at the Southern Nevada Telephone Company. Janet Savalli, a charter member of the union who later became an elected union representative for the employees, stated that it was not until 1954 that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers organized Las Vegas telephone company employees and became a buffer between employees and management.<sup>143</sup> A notice posted in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* on November 1, 1954 announced that 273 telephone company workers voted for a union and 5 workers voted against a union.<sup>144</sup> As of November 1, 1958, management, in cooperation with the union, implemented a pension plan for the employees which would be paid for entirely by the company. It was non-contributory for employees.<sup>145</sup>

As the 1940s were coming to a close, changes took place both in Las Vegas and the telephone company that would change the landscape for each of them. The nucleus of what would be a giant gaming industry was born in 1946 when Bugsy Siegel's Flamingo Hotel opened on New Year's Eve on the two lane

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<sup>143</sup> Janet Savalli, Interview with author, Tape recording, 21 September 1996, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>144</sup> *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 1 November 1954, 21.

<sup>145</sup> *Circuit Chatter*, Southern Nevada Telephone Company Newsletter, November 1958, 1,3.

highway that would become the fabulous Las Vegas Strip. The Thunderbird, Dunes and New Frontier Hotels were soon to follow. New housing subdivisions were under construction. Because of a lack of equipment to supply telephone service to the new subdivisions, the telephone company installed pay phones in subdivisions for customer's use.<sup>146</sup> During the war years all materials including cable were allocated to the military. Now that cable and equipment became available, there was a scramble to provide the necessary service. However, Sam Lawson, the president, was reluctant to implement a dial system at this time for fear that his many local operators would become unemployed.<sup>147</sup> Eight party-lines, twenty minute waits for calls to be connected, and irate customers were the order of the day. In order to endure these stressful working conditions, operators had to change shifts more frequently.<sup>148</sup> The decade of the 1950s was the age of casinos, nuclear testing, and population explosion.

By 1950, Lucille's Palmer-Matyas' work ethic led to a position at the Nevada Test Site as Chief Operator in charge of the telephone and teletype room. The Test Site was approximately fifty miles north of Las Vegas and the site of Atomic Bomb testing. She recalls that anyone who wished to witness the above ground atomic blasts would remain at the test site overnight because the "shoots" took place early in the morning. It was terribly cold and the observers bundled up to stay warm. Lucille tells that because of the cold she wore two sets

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<sup>146</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 66.

<sup>147</sup> Eugene, P Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas 1930-1970* (University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nevada, 1989), 223.

<sup>148</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 67.

of mittens the night of the blast. Even though the explosion was ten miles away, she could see the bones in her hands through the two sets of mittens. Although unaware of the health risks, it so frightened her that she never again stayed to witness another explosion.<sup>149</sup>

After marriage and five children, financial reasons necessitated Lucille's return to the work force. The local telephone company, now Centel, rehired her in the plant department to work on the Delayed Order desk. Orders for cable and equipment not in stock or orders for special equipment were processed at this position. Here, she performed so well that she was placed in charge of cable installation. This required many trips down into manholes where she inspected the underground cable and looked for leaks. She recalls once being given a company pick-up truck to drive into the country side to check the poles and wires. When it was time to return to the office, the drive gear in the pick-up would not engage, so she put the truck in reverse and backed eighteen miles back to town.

Next, Lucille headed the Service Center where she went into the field to identify and resolve problems. She went unannounced to the South Five Central Office, one of the largest in Las Vegas, and told the workers she was going to pull the alarm system to see how long it would take them to respond. When she pulled the alarm she said, "there was not a peep, not a squeak, nothing." Someone had disarmed the alarm system, which meant that if an outage occurred in the central office, subscribers would be without service for an

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<sup>149</sup> Palmer-Matyas, interview.

undetermined length of time. She recalls how all the men scrambled wildly under her watchful eye to get the alarm system back into service.<sup>150</sup>

Lucille said that she didn't have many friends at the telephone company. A woman working in a man's field was lonely. She was a company person who gave an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. When she became widowed, this work allowed her to continue to maintain her lifestyle, and ultimately, the benefits she accrued allowed her to retire comfortably.<sup>151</sup> I would argue that while Lucille did not break the glass ceiling, there is no doubt that she carved a niche for herself into the man's field of telephony beginning at an early age when she repaired switchboards during World War II.

Vanda Eversole was hired as a long distance operator in 1950 and worked under very stressful conditions as described earlier. Vanda described the contrast between the local operators who just made connections, and the long distance operator who multitasked. In order to make a long distance connection, she first had to find the routing for it. Very few calls were routed directly to their destination. Some calls went through many cities before the connection was made. As an example, Vanda recalled the routing for Tallulah, Louisiana. She went out on a circuit and rang Los Angeles. The Los Angeles operator connected her with Dallas, Texas. The Dallas operator then connected her to Monroe, Louisiana and the Monroe operator rang Tallulah, the final destination.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Palmer-Matyas, interview

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Vanda Eversole, Interview with author, Digital recording, 17 May 2011, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas.

Nearly all calls went through this process. In addition, she had to time stamp each call at the time it began and again when it ended in order to bill for the call. Lights on her switchboard alerted her to the end of the call. Some of the outlying service areas had no lamp supervision, so they had to be monitored by listening in on the call. If the operator became busy and forgot to monitor the call, huge billing adjustments resulted. She had to compute the charges on all calls made from pay phones; collect the money, and time stamp the calls. She had to notify the subscriber when the initial three minutes were up and collect additional money if the customer wished to continue the conversation. Each coin had a distinct tone, so the operator could discern that the correct amount was deposited. On the calls from hotels and casinos, she had to compute the charges and call them back to the hotel so that the customer could be charged. Meantime, while she was doing all this, the operator was taking additional calls. In that era it was called "overlapping." This high degree of multitasking typified Vanda's usual workday.

For the convenience of tourists an Attendant Station was established in the mezzanine at the Fremont hotel. It was manned by one operator and one supervisor who had the same information at their disposal as operators in the Central Office. The customer could place his call, and when completed, the operator computed the charge, and the customer paid for it in cash

Although Vanda had no aspirations to move into the male realm of telephony and was content to remain in the traffic department, she rose to the top of her field. She became a supervisor, training instructor and assistant chief



operator, and her extensive experience proved invaluable in providing an insight into the early operator's functions.<sup>153</sup>

To relieve these cumbersome conditions under which operators performed and solve the resultant problems, telephone company plant engineers implemented bold measures. They deconstructed the old ideas and constructed new ideas which resulted in the conversion of the old manual system to a new dial system. It took planning, ingenuity, and the expertise of many engineers, to bring this to fruition. The conversion was completed on August 22, 1955.<sup>154</sup> Now, when the subscriber picked up his telephone receiver he was greeted with a dial tone instead of the "voice with a smile." In Las Vegas this was the demise of the "voice with a smile." Many subscribers were unhappy that they now had lost this personal touch. The conversion did not go without some glitches. Many customers had to receive instructions on the new dial system. Vanda tells of the woman who called in and asked how to dial the dash between the numbers.<sup>155</sup>

The cutover from manual to dial was a monumental task. Twenty-three thousand subscribers, including residential telephones, and switchboards located at the hotels, casinos, and other businesses needed modification in order to convert to the dial system. The DUDley prefix was established for Las Vegas users, DUpont for Nellis Airforce Base, and EVergreen for Paradise Valley. Conversion of hotels, businesses, and casinos was performed by the outside

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<sup>153</sup> Eversole, interview.

<sup>154</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 68.

<sup>155</sup> Eversole, interview.

plant personnel. Thomas Cooper, a switchboard installer from Dublin Ireland, was hired on June 1, 1955, to work on the cutover. He recalls modifying the switchboards at the El Rancho Vegas, the Desert Inn Hotel and Casino, Sunrise Hospital and many small businesses by installing dial pads. He remembers that many problems occurred once the cutover was completed. Most originated in the central office and included many dropped calls and dialing problems.<sup>156</sup> While outside repair crews worked non-stop, the central office, with a force of fifty specialists, worked swiftly to remedy the situation.<sup>157</sup>

#### THE PLANT DEPARTMENT

Among those in the central office involved in the cutover was Joanne Pattini-Molen. She started her telephony career when she was hired part-time by Citizens Utilities in Alturas, California as a billing clerk. In 1954 the position of Wire Chief in the plant section of the Alturas, California utility company became vacant. The company found itself unable to find a suitable replacement. Therefore, they decided that since Joanne was a quick learner she should be given the job. Her training consisted of being shown what to do by an old timer (male) who told her to pay attention, because, "he would only tell her once." According to Joanne, this was the best experience and most valuable training she could have had. Her duties as Wire Chief included running jumpers onto the frame, taking all the trouble calls and dispensing the repair people and installers. She cleaned the telephone instruments, typed all the work orders, and counted

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<sup>156</sup> Thomas Cooper, Interview with author, Digital recording, 4 August 2011, (Boulder City, Nevada: Women's Research of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>157</sup> "Minor Flaws in Dialing Ironed Out," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 22 August 1955, 1, 3.

all the coins that came in from the pay phones. Although she performed a man's job as a Wire Chief, the company would not give her the title. Her pay was \$1.25 an hour. There was no adverse reaction from her male coworkers because she was doing a man's job while earning a woman's wage.<sup>158</sup>

She came to Las Vegas on July 1, 1955, when she was 26 years old, with her husband and two small children. Her husband had obtained a job at Nellis Air Force Base as a helicopter mechanic. She applied at Southern Nevada Telephone Company for a plant position, but they could not hire her at that time. The company had just switched from a manual system of placing calls to a dial system, and the first preference for any job was offered to those who had been displaced from their old positions.

Joanne went to work for the Las Vegas Florist as a floral arranger for \$1.25 an hour. After working all day at the florist, she had to deliver floral arrangements on her way home. Everything north of Fremont Street out to Nellis AFB was her territory. She had to use her own car and gas; it was dark, and it was difficult to locate many addresses. She never knew exactly when she would arrive home.

Southern Nevada Telephone Company offered her a job at \$1.20 an hour as an A-Cutter, a male position. The telephone company had learned of Joanne's ability through contact with her previous supervisors in Alturas, California. Her main function in the cutover was to remove the cables between the old frame and the new frame now that the telephone company had cut over

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<sup>158</sup> Joanne Pattini-Molen, Interview with author, Tape recording, 25 January 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

from the manual to the dial system. Her duties included preparing the paper work that told the frame workers how to change jumpers from one pair to another, instructing the cable splicers in the field as to which cable pairs to use, which cable pairs to splice, and what they were transferring from and to. Additionally, she was responsible for the maintenance of the cable books and the line cards.<sup>159</sup>

As Las Vegas and the telephone company grew, Joanne's department grew, with additional people hired to work under her supervision as the foreman. Depending on the work load, she had as many as ten people under her supervision. There were no minorities in the work force during this era. The work force included many men who made more money than she did, although she was the supervisor and responsible for their training and overseeing their work. As a foreperson she made \$2.10 an hour of which ten cents was the differential for holding the supervisory position. The men working under her were making approximately \$4.00 an hour. Joanne felt like the minority during this time. Test board men were soon placed under her supervision.<sup>160</sup>

The men made subtle innuendos and disparaging little remarks about her working in a man's realm. However, once they realized how exceptionally capable and knowledgeable she was in performing the duties of the position, all animosities disappeared. As an example of an unhappy male employee under the supervision of a female was the Test Board man who told her that she could not be his boss. Test board men were a Class A employees and Joanne held a

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<sup>159</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

cable splicer classification which was a Class B employee. The man insisted they take the dispute to Leroy Whitney, the Plant Superintendent and Vice-President, who he believed would resolve the matter in his favor. When given the details, Mr. Whitney thanked the man for bringing this matter to his attention. He then turned to Joanne and announced that from that moment on, she was a Class A employee. This was quite a different outcome than the one anticipated by the Test board man. Before he left the department, he came to respect and admire Joanne for her ability, competence and her fairness to all the employees in her department. Joanne held this position for five and a half years.

The Engineering department asked that she transfer to Engineering to research cable records. Much of the previously run cable was not recorded and it was necessary to locate, count and map the cable. It was vital to track and record the cable location, and determine the amount of cable for tax purposes because of cable depreciation. This was a clerk's job, and Joanne was supervised by Mary Hill, the only female engineer at Southern Nevada Telephone Company.

