



AT THE *Sands*

The Casino That Shaped Classic Las Vegas, Brought
the Rat Pack Together, and Went Out With a Bang

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Fools Rush In

The gambler was in the air, coming back to Las Vegas.

The newspapers called him a publisher and café owner. The gossip columnists called him only by his name, which in Hollywood was enough. But his friends—and his enemies—knew him for what he really was. A gambler.

Billy Wilkerson couldn't remember a time when he wasn't gambling. His dad, Big Dick Wilkerson, was a legendary gambler in his native Tennessee. In 1902, the elder Wilkerson won the rights to bottle Coca Cola across the South in a poker game. He flipped that concession for a movie theater, which he sold for \$4,000, which he promptly lost in another poker game. Big Dick, unsurprisingly, died penniless. Wilkerson had to drop out of medical school, thwarting his dreams of becoming a doctor, which had replaced his earlier dream of becoming a priest.

Wilkerson the younger was already, by this time, a confirmed, if not degenerate, gambler. Betting on ball games, card games, horses—it was Wilkerson's greatest pleasure and only real escape. Gambling also gave him a very real lifeline after his father died. A friend from medical school won a New Jersey movie theater, thanks to a World Series bet, and asked Wilkerson to manage it in exchange for half of the profits.

That break, in 1916, led to a series of jobs in and around New York's film industry (and a stint running a speakeasy) before, in 1929, Wilkerson bought a share of a Manhattan-based film trade paper. Hoping to hit a big score to finance a daily version of the paper in California, Wilkerson chose to play the markets—on October 29, 1929. Cleaned out completely, he did not give up on his dream. After relocating to California, he published the first edition of the *Hollywood*

Daily Reporter less than a year later.

This was the life of a gambler: from the top to the bottom and back again, all on the flip of a card or a horse's gallop.

Hollywood, when you thought about it, was a big poker table: A nice bankroll might get you in the game, some skill could keep you there, but it almost always came down to luck. What Hollywood sold — fame, wealth, power — could only be purchased with the currency of luck. That was just as true for a studio boss as it was for an aspiring starlet. Or a publisher.

As he looked out the window of his chartered airplane—he could still travel in style, even with five alimonies—Wilkerson thought about luck. Lately, most of it had been bad. Four hundred dollars a month, Vivian had stuck him for. Bad luck, but at least Bautzer spared him a trial with that settlement.

Then there was good luck. Like that January morning when he'd walked down to the Top Hat Café for a Coke (He loved his Cokes. Sometimes twenty a day). Then she walked in—the most sensual, innocent girl he'd ever seen, and he'd seen plenty. She was one of a bunch of kids from Hollywood High School across the street, cutting class and, like Wilkerson, drinking Cokes.

“Who's that?” he asked the manager.

“Her name's Judy, Mr. Wilkerson.”

“Can you make an introduction?”

The manager went over and, after some hesitation, walked Wilkerson down the counter.

“How would you like to be in pictures?” the 46-year-old publisher asked the teenager.

“I don't know,” Judy said coyly. “I'll have to ask my mother.” Wilkerson gave her his card.

A few days later, mother and daughter walked into the *Hollywood Reporter* office, just down the block from the Top Hat. An introduction to talent agent Zeppo Marx, a word to director Mervyn LeRoy, who signed the 16-year-old to a contract, and Judy, now Lana Turner, was on her way to stardom. Not that she forgot Wilkerson or vice versa; he was the best man at her third wedding eleven years after that fateful afternoon at the Top Hat.

Some said it was a real-life Cinderella story, but Wilkerson knew it was just luck. Maybe Judy decides to stay in class that day. Maybe he's more interested in his racing form and doesn't look up at just that moment.

Luck.

Wilkerson had enough of it to make him a man to be reckoned with, which gave him entrée into private poker games, like the one at MGM production head Irving Thalberg's Santa Monica mansion, in which players could win or lose tens of thousands of dollars. It also gave him a view into what made Hollywood tick. Something, he was convinced, was missing from the town: real glamor.

And, if he was honest, Wilkerson didn't want to just be the ink-stained publisher cataloging Hollywood's deeds and silencing, for his friends, its misdeeds. He wanted to be the one throwing the party, making the connections. And what better way to do that than by opening a restaurant?

He started with Vendome, a lunch joint, but really hit his stride with the Café Trocadero, a slice of Parisian style that opened on the Sunset Strip in 1934. Thanks to publicity from the *Reporter*, the Troc became *the* place to be seen in Hollywood. Tuxedoed and evening-gowned film stars danced and gossiped, while the general public came, in hopes of seeing a slice of the cinema and maybe, just maybe, being discovered. If it could happen at a soda fountain, why not at the Troc? Sunday night "Amateur Hour" launched more than a few stars, including Phil Silvers, Jackie Gleason, and Judy Garland.

Luck.

Wilkerson chased luck in the Saturday night poker game in the Trocadero's back room. Only the biggest names were invited, and they played for only the highest stakes. Sometimes luck was with him, sometimes it wasn't. Wilkerson sold the Trocadero in 1937 after having remodeled it three times in as many years, but extracted from the new owner the concession that he and his family would be able to dine at the Trocadero for free in perpetuity.

Next was Ciro's, another nightclub, and the LaRue, a restaurant that, within weeks of its 1944 opening, became a Tinseltown institution and nationally famous. *Time* magazine ran a story on the restaurant in which its owner noted that LaRue, which had cost \$44,000 to open, had earned more than \$100,000 over its first ten weeks.

The money Wilkerson earned that wasn't spent on alimony (though he only had four ex-wives by this point) fueled his gambling addiction. By the fall of 1944, he was out nearly a million dollars for the year. His good friend, Twenty Century Fox production head Joseph Schenk, sat him down for a man-to-man talk.