When Mary Hill retired, Joanne became the foreman of this work group. The new superintendent of the Engineering department was firm in his belief that women under him should not hold supervisory positions. He would not give her a supervisor's salary or the title. In 1963 she bid back into the plant department as an A-cutter in the line assigning department. The Civil Rights movement that called for equal pay for equal work was underway, and the company abided by the new rules. She returned at the same pay that a man would receive, but

instead of giving her credit for her five years of service in that department, they returned her at the three year level. The male salary at this level was \$3.32 an hour. Her family had increased by two more children and she was now supporting a family of six due to her husband's illness. She still feels bitter about this, but at the time there was no recourse for her.<sup>161</sup>

In 1965, the Telephone Company asked Joanne to take over its Control Center on Spring Mountain Road. As the foreman, she held the title of Cable Splicer. She saw this as a chance to learn the aspects of the Outside Plant. Her duties were to organize and manage the department. Her predecessor, a male, kept all the records filed in his head, and as the company had grown rapidly this was not good business practice. As she received cable jobs from the Engineers, it was her responsibility to order all the major cable required, and disperse the work to the cable crews. Because she had never before physically spliced cable, she attended Cable Splicing School on her own time at night to learn the trade to avoid any challenge she might receive due to her title of Cable Splicer.

About 1975 she was interviewed for, and accepted a job in the Engineering department that appealed to her. Her duties were to research all kinds of engineering jobs, including those for entrance cable, rearrangement of cable and the placement of poles so that they could be input into the new computer system that was in place. She assisted different engineers with their various jobs and learned the ins-and-outs of engineering by asking questions, listening, and observing engineers. This was the method by which she became

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<sup>161</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.

an Engineer and was assigned to the management of the telephone company's Main Exchange.

The Main Exchange was not an easy exchange to manage. It encompassed an old district in the downtown area. Many old homes were now converted for businesses and professional use and required more cable. The existing cables were old lead cables, the conduit was full, and this resulted in much rearranging of cable. Although it was a challenge to maintain, Joanne described the job as fun. She was so successful in managing the Main Central Office that at the time of this interview, Joanne had earned the title of Administrative Engineer and was in charge of three Central Offices, Main, West 8 and the West 6 Central Offices.<sup>162</sup>

She received extensive training from Sprint for this position as opposed to the earlier style of learning on the job. As an Administrative Engineer, she assisted other engineers in their projects, attended meetings for her boss and was the lead engineer over three primarily male crews of engineers. She was the only lead engineer at the time of this interview. There was no animosity by her male crew members toward a female leader. She was always willing to assist and help them, and prefers to think of them in terms of her co-workers rather than workers under her. Third in the hierarchal ladder of Sprint's North Western Outside Plant Division, Joanne was subject only to her immediate supervisor, a male, and the Division Director, Peggy Gideon, a woman.

During her work career, Joanne became the sole support of her family of six. Her husband developed leukemia in 1963, became paralyzed from the waist

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<sup>162</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.

down and was confined to a wheel chair. Her youngest daughter was 1 ½ years old at the time. Joanne worked as much overtime as she could get. Although the normal working day was eight hours, she often worked from 5 A.M. to midnight and many Saturdays. She strictly budgeted her time and could not deviate from the schedule. She washed clothes on Wednesday and Saturday nights. There was extensive use of leftovers, and she always cooked enough food at one time for several meals. She ironed her children's jeans and t-shirts and they were always clean and well dressed. After the death of her father, her mother moved to Las Vegas in 1968 and gave her some support. Until his death in 1970, her husband, from his wheelchair, taught her boys how to use tools and they became mechanics. The children were all deeply involved in Scouting and school activities, so did not do a great deal to help around the house.<sup>163</sup>

Because of the pressure of work and home, there was no time for Joanne to develop hobbies, but she found time for community service. After 1970, she joined St. Thomas Episcopal Church and became its Guild president, Church warden and took charge all the arrangements for weddings including the floral decorations for them. She became a member of the American Business Women's Association (ABWA) which promotes scholarships for deserving women, and had never missed a meeting in twenty-seven years. The ABWA name her "Woman of the Year" on four different occasions. She is a past commander of the Disabled American Veterans, and has served as Secretary-Treasurer for Ex-Prisoners of War for the past 18 years. Governor Richard

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<sup>163</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.



Bryan appointed her to the State Veterans Advisory Committee and at the time of this interview, she was serving her thirteenth year in that position.

Among the things that Joanne liked about her nontraditional career were the opportunities that she had to learn the many different aspects of telephony. The work was always exciting and challenging. Nontraditional work gave her the opportunity to meet challenges and solve problems creatively. It provided her with a higher income than she would have made as a typist or secretary. This allowed her to provide a good lifestyle for her family, educate her children, and make investments that would guarantee her a secure retirement.

The disadvantages for Joanne were the additional responsibilities nontraditional work placed on her. She answered for all mistakes, her mistakes as well as the mistakes of others. She had to work harder than her co-workers and she put more into her work than others did. She always double checked her work because she did not want any mistakes that would give anyone the chance to say a woman could not do the job. She had to put in extra effort, hard work, and study to learn everything about these nontraditional jobs to show that women could do the work. The job also took away some time she would have liked to spend with her children.<sup>164</sup>

Today, there are many women who have chosen a nontraditional work path in telecommunications. They work as test board persons, cable splicers; they install equipment, climb poles and engage in many other facets of telephony that were once the sole provinces of men. Joanne believes that there are even

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<sup>164</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.

greater opportunities for women in this field because of new computerized technologies that are being developed.<sup>165</sup>

#### THE COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT

Another dimension of telephony, in addition to plant personnel, engineers and telephone operators was the business office. As a result of Southern Nevada Telephone Company's rapid growth, pressure from the Public Service Commission was brought to separate the company into two separate entities in 1953.<sup>166</sup> Prior to that, the Telephone Company and Power Company were one company. John McCracken was in charge of all phases of the commercial department for both companies: credit, service applications and billing. After the split the telephone company hired Agnes Cote to establish a commercial department.

Agnes began her career in telecommunications in New York City, where she worked for Bell Telephone Company for seven years as a service representative. During those years her many varied duties included managing the service department, taking a physical inventory of the New York Stock Exchange, and work in the advertising department where she billed for Hill-Donnelly, the Directory Company. In 1954 she took over duties previously performed by Mr. McCracken. Only the credit section remained with McCracken.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.

<sup>166</sup> Nevada Telecommunications Association, 67.

<sup>167</sup> Agnes Cote, Interview with author, Tape recording, 17 February 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

Southern Nevada Telephone Company gave her carte-blanche in creating the new department. The first Commercial Office was located at 515 South 5<sup>th</sup> St. (now Las Vegas Bl. So.) She was given the space for which she worked up a layout, and ordered desks and equipment. In addition, she hired and trained new employees. There was no formal training program, so she wrote a training and practices manual for service representatives that had to conform to the Public Service Commission Regulations.

The work of the new department encompassed taking applications for new service, bill payment, and explanation of customer bills, investigation and adjustment of errors on disputed long distance calls, and writing service orders for switchboards and complex equipment. They also wrote the service orders for the cut-over from the manual system to the dial system that was to take place in 1955. The representatives handled customer complaints, most of which concerned lack of service. There were no dials on telephones and customers had to wait long periods of time for an operator. When switchboards were full, there was no service at all until someone hung up and disconnected from the switchboard. In the rapidly growing city, there was not enough cable, and right of ways had to be obtained to string lines to essential facilities such as Nellis AFB. People waited for telephone calls, telephone equipment and service.<sup>168</sup>

Her original work force consisted of two cashiers, three service representative, one typist and one secretary. The normal work day was from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon on weekdays, and from eight to noon on Saturdays. Representatives earned seventy-five cents an hour, with no

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<sup>168</sup> Cote, Interview.

overtime for Saturday work. There were no benefits, no health or hospitalization insurance. In November of 1954, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers was elected to represent the employees. According to Agnes, the union obtained a small raise for the employees, but out of this they had to pay union dues. She recalls that the ethnic make-up of the work force was all white with the exception of some Native Americans who were installers or plant workers.

Agnes' working hours were from seven in the morning until seven or eight in the evening. She worked every Saturday and five hours every Sunday. Her husband, James, was very supportive and sometimes helped her with her work on week-ends. In addition to managing the department, she supervised her early work force. As the force grew in size, some of the more talented representatives were trained as supervisors, and this released Agnes for only managerial duties.<sup>169</sup>

In 1957, the commercial department moved to 1014 Garcias Street. Agnes now employed six service representatives, three file clerks to post accounts, two cashiers, and two typists. A new department, Special Services was established with three people who went out into the field and initiated orders for switchboards, teletype machines, page systems, private "hot lines" for large business customers like the government. In 1959, the commercial office moved to 125 Las Vegas Bl. South. Later the department moved to 601 Fremont Street which accommodated two hundred and fifty service representatives. She

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<sup>169</sup> Cote, interview.

acquired the furniture and equipment needed for the moves, and she had the responsibility for making the transition in a smooth and orderly fashion.<sup>170</sup>

Agnes established a commercial office in Boulder City for the convenience of the customers who had to come into the Telephone Company in person to sign up for service. Boulder City did not cut-over to the dial system in 1955 as Las Vegas had. There was one telephone operator in Boulder City and she knew everyone by name. When customers placed calls they received personalized service. If the called party was not in, the operator would say, “Oh, he’s out fishing. Do you want me to take a message for him?” There were no radios or telephones in police cars in Boulder City. If an officer was needed at night, the operator threw a switch that lit a light on top of the mountain. This signaled that the police were needed. According to Agnes, customers in Boulder City were upset when they finally switched to a dial system and had to get their own numbers.

In 1959, a merger between Western Power and Southern Nevada Telephone Company changed Agnes’ position. The telephone company was now a large corporation and the new president brought in new supervisory personnel that included a new Commercial Superintendent who was placed over Agnes and the Special Services Department. Agnes said she did not feel any resentment concerning this, because she said, “this was progress, and that was just the way things were.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Cote, interview.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

In 1962, the company, now Central Telephone Company (Centel) lent Agnes to IBM in the data processing department for a special assignment. The company was installing a data base for computerizing customer records. The names, addresses, and telephone numbers, cable information, and long distance calls were all put into the computer on a small card. The customer's entire telephone history was available by keying in the telephone number. It took three years to implement the database.<sup>172</sup>

After the cut-over to the computer system in 1965, it was her duty to maintain the system and update it by implementing new, better and faster methods. She had to negotiate with programmers and instruct them in the new requirements so they could write new programs. Agnes had to find the changes needed in programs, test them, and if the programs did not work, she had to find out why and what was needed. This was the nerve center of the company, so it was necessary to give consideration about what to do in case of emergencies like a bombing, or if the information was stolen or accidentally destroyed. The files were backed up nightly. Again, a new manager was hired and placed over Agnes. She remained in data processing until she retired in 1979.

In reviewing her long and unique career, Agnes said there were very few things that she asked the company for when establishing her departments that she did not receive. She had a free hand and the company gave her the "go ahead" for most of her projects. The only disadvantage she found was the fact that after training talented workers, they would leave the company before they became productive. After training they found that they could earn more money at

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<sup>172</sup> Cote, interview.

other companies. The advantages for Agnes were the immense knowledge she gained about telephony. Her earnings were exceptional and she made a good living. The work was challenging and rewarding for her and she made many good friends over the years.<sup>173</sup>

Agnes devoted twenty-five years of her life to the telephone company. The work she performed carried great responsibilities and proved her capabilities as a manager and supervisor. The telephone company recognized her value and they were reluctant to part with her services. Centel hired Agnes back on three occasions on a consulting basis after her retirement.<sup>174</sup> Ironically, the interview demonstrated the ideology of the large corporate structures of that era that encompassed the tenets of the sexual division of labor that sustained male supremacy in supervisory positions. Capable women performed the duties of men, but the supervisory title was unattainable.

In the Special Services department the Communications Consultants were initially men. In 1973, Marilyn Strege-Martin ascended into this male sphere of employment in the corporate structure. She was one of the first women offered the position of Communications Consultant, and only one other woman, Barbara Sperling, held the same position. She began her career in telephony as an operator for Bell Telephone Company in Long Island, New York in the 1950s for \$41.00 week. At age 26 she arrived in Las Vegas with her husband and two children. Her first job in Las Vegas was at the local telephone company as a

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<sup>173</sup> Cote, interview.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

Customer Service Representative, an entry level position. The only requirements for the job were that one dress neatly, speak well, and get along with people. She received four weeks of training. The twelve woman work force consisted of several Hispanics but no Blacks or Asian women. She later transferred to the marketing department as a Customer Service Representative. As the backup for male implementers, she wrote the service orders and other paper work needed to fill the telephone requirements for the hotels and businesses, at a salary of \$9000 a year.<sup>175</sup> She was active in the clerical union, and became the union representative for her work group. Labor complaints by women were nonexistent, but she sat in on many wage negotiations.<sup>176</sup>

By 1968 Marilyn had divorced. Through her contacts at the telephone company, she got a part time job at Caesar's Palace working the switch board to supplement her income. When the hotel Chief Operator resigned, the hotel offered her the position because of the knowledge and business experience she acquired at the telephone company. Her salary was \$10,000 a year. She supervised 35 operators and their supervisors.

Her responsibilities were to hire and train operators and schedule their shifts and days off. She was responsible for ordering all new telephone service for the hotel and making moves and changes to existing service. Guest messages, wake-up calls , and catering to the whims of the hotel VIPs and celebrities were all in a day's work. Her work force included two or three black

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<sup>175</sup> Marilyn Strege-Martin, Interview with author, Tape recording, 9 October 1996, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>176</sup> Strege-Martin, Interview.



women and one Spanish woman. Caesar's Palace telephone room was nonunion because the hotel maintained a wage scale that exceeded that of other unionized hotels. Caesar's provided better benefits for the employees to thwart union organizing. According to Marilyn the wages for strip operators at the time of the interview were \$20,000 to \$25,000 per year.

In 1973, at the invitation of Walter Geary, the regional vice president of Centel, she returned to the telephone company. When approached about returning, she informed him that she had evolved beyond the traditional positions assigned to women. He offered her a male position as a Communications Consultant. This was her first nontraditional management work assignment at the telephone company. As mentioned previously, only one other woman, Barbara Sperling, held this position. Marilyn's duties took her into the field where she worked with both established and new hotels under construction. She worked from electrical schematics and architect's drawings to make the proposals she presented to hotels to provide adequate lines and equipment to handle their traffic. She had to familiarize herself with all types of equipment, lines, and pricing. Training was mostly on the job and self-taught. The men thought that the women doing this work were a "joke," and that they did not know anything. If the women asked the men for any help, they gave it grudgingly and usually at the insistence of their superiors. It took about a year for the men to fully accept the women and trust their judgment.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

The next step in her progression up the corporate ladder was her appointment as manager of the Marketing Department of Centel in 1978 at approximately \$20,000 a year. She was the first woman to hold this position. She made many trips to Chicago, Centel's headquarters, for specialized training in personnel and management classes, seminars on budgeting, and classes designed to teach forecasting. Both male and female employees were under her supervision. Some men, she relates, could not tolerate a women superior, and transferred out of the department. She hired new replacements.<sup>178</sup>

This was a period of transition for telephone companies due to deregulation and divestiture that took place and this propelled Marylyn into the next phase of her career. Divestiture and deregulation were brought about by the breakup of the giant Bell system, followed some years later by the split up of AT&T. Divestiture broke the stranglehold the telephone company held on its subscribers. Startup companies sprang up that sold equipment and switches in direct competition with the telephone company. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) gave permission to customers to connect their own equipment to telephone company lines in 1975. Realizing that she was at the top of the ladder at the telephone company in 1980, Marilyn accepted an offer from a startup company, Las Vegas Communications. She was their first female General Marketing Manager. Next, she started and operated Telecom of Nevada as its Regional Vice-President. The company sold and installed telephone equipment in the hotels and resembled a miniature telephone company. The 25

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<sup>178</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

employees under her supervision included male engineers, equipment installers and repairmen.<sup>179</sup>

In 1988, long distance services were deregulated and Marilyn entered this phase of telephony. No longer forced into using Centel's long distance service, customers now had the option of choosing the long distance company of their preference. Marilyn incorporated herself. The companies who now sought her services hired her corporation instead of her personally. She was no longer an employee, but organized and operated these companies on a consulting basis. This was a more profitable arrangement for her. The first of these companies was Star Net. She supervised office personnel, long distance operators and a sales force. Through her efforts the company gained 85% of the business of the strip hotels. Her salary that year was \$76,000. Star Net evolved through many other companies and finally emerged as Colorado River Communications (CRC) from which she retired in 1996.

Marilyn maintained a home, raised her family and took part in many community projects. She belonged to the Independent Telephone Pioneers (ITPA). The organization helped the elderly and the needy by painting and fix-up projects, food drives, installing telephones for the elderly, and giving hard of hearing handsets to the deaf. She held the office of the vice-president of the American Business Women's Association (ABWA) that awarded scholarships to deserving young women. ABWA voted her "Woman of the Year" in 1980 for her

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<sup>179</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

community service and for making the most progress in her field. She joined the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce where she learned networking techniques.<sup>180</sup>

The major tools Marilyn Strege-Martin used to break through society's employment constraints were knowledge and legislation. She learned every technical aspect of the industry in which she worked. The knowledge she gained through traditional work was her stepping stone to nontraditional work. Federal Legislation; the 1963 Fair Labor Act, Civil Rights legislation that addressed equal pay, and prohibited discrimination in employment based on sex, and the legislation that brought about deregulation and divestiture were her allies. She recognized the opportunities they provided and acted upon them. Through her excellent job performance and fair treatment of those she supervised, Marilyn attained her goals.

According to Marilyn, the greatest difficulty she faced in nontraditional work was the uncertainty. When she left Centel to organize the new startup companies, her future was uncertain. Since she was no longer an employee, she received no benefit packages, and had no safety net. Yet, the work was challenging, and it was not boring for her. It was lucrative, and as a single mother, it provided the opportunity to work at one good paying job instead of two low paying jobs. Her nontraditional work gave her confidence in herself and the knowledge that she could work out any problem and handle any crises. It gave her the strength to do things that women of her era did not do, such as purchase her own home. It enabled her to send her children to college. These advantages far outweighed the disadvantages. Marilyn Strege-Martin proved that it was

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<sup>180</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

possible for women to succeed in business and technological fields once reserved for men.<sup>181</sup>

#### PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT

Janet Savalli started her career in the communications industry as a long distance operator. In 1950, Southern Nevada Telephone Company hired her at the age of seventeen while still attending high school. There were no special educational requirements at that time she was hired. Janet's two years of Latin and excellent handwriting impressed the Chief Operator and she hired her. Her pay was seventy-nine cents an hour. She concurred with Vanda Eversole on the wait time and the process that early subscribers had to go through to get a long distance call. The exception was the bookies and gamblers. They all had direct lines into the toll boards and their calls received priority service. Howard Hughes, a gambler, had two direct lines into the switchboard. He was very demanding, and according to Janet, believed that she was his personal operator.<sup>182</sup>

A year later, a promotion made her the youngest toll supervisor in the company. She received an additional 25-30 cents per hour. Her next position was scheduling clerk. The duties included making up the shifts and the work schedules for the operators, both local and long distance. She later became an instructor when the company switched to the dial system and she taught the toll operators. As the company grew, her responsibilities grew. She progressed to

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<sup>181</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

<sup>182</sup> Savalli, Janet, Interview by author, Tape recording, 21 September 1996, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

the position of Customer Service Representative. In this position, she went out to the hotels and taught the Chief Operators how to work the automatic switchboards that replaced the old cord boards. She also performed this function for other businesses in the community. No technical training existed for this job. To understand the operation of the equipment, she either received a book of instructions to read, or had the installers explain it to her, usually just minutes before she was to train the customer. Savalli later became a quality control clerk and monitored the operators to observe their tone of service, and the equipment to ensure it was functioning properly. Later, she became an investigator and did detective work to find out who placed disputed long distance calls.<sup>183</sup>

She was promoted to a position in Public Relations as the Community Relations Coordinator in 1988. Her primary duty was liaison officer between the company and the School district in such programs as Pay Back and D. A. R. E. These programs encouraged children to remain in school and avoid drugs. She was the coordinator for the Speakers Bureau and was involved in job and employment fairs that took place in the community. Public Relations jobs were mostly male positions when she received her promotion. Only one other woman preceded her in this position. Janet had encountered no difficulties either with her male co-workers of the companies in the community with which she dealt. They accepted her as doing a job well. She did feel there was a disparity in wages between male and females in the same position.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Savalli, interview.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

Janet recalled that in the early stage of the telephone company women outnumbered men workers. There was a division of labor between males and females. Men were wire chiefs, linemen, repair men and installers. Female positions were operators, operators' supervisors, clerks, and Chief Operator. There was no glass ceiling to crack because the only executive was the male owner. Later, she was not sure exactly when, women became line assigners who worked in a wire chief capacity, climbed poles, installed telephones and spliced cable. They became engineers involved in the planning of hotels and subdivisions, and worked at many other duties that once were exclusively male. She recalled that in the early days of the telephone company, only one woman, Ubie Diltz, worked in the wire chief's office. About 1970, men also infiltrated areas of traditional female employment. Men applied and were hired as telephone operators.

Employee relationships between each other, with the supervisors and the owner of Southern Nevada Telephone company were casual and relaxed in the 1950s and 1960s. The most feared person in the hierarchy was not the owner, but the Chief Operator who left no doubt that she was "boss." As the company grew and expanded and merged with other companies such as Centel and Sprint, working relations became more formal and structured.

The ethnic makeup of the work force, both male and female, was mostly white with a few Hispanics. There were no Black workers. In the early 1960s, a Black female worker, sent by the NAACP, came from Los Angeles to integrate the telephone company. Savalli recalled that there were no major difficulties

because of this, although she remembers a great deal of discussion by the operators on the subject. One woman resigned her job rather than work with a Black employee. Other than that, integration went smoothly, and Black qualified workers were accepted by the employees. There were no protests or walkouts.<sup>185</sup>

Since she began working for seventy-nine cents an hour, wages escalated. In 1977, as a clerk Savalli made five dollars and seventy-seven cents an hour. At the time of this interview, the beginning wage for a clerk was over eight dollars an hour. Both Janet and Agnes Cote concur that the telephone company was a training ground for other businesses after employees became proficient. It was a standing joke that the telephone company trained the operators for the strip.

Janet Savalli chose not to marry. She devoted the energy she would expend on a family and home to community service. She was a member of the Centel Singers, now retired by Sprint. Margery Anderson, widow of James Dickenson, for whom the former library at UNLV was named, led the group. They sang at many functions for all types of dignitaries; sang for Vice-President Dan Quayle, sang at schools, and sang at nursing homes for the elderly. When they performed on the strip, Steve and Edye Gorme invited the Centel Singers to close their nightly show by singing "God Bless America" with them. They declined because of work obligations. In addition, she belonged to the Independent Telephone Pioneers Association (ITPA) for many years. Savalli ran a company store, located on telephone company premises, the proceeds of

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<sup>185</sup> Savalli, interview.



which went out to the community to try to fill some of its many needs. ITPA supported Safe Net and Shade Tree shelters, among others, with either cash or equipment depending on the need. ITPA bought school clothes for needy children and personal needs for homes for unwed mothers. In addition, ITPA bought all the bedding for Boy's Town when it opened. ITPA did painting, spring cleaning and telephone repairs for the elderly free of charge.<sup>186</sup>

Janet Savalli felt that she was privileged to pursue a career in telecommunications. Besides being the means of making a living, she believes that it opened up the entire world for her. She met so many different people, had a myriad of experiences, and held diverse and interesting jobs. It allowed her to progress in a career that began with women's work to her present position, one that is usually reserved for men. Through all this, she watched the growth of the communications industry and Las Vegas, much as a mother watches the growth of a child.<sup>187</sup>

As Janet Savalli recalled, there was no doubt that the Chief Operator was the "boss" and the most feared person in the company. Her position was an unenviable one that no man would want to tackle. She was responsible for managing and scheduling the operators on seven days a week, twenty-four hour a day basis. In addition she was responsible for operator hiring and training. The Chief Operator felt a responsibility for the image the operators portrayed to the public. For example, in the early 1940s, the Chief Operator, Mrs. Doris

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<sup>186</sup> Savalli, interview.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

Porter, declared Fremont Street “off limits” at night for her operators. Mrs. Porter believed it was her solemn duty to protect the image of her operators, who in the eyes of the public personified the telephone company. Any operator found violating her edict would suffer the consequences; dismissal or unpaid leave of absence.<sup>188</sup>

On their night off a group of operators, including the author, went to a bar on Fremont Street called the “Passion Pit.” So nicknamed because it was one floor below street level and extremely dark, lit only by the street lights from above that filtered down the stairwell. Suddenly, the girls noticed four legs descending the stairway. They recognized the legs as belonging to Mrs. Porter, the Chief Operator, and her supervisor, Mrs. Palmer, who were out on patrol. All the girls dove under the table and remained there until the legs went back up the stairs and the coast was clear. It was a close call for the telephone girls.<sup>189</sup>

#### STRIP HOTEL OPERATORS

As noted earlier both Janet Savalli and Agnes Cote bemoaned the fact that talent trained at telephone company expense provided employees for other Las Vegas businesses. Using the expertise gained at the telephone company, many who had started their careers as operators and clerks propelled themselves into high paying positions in other businesses including the strip hotel-casinos. Las Vegas and the hotel-casinos grew and expanded side by side. Hotels soon resembled small self-contained cities. In addition to rooms they

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<sup>188</sup> Savalli, interview.

<sup>189</sup> Irene Rostine, *Unpublished Memoirs*.

included shopping malls, restaurants, gambling venues, nightclubs and bars, a security and maintenance department, and administrative offices. Meeting rooms, health spas, swimming pools, business centers, wedding services, and concierge services were also available. Many maintained their own golf courses and others had putting greens. The telephone room was the nerve center of these small cities.

Marilyn Strege-Martin who previously, began her career with Centel as a customer service representative, an entry level position, used the knowledge she acquired to become the Chief Operator of Caesars Palace hotel-casino on the Las Vegas strip.<sup>190</sup> The author, Irene Rostine, illustrates another example of telephone operators who took their talents elsewhere. Irene began her telephone career at the entry level position of long distance operator for Southern Nevada Telephone Company in 1943. She progressed from operator to supervisor, and finally to Customer Service Advisor. With the experience and knowledge she gained, Irene left the telephone company and became the Director of Telecommunications in the late 1960s to open three hotel-casinos; the Four Queens on Fremont Street, and the Frontier, and Circus-Circus on the Las Vegas Strip. She oversaw the construction of the telecommunications systems from the hard-hat stage through completion of the construction phase. She worked with telephone installers and telephone company representatives. Her responsibilities included hiring, training, scheduling, and supervising the switchboard personnel, and ordering moves and changes to existing equipment.

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<sup>190</sup> Strege-Martin, interview.

In addition she reconciled all the hotel billing statements from Southern Nevada Telephone Company.<sup>191</sup>

Sheila White also started her career at Southern Nevada Telephone Company in 1959 as a Long Distance Operator. The telephone company promoted Sheila to supervisor, and later to Customer Service Advisor before she ventured out to the Strip. She worked at several hotels as an operator. Then she became an Executive Lead Operator, the union designation for Chief Operators who remained in the union. Sheila held this position at one of the oldest hotel-casinos, and a local's favorite, the Showboat Hotel on Boulder Highway that opened in 1954. The Showboat's name changed to the Castaways when it was purchased by a group of investors headed by Mike Villamor.<sup>192</sup> It closed in 2004 and was imploded on January 11, 2006. After the Castaways closure, Sheila worked at the Rivera Hotel as an Assistant Chief Operator until she retired in 2011.<sup>193</sup>

Telephone companies in other areas also suffered the same loss of trained personnel as Centel. An example is Mary Ward who trained as a local operator for Pacific Bell in Southern California. She arrived in Las Vegas in the late 1950s. Her first position on the Las Vegas strip was at the Last Frontier Hotel. She recalls that there were no educational requirements, but that previous

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<sup>191</sup> Irene Rostine, *Unpublished Memoirs*.

<sup>192</sup> "Casino Sinks into History," *Las Vegas Review Journal.com*, <http://reviewjournal.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?expire=&title=reviewjournal.com+--->. Accessed 3/15/2012.

<sup>193</sup> Sheila White, Interview with author, Digital recording, 14 March 2012, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

telephone experience was a requirement for employment. She next went to the Sands hotel where her starting salary as an operator was \$14.00 a day. Working conditions were erratic and at the whim of management. According to Mary, there was no overtime for holiday or double shifts worked. The operators were always on call and they sometimes worked thirteen days straight. Seniority was non-existent and operators were fired at random whenever management wished to reduce the work force.<sup>194</sup>

Unionization began in the mid-1960s while Mary worked at the Sands. When operators were approached about organizing, Mary sprang at the opportunity to promote the union and was an avid organizer for the union cause. She politicked, campaigned, and made phone calls to promote unionization. Mary recalls the operators were thrilled at the prospect of a union that would give them leverage with management. The Front Desk, Room Reservations and the Telephone Operators were organized by Dick Thomas of the American Federation of Labor, Teamsters Local 995.<sup>195</sup>

As new the Strip properties opened, new opportunities were created for operators and Chief Operators who moved from older properties to the new properties. When the MGM opened, Mary became the Chief Operator. While at the MGM, one of the worst catastrophes in Las Vegas history occurred in November of 1980. The hotel burned at approximately 7 A.M. with a great loss of both life and property. Mary was just coming on shift when the fire broke out,

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<sup>194</sup> Mary Ward, Interview with author, Digital recording, 8 March 2012, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>195</sup> Ward, interview.

so had not yet entered the building. The assistant Chief Operator was on duty and had barely led the operators to safety when the entrance they had just exited exploded. Chief Operators had the responsibility of handling all types of unexpected emergencies and unforeseen events that might occur. By evening telephone service for the hotel had been restored in a motel located behind the hotel. Five operators, including Sheila White, who had clocked out at 7 in the morning the day of the fire, worked the night shift in the temporary quarters.<sup>196</sup>

When Bally's bought the MGM in 1986, Mary Ward remained as Director of Telecommunications, a title which she demanded and received, because she believed it was warranted due to the service that Chief Operators performed. She remained at Bally's for twenty-six years. During that time she implemented many programs that made money for the company. Telephone rooms originally were not money makers for the hotel, but merely provided a service for the guests. However, with deregulation and technological advances, projects could be implemented that put the telephone rooms in the black.<sup>197</sup>

With deregulation, hotels were able to purchase their own equipment and payphones; they were able to charge for phone calls, and voice mail, and operators could be eliminated due to the use of cordless switchboards. Her original work force of seventy-five employees was trimmed to thirty-eight. Mary had her operators performing other telephone duties on the hotel owned equipment. They changed out telephone face plates and installed guest room

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<sup>196</sup> White, interview.

<sup>197</sup> Ward, interview.

telephones. Mary sent three operators to California to the payphone vendor for a three day crash course in repairing the payphones, thus allowing the operators to repair Bally's pay phones.<sup>198</sup>

Bally's owned the Paris hotel and it was decided that the two hotels would combine telephone systems. Mary had the gigantic job to oversee and coordinate the installation of the entire telephone system for the Paris. This included all room and administrative telephones, and her operators answered the calls for both hotels from Bally's switchboard.

Mary Ward resided in Pahrump, Nevada. She endured a hundred fifty mile daily round trip to and from work. She was the mother of eight children and was actively engaged in their scholastic and athletic activities. That was her only form of recreation. When asked how she managed home and work and the long commute, she said she "just did it." On the hour drive to work she cleared her mind of home problems and focused on work matters, and on the hour trip back home, she cleared her mind of work problems and focused on home matters.<sup>199</sup>

Advantages and disadvantages dogged the women in Las Vegas who pursued careers in the corporate structure. For these women, the ladder to the top may have been a little steeper than it was for the women war workers or the women realtors. In the early years these women faced discrimination, lack of union or protective legislation governing their work, and they trained at their own expense. They worked long hours without extra compensation and they had no

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<sup>198</sup> Ward, interview.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

health or hospitalization insurance. Many women performed double duty as they juggled dual roles as career women and homemakers. Despite these drawbacks, the women continued to progress up the ladder of success. They believed the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages.

In exploring the twentieth century middle class women's rise in within the corporate structure, the interviews provide a framework to examine the tools women used to succeed. The same common threads are intricately woven and visible throughout the work lives of all the women. Ingenuity was the order of the day as they found ways to manage child care, household chores, and cope with the stress of a career in the corporate structure. Scheduling was important in order to accommodate both work and home life. Joanne Pattini-Molen is an example; she worked at her career, cared for six children and a disabled husband. She cooked multiple meals at one time, reserved certain evenings for laundering, and certain days for shopping.<sup>200</sup>

Education was an important element. Higher education was not required or expected. A high school certificate was deemed sufficient in those early years. Janet Savalli was hired because the Chief Operator was impressed with her handwriting and the fact that she had studied Latin in high school. However, all the women took it upon themselves to put forth the extra time and effort required to study and learn everything about the field they chose, so that they would be the best and excel in their work. They had to work harder and smarter to prove they could perform the job.

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<sup>200</sup> Pattini-Molen, interview.



Beneficial legislation became their ally and helped to even the playing field. The Fair Labor Act of 1938 provided for protective legislation that regulated hours and guaranteed a minimum wage. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 that made it illegal to pay less based on sex, and the Civil Rights Movement which prohibited discrimination in employment were among these women's partners.

Labor unions entered the Las Vegas scene in 1954. According to Janet Savalli, unionization in the 1950s brought women operators the benefits of paid holidays, seniority status, "short shifts" where women worked six night hours and were paid for eight hours, and ten hour rest periods between shifts.<sup>201</sup>

Unionization allowed for negotiation between the telephone company management and employees to resolve conflicts. Women used the opportunities these benefits provided to gain promotions and push themselves another step up the ladder of success. Self-discipline, strength of mind and character, determination and hard work, excellence in job performance were the other tools they employed.

These women were pathfinders. They made inroads into the male realm of telephony, and they proved that it was possible for middle class women to succeed in business and technological fields. Women who chose a work path in the nascent corporate structure of the Las Vegas telephone company were provided an opportunity to evolve from the "voice with a smile," whose entire vocabulary consisted of "number please and "thank you" and enter the world of male dominated occupations. An entire new world of job opportunities opened up to them; they became engineers, climbed poles, went down into manholes,

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<sup>201</sup> Savalli, interview.

managed departments, did trouble shooting, installed equipment, and are now presidents of companies and vice presidents of entire divisions. In pursuing these career paths, women experienced upward mobility, found fulfillment, satisfaction, and great personal and monetary rewards. Accomplishing these goals for themselves in their own day, they unknowingly paved the way for today's working women.

## CHAPTER FOUR: OUR TURN

At the end of World War II many women emerged from war work who had tasted economic freedom, and had become aware of their competency and self-worth. These women wished to remain in the labor force. Forced out of the labor market by the returning servicemen, they reluctantly returned either to their domestic duties or to previously low paying jobs considered women's work. Other women, imbued with years of socialization in the traditional values of their mothers and grandmothers, eagerly returned to their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

The 1950s brought an expanding consumer economy following the shortages created by World War II. This economic boom created a plethora of traditional women's jobs. Many housewives, anxious to make extra money to help pay for their new homes in the suburbs, new automobiles, new refrigerators and television sets; sought employment. The idealized perspective of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers, whose value as women was determined by how they functioned in these roles, was challenged by a new ideology brought on by an increasing consumer culture. The gap between the opposing concerns of home and work began to narrow as many women drifted back into the job market.<sup>202</sup>

Traditional women's jobs during this period consisted of low paying "pink collar" jobs that were extensions of women's work in the home: such as domestic service, cooking, waitressing, laundresses, sales clerks, office workers, teachers,

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<sup>202</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 200-319.

and nurses. Women's work patterns were erratic. Single women usually worked only until they married. Women who worked after their marriages were mostly classified as "part time" workers who supplemented family incomes to pay off bills, and provide extras for the home.<sup>203</sup> Women did not visualize these jobs in terms of careers. Although a significant number of exceptions existed, many women became dissatisfied with traditional women's work and the erratic part-time work patterns and sought to escape society's established mores by shaping rewarding and fulfilling careers.

In Las Vegas during the late 1940s and early 1950s, a miniscule number of women attempted to break out of the mold cast for working women of that era by entering the real estate industry. During this period their efforts were viewed as insignificant and unimportant because they were not perceived as career women; but merely as working for supplemental income. These women did not pose a serious threat or competition for men due to their erratic work patterns. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a core of business-minded women emerged who were determined to take their rightful place in the business world. Rather than working in a traditional occupation, these women chose the work path of self-employed entrepreneurs in real estate; making pivotal inroads into a predominately male domain.

Other male dominated business fields at the time were insurance and finance. In the 1970s, some clients still insisted on only dealing with the

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<sup>203</sup> Louise Kapp Howe, *Pink Collar Workers: Inside the World of Women's Work*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-25.

“insurance man.”<sup>204</sup> As late as 2011, although women had overcome many obstacles in the industry, they still fight challenges in the male dominated industry.<sup>205</sup> In Southern Nevada, finance history was made in 1958 when Selma Bartlett became one of the first female bank officers in Nevada. In 1962, history repeated itself when she cracked the glass ceiling and became the first female bank branch manager for Bank of Nevada.<sup>206</sup> These fields were not considered women’s purview; supposedly, women’s minds were not attuned to the intricacies of insurance and financing, a woman’s choice to enter into these fields during this era became a giant step forward for women.

I argue that these women workers participating in the early Las Vegas experience refused to be bound by the social constructs that cast them into gender specific roles in the work place; that many women crossed over the dividing line of the sexual division of labor to engage in work patterns of a nontraditional nature in real estate and that the inroads created by early women workers in this field eased the transition for women who later followed them into this form of nontraditional work. The oral histories of these women relate the experiences and challenges they faced, detail the reasons for their entry into the real estate field, reveal how they gained entry into the nontraditional work place, and illustrate the methods used to secure a foothold and make inroads

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<sup>204</sup> Jeanne Olsen-Burgwardt, Interview with author, Tape recording, 7 February 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>205</sup> “Women In Insurance Still Battle Leadership Challenges,” *The Business Journals*, [http://www.bizjournals.com/prnewswire/press\\_releases/2011/09/20/NY71769](http://www.bizjournals.com/prnewswire/press_releases/2011/09/20/NY71769), accessed 4/20/2012

<sup>206</sup> Selma Bartlett, Biography, Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, <http://wrinunlv.org/research/our-history-profiles-of-nevada-women/selma-bartlett/>, accessed 4/13/2012.

into, what was at the time, understood to be a man's field in the Las Vegas area. These entrepreneurial women carved their niche and became successful in the male-dominated real estate industry and they accomplished this within the arena of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors of which they were members.

Real Estate was not always recognized as an occupation. When America gained independence from England, those who dealt in land were seen as land jobbers or "hawkers." The transition from a rural, agricultural society to an urban society in the nineteenth century created the impetus for the rise of real estate as an industry, and by 1840 real estate became recognized as a business. There were no licensing requirements or restrictions placed on early real estate agents. Subsequently, many who transacted sales lacked integrity, capital, experience, or education. The only controls exerted on the real estate business were those of public opinion and actions taken in the criminal courts. As a consequence many fraudulent transactions were consummated.<sup>207</sup>

In 1847, the first attempt to organize a real estate board to implement good real estate practices in New York City failed. Baltimore, Maryland, the oldest existing board, was organized in 1858. It was followed by Cleveland, Ohio and San Jose, California in 1869. In the 1870s San Diego, California organized a board, and by the 1880s many other cities were organizing boards. The first Real Estate Associations began forming in 1901, and became an organizational bridge between the local boards, and national boards and the National Real Estate Association, established and incorporated in Chicago in May 1908. The

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<sup>207</sup> Pearl Janet Davies, *Real Estate in American History*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1958), 1-64.

name National Board of Real Estate Brokers (NAREB) was adopted in 1916. Its purpose was to unite real estate men nationwide to upgrade the industry, to promote ethical real estate practices by self-policing members, and to exert a positive influence on public policy and legislation affecting real estate.<sup>208</sup> During this formative period women were prohibited from membership in the Board of Realtors.

In 1946, almost one hundred years after the first attempt to create a real estate board in New York City, the Las Vegas Board of Realtors organized. The signatories were the twenty-four active male members. The original charter included the words, "To unite real estate men of this community, we men agree."<sup>209</sup> The officers and directors for the new Board of Realtors were: Thomas A. Campbell, president; G. R. Wilkinson, vice-president, James C. Young, secretary-treasurer; and C. C. McDaniel and Burley M. Jones, directors. Three categories of membership were established that included; active membership, limited to owners and heads of real estate firms, associate membership made up of brokers and salespeople affiliated with active members; and affiliate member-ships held by financial institutions, title insurance companies, and civic organizations that had an interest in the real estate industry. Of the forty members that comprised the original membership, only three women, Lona Hazzard; Evelyn MacDonald, and Mae Munkers were active members. Five women were associate members. No women served as officers

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<sup>208</sup> Pearl Janet Davies, *Real Estate in American History*, 1-64.

<sup>209</sup> Dale G. Henson, *Unpublished History of the Greater Las Board of Realtors*, (Las Vegas, Nevada, 1997), 1.

of the executive board, directors, or signatories of this newly formed organization.<sup>210</sup> It was incorporated as the Las Vegas Board of Realtors in June 1947.<sup>211</sup>

In addition to the goal of the organization to “unite real estate men of this community with the National Association of Real Estate Boards,” other goals included the promotion and maintenance of high standards of ethical and moral conduct, and fair dealings among those engaged in real estate; to promote legislation at the state and national level that would benefit and protect the real estate industry, and to work towards upgrading and dignifying the real estate business.<sup>212</sup>

The state real estate board, created by the Nevada State Legislature, began functioning the week of May 9, 1947. The all-male officers were; Jerry Donovan, president, Thomas A. Campbell of Las Vegas, vice-president, and Ray P. Smith of Reno, secretary-treasurer. Board members were C. H. Skipper of Reno and Thomas M. Carroll of Las Vegas. Female representation on the board was absent. The main headquarters was in Reno and the Las Vegas office was located in Campbell’s office at 315 South Fourth Street.

The new state board spelled out the qualifications for acquiring a Nevada real estate license. The sole requirement was that the applicant must have

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<sup>210</sup> “Real Estate Board Organized in Las Vegas,” *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 4 November 1946.

<sup>211</sup> Gloria Johnson and Paddy Ryan, “GLVAR Celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,” *Southern Nevada Realtor*, Official Publication of the Greater Las Vegas Association of Realtors, (Las Vegas, Nevada, July 1997), 14.

<sup>212</sup> “Real Estate Board Organized in Las Vegas,” *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal*, 4 November 1946.



resided in the state for six months prior to filing the application. There were no educational requirements. The licensing fee for a broker cost twenty dollars a year and for a salesman, it cost ten dollars a year.<sup>213</sup>

Keith Kelley, President of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors in 1997, related that real estate in Las Vegas was by tradition, considered “men’s work.”<sup>214</sup> Although there were a few women agents in Las Vegas in the 1940s, their role in real estate remained minimal. Despite being dues paying members, women occupied a secondary position in a paternalistic, male dominated Board of Realtors that gave them no voice in its decisions.

Jessie Emmett, who obtained her first license in California in 1948 and later was licensed in Nevada in the 1960s, said that women in real estate were viewed as “dabblers.” They were not expected to perform all the duties prescribed to real estate agents, and were usually assigned to look after rental properties. They were to smile nicely, drive the client to show them houses, and then turn the client over to their broker to finalize the sale.<sup>215</sup> Jeffrey M. Hornstein in, “‘Rosie the Realtor’ and the Re-Gendering of Real Estate Brokerage,” cites Mary Amelia Warren, a California realtor, as stating that, “brokers in many offices would “permit” women to “draw in the business, initiate

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<sup>213</sup> “State Realty Board Begins Functioning,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 9 May 1945, 4.

<sup>214</sup> Carmel Hopkins, “Realtors celebrate 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 15 June 1997.

<sup>215</sup> Emmett, Interview with author, Tape recording, 16 October 1996. (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

sales, and work out most of the details,” then step in at the last minute and close the transaction.”<sup>216</sup>

Hornstein describes a sexual division of labor that existed in the real estate industry during this early period. Initially, men resisted women’s attempts to invade the real estate industry. However, grudgingly men came to accept women’s intrusion into the industry. He describes women’s role in real estate as “business maternalism,” based on the premise that selling the family home was the proper role for women in the real estate business. Women’s traditional role as homemakers and the special skills they acquired in the private sphere qualified their claim to this segment of the business. He claims that the more profitable transactions of industrial, commercial and land brokerage came under the domination of male brokers.<sup>217</sup>

Although in small numbers, women continued to practice real estate throughout the 1950s. In 1950, nationwide, women comprised only 14% of real estate agents.<sup>218</sup> A search of the 1950s “Real Estate for Sale” advertisements in the *Las Vegas Evening Review Journal* reveals a growing real estate industry, but with minimal women’s involvement. In Las Vegas, the decade between 1950 and 1960 indicated the number of real estate agents and brokers escalated. The 1960 census confirms 137 male and 79 female real estate brokers and agents in

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<sup>216</sup> Jeffrey M. Hornstein, “‘Rosie the Realtor’ and the Re-Gendering of Real Estate Brokerage, 1930-1960,” *Enterprise & Society* 3, (June 2002): 335-336.

<sup>217</sup> Jeffrey M. Hornstein, “‘Rosie the Realtor’ and the Re-Gendering of Real Estate Brokerage, 1930-1960,” 320-322.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 321.

Las Vegas.<sup>219</sup> A *Review Journal* advertisement in April of 1951 disclosed that Helen Herr, who later became a Nevada State senator, opened and operated a real estate company in 1949 with two agents under her supervision.<sup>220</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s became a turning point in the real estate industry with the emergence a core of business-minded women. Determined to carve careers for themselves, these career-minded women became both visible and vocal participants in the real estate industry. These decades provided fertile territory for these business minded women. Between 1950 and 1980 population growth in the Las Vegas Valley was exponential. Thousands of people migrated to the area each month. World War II brought the Basic Magnesium Plant, the Las Vegas Gunnery School (now Nellis Air Force Base), and Indian Springs Air Force Base to the area. In the 1950s Las Vegas experienced the genesis of the Las Vegas Strip. Atomic testing took place at the Nevada Test Site, approximately fifty miles north of Las Vegas. Between 1950 and 1980 Nevada's population expanded from 160,083 to 800,493. The bulk of the increase took place in Clark County, Nevada. In 1950, Clark County's population was 48,289 but by 1980 it expanded to 463,087.<sup>221</sup> New subdivisions as well as entire new communities sprang up that extended the city's boundaries far beyond anyone's wildest imagination and a real estate boom followed. Despite many economic

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<sup>219</sup> United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Table 121, "Detailed Occupation of the Employed, by Sex, For the State, Urban and Rural, and for Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas of 100,000 or More: 1960," 30-171.

<sup>220</sup> *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 18 April 1952,14.

<sup>221</sup> "Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990." Compiled and edited by Richard L. Forstall. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20233, <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nv190090.txt>, 6 August 2011.

ups and downs during this period, this era, nonetheless, proved to be exceptional time for real estate.

These women came from many different areas of the country with motives for entering real estate as varied as the backgrounds from which they came. The five women profiled here illustrate the motivations that drove them to become recognized as legitimate business women, and to gain a voice in the body that governed them. Hazel Hedges came to Las Vegas from Kansas City, Missouri in 1952 with her husband Charles. She worked as a waitress in the show room of the Riviera Hotel where she paid another young male employee \$1.00 a night to lift the heavy food trays for her. Hazel worked there about two years; long enough to pay off the furniture and carpeting purchased for her new Las Vegas home. Then she assumed the role of wife, mother and homemaker because, "I had always read that you were supposed to stay home." By the time her son James was a junior in high school, she felt that she had fulfilled the role assigned to her by society. She said, "I was dying to go to work and do something." It was "her turn." In 1960, at the age of thirty-eight, she took and passed the test for real estate agent, and went to work for Charlie Collins at Bond Realty.<sup>222</sup>

Kay Rodrigues also shared this motive and quoted an age-old Chinese proverb: "Man sits for long time with open mouth waiting for roast duck to fly in." She said that she had been so busy roasting the duck all her life that now she knew that she could make things happen. It was her turn to have some roast duck. Money was also an impetus for Kay who moved from South Dakota to Las

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<sup>222</sup> Hazel Hedges, Interview with author, Tape recording, 29 October 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

Vegas on February 14, 1959. She worked as a waitress in various showrooms, but she saw no future for her in that line of work. Pregnant with her fifth child, she decided to give up waitressing and seek a new career. Believing that the two big ticket items people purchased were automobiles and homes, she applied for work at the automobile dealerships in Las Vegas. The dealerships rejected her applications on the grounds that women did not sell cars in the 1960s. That left selling homes as her remaining option. Therefore, at the age twenty-seven, she applied for and obtained her real estate salesman's license in 1964.<sup>223</sup>

Another interviewee, Betty Krolak, transplanted from the Midwest in 1962, obtained her real estate license the following year at the age of 46. For her, real estate was an equal opportunity employer and the only work in which both men and women could earn comparable pay for comparable work. According to Krolak, when a commission on a property was agreed upon it became gender blind. Left with six children to support when her ill husband had to be institutionalized, she concluded that real estate was the only way she could earn a living and support her family. Her only alternative, which was unacceptable to her, was welfare. Betty opened her own real estate office on February 1, 1964.<sup>224</sup>

Jessie Emmett relocated from California to Las Vegas in November 1954 when her husband found work at the Nevada Test Site. She obtained a California real estate license in 1948, but stated she didn't seriously work at it

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<sup>223</sup> Kay Rodrigues, Interview with author, Tape recording, 14 November 1997, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

<sup>224</sup> Elizabeth (Betty) Krolak, Interview with author, Tape recording, 23 September 1996, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

because she was taken up with motherhood. Her father and husband pushed her into getting her license because, “they believed in cattle on the range,” that women should be independent, and both believed she had a gift for salesmanship. Expecting to remain in Las Vegas temporarily, she kept the California license. Her husband was away for long periods of time at the test site, so out of boredom, Jessie decided to take the examination for the Nevada real estate salesman’s license which she passed. She later took and passed the brokers examination in the mid-1960s. For Jessie Emmett, success meant taking the initiative to acquire the knowledge necessary to conduct business. She made an appointment with the president of Frontier Savings and Loan and asked him to teach her the intricacies of real estate financing. He was so taken aback that a woman, who was not supposed to know about such things, would be bold enough to go to such lengths. However, he agreed to teach her, and she learned financing.<sup>225</sup>

Jessie decided that she wanted to own her building rather than pay rent, and convinced First Western Savings to give her a loan to buy a property on Decatur Blvd. She had about a half dozen salespeople and put together an extensive training program. She was so successful that she bought another building on East Flamingo Avenue next to Desert Springs hospital. She had a combined sales force of close to a hundred people at that time. Jessie became known as the ‘Ann Landers’ of real estate because she wrote a very popular

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<sup>225</sup> Emmett, interview.

column every Sunday in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* that answered people's questions regarding real estate.<sup>226</sup>

Helen Naugle came to Las Vegas from Mountain Home, Idaho in 1962 with her husband who had accepted a position with EG&G as a technical writer. In 1963, Helen took and passed the real estate salesman's test. Her friend took and passed the real estate broker's test and obtained a broker's license. Together, they opened and operated Bruce Realty. Neither Helen nor her partner had ever worked in a real estate office, nor had any training in real estate. According to Helen, because of this lack of knowledge, they wasted a great deal of time that could have been put to more productive use. In 1963, she took and passed the examination for broker and obtained her real estate broker's license. Helen stated that property management kept her and her partner in business for that first year. Because a great number of repossessed properties became available due to overbuilding by First Western Savings and Loan, Helen and her partner became repossession specialists.

She worked at Bruce Realty for ten years, but said she never really enjoyed selling houses. Therefore, in 1972, she decided to apply her skills to commercial real estate and joined the Hotel/ Motel Association of America. She was the only woman in a nationwide organization that sold hotel/motels.<sup>227</sup> Helen became the first and only Nevada realtor appointed to represent the Hotel/Motel Association of America. This was an all-male organization until she

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<sup>226</sup> Emmett, interview.

<sup>227</sup> Helen Naugle, Interview with author, Tape recording, 31 October 1996, (Las Vegas, Nevada: Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada Las Vegas).

was admitted into the organization in 1972. She was elected National President of the Association in 1978, and has served as its Director since 1980. Because of her expertise in the hotel/motel field, she was selected as a member of the Air Force Innkeeper Evaluating team of the United States Government to evaluate living accommodations at Air Force Bases.<sup>228</sup>

In Nevada, in 1947, no educational requirements existed for entering the real estate business. The state only required the applicant to have six months residency.<sup>229</sup> As late as 1959, according to Jeannie Olsen-Burkwardt, only a sponsor was required.<sup>230</sup> However, the Nevada State Legislature later passed laws requiring ninety hours of instruction before one took the real estate examination. Most of the interviewees obtained this at night or on weekends at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. High school education satisfied the requirements for most women's jobs of this era; therefore, none of the women interviewed acquired higher education. When these women passed the real estate examination and obtained a real estate license, another educational void existed. The state provided no further training, and training under a broker remained minimal. These women were given a desk, telephone, a pad and a pen. With only these bare essentials, and with inadequate instruction in the nuts and bolts of real estate, women were expected to start earning a living. They obtained their training by trial and error, reading books, and attending out of state seminars conducted in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, Phoenix,

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<sup>228</sup> Naugle, interview.

<sup>229</sup> "State Realty Board Begins Functioning," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 9 May 1947, 4.

<sup>230</sup> Olsen-Burkwardt, interview.



Arizona and Salt Lake City, Utah. Today, the state of Nevada requires, as a prerequisite for obtaining a real estate license, that the applicant provide proof of forty-five semester units of college level classes including principles, practices and procedures, law, and the ethics of real estate.<sup>231</sup>

Hazel Hedges, as a new licensee, first worked in an office in which she and the broker were the only agents. Her broker, Charlie Collins, was out of town most of the time. The office had no properties listed for sale, but she came across an expired listing for a grocery store. She received no training at all, but read a book that said the most likely person to purchase a commercial property was the person who occupied the building. Armed with this knowledge, she proceeded to sell the property under the exact terms of the expired listing agreement to the young man who ran the grocery store. It turned out that the seller no longer wanted to sell his property and threatened to sue both Hazel and her broker. Since the broker was out of town, and she did not know what to do, she decided her next stop would be at an attorney's office. Kaye Rodrigues' first broker was also Charlie Collins, and she, like Hazel Hedges, was also self-taught.<sup>232</sup> This lack of training and lack of supervision left many agents and their brokers vulnerable to law suits and loss of their license.<sup>233</sup>

These women interviewees worked only a short period of time as sales agents. Within their first year as business women, they took and passed the real estate brokers examination, and opened their own businesses. Once in business

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<sup>231</sup> *Nevada Revised Statutes*, NRS 645.343.

<sup>232</sup> Rodrigues, interview.

<sup>233</sup> Hedges, interview.

for themselves, they circumvented the lack of instruction by looking to the mortgage and title companies for assistance. They believed that the mortgage and title companies, versed in financing and the legal aspects of real estate, could be counted on to supply the understanding and the knowledge of real estate that they would need to operate their business successfully. Jessie Emmett remembers that these companies were incredible not only for the support they had given the women, but also for their generosity in supplying many of the forms and other office supplies needed to conduct business. Legislation has since led to the discontinuance of that practice.<sup>234</sup>

Real estate agents worked as independent contractors. Betty Krolak, relates that although they were under the authority of a broker, they paid all their own expenses, and set their own work hours. There were with no paid vacations, company retirement or benefit packages and they relied solely on the commissions they earned to make a living. Brokers withheld no income taxes, leaving these agents responsible for keeping track of their own taxable income and filing their tax returns. The Board of Realtors billed the salespeople directly for their monthly dues, and if dues weren't paid, the broker was responsible for paying it or discharging the salesperson. The salespeople were required to be covered by the State Industrial Insurance System at their own expense.<sup>235</sup>

Surmounting these hurdles, in 1963, Hazel Hedges bought the business of the second broker she worked for: DeSure, Faire and Davis. After the sale, the owners gave her a brief crash course on business procedures. Then they

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<sup>234</sup> Emmett, Interview.

<sup>235</sup> Krolak, interview.

relocated their business under a new name across the street from Hazel's location. She named her new business "Southside Realty" because it was located on east Sahara Avenue at Sixth Street. Some of DeSure's sales agents remained with Hazel for a short while, but they gradually moved on to other endeavors. After they left, Hazel did not need the extra space, so she moved across the street and rented a small space from DeSure where she worked alone.

However, after about a year of working alone, she decided that she needed to expand her business and obtain a larger office that would accommodate a secretary and other sales agents. In 1967, she bought a duplex on the corner of Maryland Parkway and St. Louis Avenue. She applied for business zoning, remodeled the property and moved Southside Realty to its new location. She hired two secretaries and had eight or nine sales people under her supervision. This illustrates just one example of the flexibility and mobility that real estate afforded.

Hazel Hedges applied for, and obtained the contract to rehabilitate and market abandoned and boarded up Federal Housing Authority (FHA) repossessions that were in foreclosure. Her territory encompassed the south side of Las Vegas and all of North Las Vegas. Contractors were hired to do the repair work under the supervision of Larry, her maintenance supervisor. The ethnic makeup of the sales force did not include blacks, Asians or Hispanics, and Larry was the lone black employee on the payroll.

Hazel divided the new office into two sections with separate entrances. Hazel's second secretary handled the FHA operations. Those interested in FHA repossessions used the rear door, and those who were interested in purchasing residential or commercial property from Southside Realty used the front entrance.<sup>236</sup>

At this point in her career, Hazel Hedges no longer engaged in the selling of real estate, but assumed the role of manager, instructor and supervisor. As a new phase of her business, she extended credit and made mortgage loans to her clients. The collateral for the loans was second trust deeds that she took back on client's properties. By acquiring property either through foreclosure or purchase, she gradually built a small empire for herself. Except for supporting and admiring her efforts, the only role her husband played in her business was to fix up the properties she acquired. In the mid-1970s, she merged with another large real estate firm: Hardy/Matthews and Company. The firm now became Hardy, Matthews and Hedges. They each maintained their current existing locations, and there were roughly twenty-five agents to supervise between the two offices. This business relationship did not last long because of personality conflicts. Hazel Hedges then formed a partnership with her son, James Wade, and the company became Hedges and Wade. She continued to operate her business at its same location on Maryland Parkway until 1980 when she sold the business upon the death of her husband.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Hedges, interview.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

Kay Rodrigues, calling herself a “new woman of ideas,” opened her real estate company in August 1972 next door to the office of her former broker, Charlie Collins of Bond Realty. In 1965 she became a partner and vice-president of Bond Realty. She worked in this capacity for seven years and during that time was responsible for bringing many new sales agents into the firm, thereby establishing a sizeable staff. A junior partner was later added, and he thought the company should take a percent of her commissions. She was not happy with this arrangement, and named the price she would take for her share of the business, which Collins accepted and paid. Kay Rodrigues had previously purchased the property next door to Bond Realty with the intentions of opening a commercial department of Bond realty at a future date. The day that Collins bought her out, she took a plane to Carson City, incorporated her new business, Bar-K-Realty, and caught a night flight back to Las Vegas. As she said, “I opened the door of my new business the very next day before the first ripple of the sheets.”<sup>238</sup> She opened a second location on Rancho and Charleston Boulevard and spent a half-day at each location managing the businesses. Later in her career she specialized in investment exchange, property management, and commercial transactions. These facets of real estate were once the exclusive domain of male agents; but no longer. At the time of this interview in 1997, Rodrigues was still operating Bar-K-Realty after twenty-six years.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Rodrigues, interview.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

When Betty Krolak opened her first real estate business at 820 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street in 1964 it was a one woman operation. She later expanded the business, Clark County Realty, to include both male and female agents whom she supervised. To add to her real estate expertise, Krolak went to University of Southern California in 1970 and enrolled in a two week course in real estate appraising. At the time this also was a man's field. In a class of about a hundred men, there were only three women. She later became a licensed real estate appraiser. For thirty-three years she successfully survived many economic "ups and downs." At the time of this interview Clark County Realty still operates under the management of her son, Scotty Dugan, also a successful real estate appraiser. Betty Krolak believed by working in real estate she served as a role model for her children. In addition, Betty Krolak and her entire firm were members the Las Vegas Board of Realtors.<sup>240</sup>

The Board of Realtors had a powerful political action committee that wielded influence at both the state and federal level in legislation relating to real estate matters. It afforded the women a place in which to learn how to do business in a man's world, and they had the camaraderie of other agents. Members of the Board shared inventory through the Multiple Listing Service and this increased their opportunity for sales. All these women interviewees joined the Las Vegas Board of Realtors.

According to Hazel Hedges, women benefited by joining the Board of Realtors, since membership gave them an identity and placed them on a notch higher than a broker. The use of the term "Realtor" meant that they would abide

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<sup>240</sup> Krolak, interview.

by a code of ethics in their dealings with clients and fellow realtors. Realtors agreed to arbitrate their differences between themselves rather than sue in a court of law. The Board of Realtors was strictly a man's world when Hazel Hedges joined it. She said that even Helen Herr and Vera Love, prominent pioneer Las Vegas Realtors, had no voice in the Board of Realtors. Men thought that the acceptance of women would provide many pot luck dinners, cooks, janitors and baby sitters.<sup>241</sup> Betty Krolak recalls that women were given committee jobs; they set up meetings and banquets, and furnished coffee. However, women were not considered a valuable asset to serve on the Board.<sup>242</sup> Jessie Emmett seconded the notion that the women were merely tolerated and had to fight for their acceptance. Women's functions were to take minutes, arrange social functions, and act as social hostesses for those functions. Women had to fight for the acceptance of the men in the Board of Realtors.<sup>243</sup> In her late twenties when she became a member of the board, Kay Rodrigues related that she was merely viewed as an "object" by the male members.<sup>244</sup> Hazel Hedges stated that the women who joined the Board of Realtors became members with the conviction that they were business women, and believed that were equal with men, and wanted to be thought of as equal.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Hedges, Interview.

<sup>242</sup> Krolak, Interview.

<sup>243</sup> Emmett, Interview.

<sup>244</sup> Rodrigues, Interview.

<sup>245</sup> Hedges, Interview.

A group of Las Vegas women realtors that included Jessie Emmett, Helen Naugle, and Betty Krolak attended a real estate seminar in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s. After viewing the Los Angeles organization they realized that the women in Las Vegas lagged far behind women realtors in other cities. Previously, Helen Naugle had requested a packet of information from the National Women's Council of NAREB. On their return from California, Helen gave the information to Jessie Emmett.<sup>246</sup> Because women needed a voice in the organization that governed them, this nucleus of women, led by Jessie Emmett, founded the Women's Council of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors in 1967. Jessie Emmett became the first president of the Women's Council.<sup>247</sup>

In an attempt to increase membership, the NAREB encouraged the formation of the Women's Council of the NAREB in 1938. Originally, it was intended to make female realtors and saleswomen more comfortable during national conventions and as a means for women in real estate to get acquainted. Separate meetings were held where women could laugh, and "open up."<sup>248</sup> Eventually it evolved from a "kind of ladies auxiliary and women's social club into a professional business women's association"<sup>249</sup>

The Women's Council of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors was a powerful tool in the women's battle for professional legitimacy. The women brought in speakers, held seminars, and held training classes. The Women's Council

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<sup>246</sup> Naugle, Interview.

<sup>247</sup> Emmett, Interview.

<sup>248</sup> Jeffery M. Hornstein, 328.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 337, 338.



created the first educational arm of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors. It was the first formal education provided to the realtors in Las Vegas area.<sup>250</sup> It quickly became a forum to develop and expand women's leadership skills. Although real estate was a competitive business, Betty Krolak remembers the Women's Council as "a networking thing."<sup>251</sup> The women networked, collaborated with each other, exchanged ideas, shared experiences and learned from each other. Eventually men began to attend the meetings of the Women's Council and later many men joined the women's organization.<sup>252</sup>

The members of the Women's Council were also responsible for upgrading the Multiple Listing Service in Las Vegas. When Betty Krolak entered the business there were only nine offices in the Multiple Listing Service.<sup>253</sup> This service was the means by which realtors shared and disseminated information about their new property listings. In the 1960s Realtors shared this information by passing out photos of the properties at the weekly multiple listing breakfast meeting.<sup>254</sup> After their weekly meeting, in which the salespeople publicized and promoted their properties, agents car pooled around town and toured all the new listings. Krolak relates that the city was so small at that time that the tours could be completed by early afternoon. The salespeople placed copies of the new

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<sup>250</sup> Emmett. Interview.

<sup>251</sup> Krolak, Interview.

<sup>252</sup> Emmett, Interview.

<sup>253</sup> Krolak, Interview.

<sup>254</sup> Gloria Johnson and Paddy Ryan, "GLVAR Celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Southern Nevada Realtor*, 15.

listings in a loose leaf notebook. After extensive investigation Phoenix, Arizona was found to have had one of the finest Multiple Listing Services in the country. Krolak and Naugle along with several other women went to Phoenix to study their system of Multiple Listing. The information they brought back resulted in the implementation of a bi-monthly publication of listings with pictures. The advent of computers has since made those books obsolete.<sup>255</sup>

Jessie Emmett described the Women's Council as the "back door" by which the women infiltrated the all-male Executive Board of Realtors. Hazel Hedges concurred, saying the women entered the Board quietly, did not make any trouble, and before the men really realized it, the women were "in." Jessie Emmett became the first woman president of the Executive Board of Realtors in 1972. That same year, Hazel Hedges, nominated from the floor, ran against Jack Matthews, a well-known Realtor, becoming the first woman Secretary-Treasurer of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors.<sup>256</sup>

Jeanne Olsen-Burgwardt, a real estate broker in Henderson, came to Nevada in 1949. Her husband, Bob Olsen, an insurance agent who wished to work independently, learned that Henderson, Nevada was a small new town of about two thousand people that had potential growth possibilities. Because there were no commercial or professional buildings available, they opened Bob Olsen Realty and Insurance in a small two bedroom town site house at 333 Water Street. Because the government did not want home-based businesses conducted in a residential area, they were given a month to relocate. They

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<sup>255</sup> Krolak, interview; Naugle, interview.

<sup>256</sup> Emmett, interview; Hedges, interview.

moved to a small two room building with a kitchenette at 6 Water Street. At the time of this interview, business was still conducted at this location, although the building has been extensively renovated and refurbished. Jeanne performed all the secretarial duties and typed all the insurance policies since there were no preprinted policies at that time. In 1959, Jeanne, sponsored by her husband who had a broker's license, obtained her Real Estate Broker's license.<sup>257</sup>

The office was split in two sections and Jeanne became the broker for the real estate section. Jeanne and her husband belonged to the Board of Realtors and were members of the Multiple Listing service and attended the Realtor's meetings. She did not join the Women's council because they lived in Henderson and she was too busy with work and taking care of family responsibilities to participate. At one point she had seventeen agents under her supervision.

When her husband became terminally ill, the business was incorporated to perpetuate the company in the event of his death. Jeanne acquired a certificate of convenience to allow her to continue the insurance business until she could obtain a license. She was now the broker over both businesses. She recalls the bias toward women insurance agents in the 1970s when clients demanded to talk to the "Insurance Man."<sup>258</sup>

After her husband's death in 1973, she organized and operated Eagle Sand and Gravel with her son Peter until 1985. "Gravel Gertie" was the pet name given her by the men workers. They sold processed type two cushioning

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<sup>257</sup> Olsen-Burgwardt, interview.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

sand. She jokingly tells that the Henderson jail and Ethel M Cactus Gardens rest on her sand. She then began to develop land and industrial parks. At the time of this interview she limited her involvement only to the commercial aspects of real estate. Jeanne was vice-president of Olsen Insurance and Realty, vice-president of Olsen Plaza Inc., which she developed with her son, and was vice-president of Stow-Away- Mini Storage Inc., a new development in the Henderson Industrial Park.<sup>259</sup>

These highly successful business women won many coveted positions that were once “male only” posts leaving an indelible mark on the industry. In 1974, Jessie Emmett became the first woman to serve on the Nevada State Board of Realtors. Again in 1978, she created another “first” as the first woman and the only Nevadan to serve on the National Executive Board of Realtors. At that time, she told the all-male members of the executive board that she “did not take minutes.”<sup>260</sup> In 1973, Betty Krolak became the first woman Commissioner appointed to the Nevada State Real Estate Advisory Board by Governor Mike O’Callaghan; serving two three-year terms in that capacity.<sup>261</sup> The Nevada Real Estate Advisory Board, under the Nevada State Department of Commerce, is the regulatory arm of the real estate division. It promulgates the rules and regulations that govern the activities of real estate licensees statewide. The Commission hears complaint cases where the public or real estate brokers have grievances

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<sup>259</sup> Olsen-Burgwardt, interview.

<sup>260</sup> Emmett, interview.

<sup>261</sup> Krolak, interview.

against each other. It then hands out disciplinary actions as needed.<sup>262</sup> In late 1978 she was followed in that position by Jessie Emmett who served for six years.<sup>263</sup>

Kay Rodrigues who had been viewed merely as an “object,” by the men in the Board of Realtors, consistently earned, month after month, the awards given by the Board of Realtors for having the most sales and most listings sold. Given her record, she earned the respect and appreciation of her male peers for her business acumen. She then became involved in the development of an industrial park in North Las Vegas.<sup>264</sup>

In describing their work experiences the interviews of these women served as a lens through which to gain an insight into the social, economic, and political environment of women in the 1960s and 1970s. Working women of this era did double duty as they performed their duties in the work place, managed child care, home, family and social obligations. Typically, husbands of the period did not do housework, and all the women said they did not have domestic help for their household chores. They shopped, cooked, cleaned the house, ran errands as well as conducted their businesses. They successfully blended the two worlds. As Helen Naugle phrased it, she was “just fast.”<sup>265</sup>

During this era, the women did not enjoy the advantages provided by today's technological advances. There were no cell phones, faxes, beepers,

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Emmett, interview.

<sup>264</sup> Rodrigues, interview.

<sup>265</sup> Naugle, interview.

computers, email, or other electronic aids. All real estate work was performed manually. They hand carried documents for signatures. Real estate agents prequalified their buyers, unlike today where the buyers are sent to the mortgage company to be qualified for loans. Betty Krolak relates that time was of the essence; therefore both selling and listing agents met to present their offers to the seller in person rather than by fax. Betty was a notary and notarized many of the documents that were required. She believed that the extra time invested in performing these duties, created a much greater spirit of cooperation than exists in the industry today.<sup>266</sup>

Most women Realtors were married with families; therefore, child care became a challenge. Child care facilities in the fledgling southern Nevada area were practically nonexistent. Therefore these women Realtors handled child care in unique ways. Real estate was not a nine-to-five job and these women entrepreneurs worked all sorts of odd, long hours. They had to be available when the client was available, so they had to devise ingenious methods to handle child care in an era when it was extremely limited.

Betty Krolak, the mother of six children, kept track of her children through her answering service that acted as a “nanny.” She left her whereabouts with the answering service, and required her children to check in and report their location and activities to the service. They left messages for each other and were in constant communication.<sup>267</sup> Jeanne Olsen-Burgwardt brought her infant son,

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<sup>266</sup> Krolak, interview.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

Peter, to the office in a car seat. She rocked him with her foot while she typed. Another pioneer agent, Magda Potter, who worked in the office with Jeanne, also had children. They prepared lunch for the children in a small kitchenette in the rear of the office and put the baby down for his nap in a second room in the building. The two women staggered their appointments for showing houses and taking listing so that one would always be in the office to care for the children. They also shared the one automobile that was available.<sup>268</sup> Kay Rodrigues said that most women of that period stayed at home and did not work. She inquired around and located a neighbor who, anxious to earn extra money, helped with her five children for the fourteen years she required child care.<sup>269</sup> Jessie Emmett, whose husband's work kept him away from home a great deal of time, said that she enlisted the aid of her mother, and later her mother-in-law to help her with the children.<sup>270</sup>

It was the consensus of all those interviewed that civil rights legislation did little to help single women who tried to obtain a loan for a home purchase. The problem was that credit could not be extended to these women because their wages lagged far behind men's and they did not earn enough money to qualify for the loan. Kay Rodrigues told of one area in which the Fair Housing legislation that banned discrimination for race, age or sex was beneficial to one particular woman. The client was sixty-two years old and was applying for a thirty-year mortgage. Able to qualify for the loan, the client worried that her age would

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<sup>268</sup> Olsen-Burgwardt, interview.

<sup>269</sup> Rodrigues, interview.

<sup>270</sup> Emmett, interview.

prevent her from obtaining an FHA thirty year loan. However, the new legislation forbade age discrimination and the loan was approved. Kay Rodrigues remarked that it was likely the woman would not live to pay the loan off, but at least she had the benefit of the same low monthly payment as younger applicants had. The Fair Housing policy also opened previously all-white residential neighborhoods to minority groups. Kay Rodrigues stated that her office received some calls concerning showing houses in these neighborhoods, but her office handled the calls without any problems. Because of her last name, “Rodrigues” she never received any complaints about Hispanic integration.<sup>271</sup>

These women’s experiences illustrate many commonalities in attitudes and motivations of women who worked in the late 1950s and 1960s. It is clear they wanted more out of life than mere domestic life or a “job.” Their entry into real estate became a turning point in all their lives, with the most salient commonality being the need to “have a turn.” The tug-of-war between work in the public sphere and work in the home that existed for these women is evident by examining the age brackets of the women. With the exception of Kay Rodrigues, who was in her late twenties, the women were all approaching mid-life. Although all had worked either until marriage or at some form of traditional women’s work after marriage, they placed home and family first before taking the step out into their career world. Because of their socialization, they fulfilled the obligations that society prescribed for them, and raised their children to a point

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<sup>271</sup> Rodrigues, interview.



where, as Hazel Hedges phrased it, “I knew he (her son) would make it.” At this juncture, it became “her turn.”<sup>272</sup>

Money was the next common denominator. The only woman who was not married and had to work out of necessity was Betty Krolak. The other women had husbands, who were employed, but the financial rewards of real estate were tremendous. The money they earned provided more of the good things in life and allowed each to build her private empire.

Flexibility was the third commonality the women shared. Their day was unstructured and lasted as long as it took to do the job. But, at the same time, it allowed them time in between their real estate duties to shop, pick up children from school and do whatever else was needed. Real estate, as opposed to a nine-to-five job, gave them the freedom to pursue the things in life that interested them. It allowed them to be creative and pursue their ideas. Many did community and charitable work, traveled extensively, or participated in politics.

Some women felt that they paid a price for their success. Real estate is a demanding business that takes much of one’s time. You do not leave work at five o’clock, because many offers are presented and many listings are taken in the evening. One is constantly planning ahead about what has to be done. Although they all believed that they never neglected their responsibilities to their families, one woman related that her family life suffered slightly. Another said she would do things differently. She would give more time to her family and spend less time on business and community activities. Another said that one

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<sup>272</sup> Hedges, Interview.

had to discipline oneself and make many sacrifices. But all women believed that the benefits far outweighed the sacrifices.

Women excelled in residential sales. Once homemakers themselves, they understood the requirements needed to provide a comfortable working environment for other women. They were sensitive to housewives homemaking requirements and bonded more easily with clients than did the male agents. Although at first many women engaged solely in home sales, many quickly expanded their career opportunities and became experts in industrial, commercial, land, and hotel/motel transactions.

The watershed that signaled a new era for women came in 1972 when Jessie Emmett and Hazel Hedges were elected as the first president and first secretary-treasurer of the Executive Board of the Las Vegas Board of Realtors. No longer merely voiceless dues paying members, women became highly visible as they gained a voice in the formerly all-male organization that had resisted integration by women since its incorporation in 1947. Efforts of those early dedicated pathfinders, who surmounted all obstacles and excelled in their endeavors, lifted women from a marginal position in the real estate industry to the position of respected businesswomen. Through their expertise and professionalism, these women realtors helped dispel public opinion classifying the real estate industry in the same category as “tire kicking, used car salesmen.” A new era of professionalism had begun. In 1997, the Greater Las Vegas Board of Realtors celebrated its fiftieth year of service. Membership had almost reached

the staggering five thousand mark. At that time four of the last eight Board presidents were women.<sup>273</sup>

All these trailblazing women agree that today's real estate industry has changed drastically from what it was when they entered the business. Sales people today are allowed to hire assistants who do much of the leg work for them.<sup>274</sup> Brokers and realtors can delegate much of the work once performed by the interviewees to their unlicensed assistants including; conduct open houses, obtain and give out information, deliver documents, and place and remove yard signs. If the assistants are licensed, they can perform more in-depth duties of the broker such as; prepare listing and sales contracts, do telephone marketing, interpret documents and give advice, represent themselves as being associate brokers, and attend closings unsupervised. All these duties were performed by the women realtors in the mid-twentieth century.

Technological advances have made real estate easier, but at the same time made it less personal between broker and client. The State of Nevada now requires that real estate salespersons work under a broker for a period of two years before they can become a broker or open their own business. Within a year of their licensing, these women opened and were operating their own real estate business. During the era of these entrepreneurs, the main tools of their trade were the telephone, the automobile and "woman power."

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<sup>273</sup> Gloria Johnson and Paddy Ryan, "GLVAR Celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Southern Nevada Realtor*, 14-15.

<sup>274</sup> Krolak, interview.

It is clear by their success that these risk taking women who chose the work path of self-employed entrepreneurs in real estate made pivotal inroads into a predominately male domain. The educational programs instituted by the Women's Council of the Board of Realtors created the wedge in the Executive Board of Realtors which opened the way for women. Today, women continue to maintain these programs and actively serve the board on committees and in official capacities as the means for securing their position. Members of the Women's Council continue to network, exchange ideas, share experiences and learn from each other. By upgrading their knowledge and attending seminars and classes, both in and out of town, these women fortified their expertise by learning the intricacies of financing and details of commercial, industrial, hotel/motel, and property management aspects of real estate. They became experts who often excelled and surpassed many men in these fields. Real estate enterprises that were once the exclusive domain of men were mastered by women as they continued to carve their niche. By their professional performance, these women created inroads into a formerly male industry, and eased the path for the women who followed them into real estate. Currently, the 2012 Greater Las Vegas Association of Realtors has almost 11,500 members and its president is a woman, Kolleen Kelley.<sup>275</sup> The sizeable presence of women who now serve on the Executive Board serves to underscore the power of women's collective activism in obtaining their rightful place in the work place.

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<sup>275</sup> Kolleen Kelley, "Homebuyers should review preliminary title report," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 4 February 2012, 4E.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Women in the Southern Nevada area in the mid twentieth century exemplified the power of women's ability to bridge the gender gap and destabilize the sexual division of labor that existed during the pre-World War II period. Before World War II, less was expected of women in the labor force, and, relative to men, women expected less of themselves. But after World War II, women's emergent sense of self-worth, their awareness of their competency and the increasing knowledge that "they could make things happen," provided the recognition that they had a choice in their working lives and provided them with their identity.

Propaganda campaigns, through posters, songs, magazines, and the media sent confusing signals to women. War time propaganda depicted women's war work in a favorable light. The woman war worker was portrayed as glamorous, and she was the symbol of the "home front." These campaigns pressured women to work in war industries as riveters, welders and in munitions factories as well as to serve in the armed forces. William Chafe describes the World War II area as the engine of change in women's lives. It interfered with the long established patterns of life and forced men and women into new activities and roles.<sup>276</sup>

Post-war conservative thinkers and Madison Avenue propaganda attempted to reverse these trends and return women to their prewar social status: that women's proper place was in the home as wife and mother. Post war

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<sup>276</sup> Chafe, William, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, Political Roles, 1920-1970*, 298.

America became a more mobile society, and coupled with the baby boom, the expanding economy and the move from urban areas to the suburbs, a major shift in the social order took place. According to Dorothy Sue Cobble in, *The Other Women's Movement*, during the 1940s and 1950s hostility toward married women working outside the home greatly diminished.<sup>277</sup> Amy Kesselman relates in her work, *Fleeting Opportunities*, that nationwide, the percentage of married women wage earners increased significantly between 1940 and 1950.<sup>278</sup> Karen Anderson agrees with the other historians that World War II had an intense impact on American Social History as large numbers of married women entered work force during this period.<sup>279</sup> Post-World War II American society would never again return to its pre-war status.

Many women workers were happy to return to their pre-war status as wives and mothers, but there were others who desired to continue working after the war. They wanted extra income to help pay for the new luxuries the expanding economy brought; the new home in the suburbs, the new refrigerator, a new car in the driveway. Part-time work once characterized the work patterns of many women. However, workers and work patterns of women were changing. As the boundaries between men and women's work began to shift, women were no longer deemed secondary part time workers. Older women, married women, and mothers entered the work arena. Job discrimination determined by race, ethnicity, religion or gender began to erode.

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<sup>277</sup> Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 72.

<sup>278</sup> Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities*, 124.

<sup>279</sup> Karen Anderson, *War Time Women*, 174.

Post World War II women viewed work in many different ways. Some viewed work merely as a temporary means to an end; to pay off debts or to purchase the many amenities offered by the growing economy; after which they would return to the home. Other women wanted more out of life. Work filled a void in their lives that housework and motherhood could not satisfy. More important than monetary reasons, work was the means of establishing their identity and their status in the social structure. They grasped for opportunities to develop their talents, to be active agents in their lives, and for the freedom to express themselves. The desire to take control of their work life and working conditions were deeply embedded in these working women's psyche, and they expected equitable treatment from the business world. They believed that family life and wage work were compatible.

Thus, the study of three groups of women workers; factory workers, realtors, and corporate workers, demonstrates the changing nature and ideology of women's work, and the shift in the changing social order and the changing social attitudes toward working women. Female rebellion against the injustice and the inequality of the double standard they faced in the post war period emerged during this era, decades before the feminist social movements and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that addressed these issues.

In the 1940s the Magnesium Maggies worked on equal terms with men in the factory system. Women worked in previously male dominated positions in the chlorine plant, as forklift operators and jeep drivers, over molten vats of magnesium, as chemists and machinists. Due to the War Labor Board's dictate,

they received the same rate of pay as men who performed the same work.

Women performed the work as well or better than men, while at the same time they carried out their dual duties of homemakers; juggling housework, child care and social obligations with their factory work. They demonstrated that they could balance family and work. They were able to approach and solve problems on their own without male input. These women workers transcended the sexual division of labor and were a catalyst that created the stimulus for women's potential to create careers on equal terms with men.

The seeds that were sown some seventy years ago would blossom into a movement that would shake the foundation of American social institutions as a new breed of Rosies, some twenty years later would cross over the sexual division of labor and enter the world of industry and business. The venture into the work place by the "Maggies," the Rosies," and the "Wandas" of the Second World War were the seedlings of the coming thrust for equality for the American female, which would blossom and grow into a second wave movement for women's rights.

After World War II, office work was one of the growing fields of work for women. Many women sought employment within a corporate structure. In the world of the corporate structure, women were judged collectively, not as individuals. Because women were child bearers, management viewed them as temporary workers whose work life would be interrupted when they had children. Management did not wish to invest in expensive administrative training programs for women, because they believed that after training women would leave before



they became productive. They could not justify the cost. Therefore, custom and prejudice in the corporate structure penalized women and limited them to entry level positions, such as clerks, typists, steno, and telephone operators whose positions could be easily filled when they resigned. However, career-minded women who chose work in the corporate structure, and viewed it as the venue to pursue their ambitions, refused to be bound by this rationale.

Women transcended sexual discrimination in the corporate work place by utilizing all the tools at their disposal to obtain their goals. Their major allies in combating discriminatory practices in the workplace were legislation designed to protect women, unionization, and their inherent drive to succeed. These women worked harder and smarter to prove their capabilities. Education, while not required, was a powerful tool in the struggle against the marginality imposed by corporate management. Advancing technology dictated that they educate themselves and learn every aspect of the job they aspired to in order to excel. This was mostly done on their own time and at their own expense. Women worked harder and smarter to prove they were equal to the tasks and could be the best at the tasks they performed. As a result, these women became engineers, headed departments with males under their supervision, became cable splicer foremen and test board men, climbed poles, installed and repaired equipment, and became vice presidents of entire divisions and presidents of companies.

The philosophy of corporate management in the 1950s toward women working in men's occupations is demonstrated by the treatment of Agnes Cote

and Joanne Pattini-Molen. Both women capably performed men's duties, but management denied them both the title and the compensation. Cote's statement that "that's just the way things were," in the 1950s, highlights the male dominated patriarchal hierarchy of the period that placed women workers who held male positions in a secondary, subordinate position. Women were paid less for doing the same job as a man. Thus, the wage for women working in male positions was maintained by gender roles. It was not until the advent of the Equal Pay Bill of 1963 that women were justly compensated for their labor.

Higher education for middle class women of this era was deemed unnecessary. A high school diploma was sufficient for women's station in life. Young women were viewed as temporary workers who would work only until marriage and then leave the labor force. Education would only be needed to fall back on in event that the husband died. Elite women of the era were privileged to attend prestigious colleges to fill the gap only until they found a suitable husband for marriage.

Nor was higher education required for the women entrepreneurs in real estate in the 1950s and 1960s. Discrimination in hiring was not a factor. The ability to successfully pass an examination given by the state earned a license to practice real estate. Women realtors faced two challenges; to gain a voice in the board that governed them, and to gain respect as legitimate businesswomen. At one juncture, they were voiceless dues paying members of the Greater Las Vegas Board of Realtors. However they demonstrated women's potential to elevate themselves from these secondary, marginal roles and propelled

themselves to positions of power. Once viewed as “dabblers” in real estate, through their hard work and ingenuity, they became successful in an industry once dominated by men. The women in this study were mainly self-taught, but they created surroundings that were conducive for networking and learning from each other. Real Estate was gender blind; women received the same pay as men; and they were equal with men as they performed the same service as men. Women in real estate had no need for special protective legislation or legislation regulating women’s work. These self-employed women worked on their own terms and worked as long as necessary to complete the job. They not only found time for work and home, they took part in many community activities in order to give back to a community they helped to build.

These working women did not try to be “men.” According to Jessie Emmett, once one entered a man’s world, women should not change their traits, but they needed to enhance and develop their traits. Women could be successful by being themselves.<sup>280</sup> They demonstrated that life and labor in the home was as valuable as in the workplace, and proved that a career and home life were compatible. They were able to successfully blend the two worlds.

The interviews of the women of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s elucidate a picture of women’s emerging claims to full economic rights in the marketplace, and the right to be recognized as legitimate businesswomen. It is apparent that a sexual division of labor existed throughout every facet of the labor market. The interviews expose the social, economic and political structures that supported women’s dependent and subordinate position and emphasized the need to

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<sup>280</sup> Emmett, interview.

restructure those systems. Women were in a battle to achieve equality; economic, social, and political. They were certain that “they could make things happen” and it was “their turn.”

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