“If you can’t stop,” he advised, “get on the other side of the table. Build a casino.”

Wilkerson had a vision of doing for gambling in Nevada what he had done for nightlife on the Sunset Strip. The resort he imagined, the Flamingo, would be a black tie, glamor-filled casino that would put the existing hotels of Highway 91, that stretch of roadway south of Las Vegas that wasn’t yet called the Strip, to shame, the way the Trocadero had eclipsed the roadhouses of Sunset.

Building a casino was expensive, and Wilkerson’s hopes of boosting his capital at the craps tables of Las Vegas failed. So he turned to backers who brought an infusion of capital—and a new partner, Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. Over the next two years, Siegel pushed him out of the Flamingo. When it opened, on December 26, 1946, the “sportsman” had even crossed Wilkerson’s name off the matchbooks. Wilkerson had been dealing with gamblers, racketeers, and tough guys since his speakeasy days, but no one he’d done business with matched Siegel’s temper. Even Siegel’s murder in June 1947 couldn’t persuade him to return to the Flamingo.

But now, three years later, Wilkerson couldn’t help but return to Las Vegas for a second chance. He had already sold his interest in LaRue and was ready to open a Las Vegas version of the restaurant with Nola Hahn, a notorious Los Angeles gambling operator and longtime friend. They both thought it was a can’t-miss opportunity. LaRue was already famous worldwide, and there wasn’t anything like it in Las Vegas. They wouldn’t corner the market on a high-class dinner/late night supper place in town—they would create it.

As the plane began its descent, Wilkerson looked forward to closing the deal that would let him build a Mojave outpost of Hollywood’s Parisian chic. But his fingers were itching at the thought of the city’s craps tables.

Las Vegas in 1950 was already a far cry from Las Vegas in 1944, when Wilkerson had first envisioned the Flamingo. Only six years had passed, but much had changed. Maybe the city hadn’t become a little piece of Paris in the desert, but it had grown. With the opening of Wilbur Clark’s Desert Inn that spring, Highway 91 had come into its own. Joining the El Rancho Vegas and Last Frontier, which had

preceded the Flamingo, and the unpretentious Thunderbird, which opened in 1948, the Desert Inn was the brainchild of Clark, a well-traveled casino dealer and operator who usually had a smile on his face.

The amiable Clark was perfectly cast as the Desert Inn's public face. The casino, though, was actually run by Moe Dalitz who, with his associates in Cleveland's Mayfield Road Gang, had thrived as bootleggers during Prohibition before diversifying into a range of quasi-legal and flat-out illegal hustles. The Desert Inn would become, for Dalitz and those in his orbit, a chance at middle-aged respectability, a chance for him and his partners to remake themselves as builders, philanthropists, and even pillars of the small community of Las Vegas. For now, though, that was in the future. All that mattered was that this fusion of back-east chutzpah and out-west hospitality was prospering. Which itself made people take notice.

Las Vegas itself had just a shade under 25,000 people, a far cry from the 8,422 who had called it home a decade earlier. But it still retained the feel of a small town. The leading item of *Fabulous Las Vegas*, the city's fledgling entertainment magazine, might be a successful campaign by the local Red Cross or a casino cashier's Florida vacation. Flipping through the pages, you got the feeling that everyone in town was personal friends—but also the distinct impression that anyone bringing to the small town their own gifts, including that most precious of gifts, money, would quickly become a friend as well.

And there was, for a man like Wilkerson, still plenty of work to be done in rough-and-tumble Las Vegas. Sure, you might see Liberace at the Last Frontier or Peggy Lee at the Thunderbird, but more often than not it was lesser-known acts, like singer Rosalind Courtright at the Desert Inn, comedian Hank Henry at the Golden Slipper (soon to be renamed the Silver Slipper) or signing comedian Mary McCarty at the El Rancho Vegas. Food tended to be filling rather than delectable. There was no place anyone with class wouldn't be a little embarrassed to be seen. Gambling was one thing—you'd go anywhere for that, it was understood—but for a real night out, Las Vegas was sorely lacking.

Just like Hollywood had been. Until Wilkerson had changed it. Now there were a half-dozen quality joints in Los Angeles.

I should know, Wilkerson thought ruefully. I used to own most of them.

Nola Hahn had sat across the table from Billy Wilkerson more times than he could count, both playing poker and doing business. He'd bought the Trocadero from him over a decade before, and the bath he'd ended up taking on that one hadn't made him like Billy any less. But it did make him somewhat more cautious than usual.

"This place?" Hahn asked Wilkerson, not believing his eyes. "We're supposed to make this place into LaRue?"

"This place," Wilkerson reassured him.

"But...look at it." There wasn't much to look at. A card table, a dice table, a few slot machines. Sawdust on the floor. This wasn't even on the level of the Fremont Street clubs, and they would have to go to finishing school to qualify as dives.

"With enough money and Tom's help, we can make this place look like a carbon copy of LaRue." This was Tom Douglas, Wilkerson's interior designer of choice, who had worked his magic in his Hollywood clubs and, while he was still in charge, the Flamingo. "Some paint, some silk drapes—they'll think they're back on the Sunset Strip."

Wilkerson convinced Hahn they could make a go of the place. They bought the dilapidated Kit Carson club and started renovating, but brought in two other partners to spread the risk. They were Steve Pappas, a 34 year-old oilman from Missouri by way of Texas, and Bill Good, owner of Wofford Press in Los Angeles. They each had multiple interests; Pappas, for example, owned a bowling alley in Joplin, Missouri.

As opening day got closer, Wilkerson wanted less to do with LaRue Las Vegas. With perpetual money problems because of his gambling, he was realizing that, even with Ben Siegel dead and buried, Las Vegas was not a good place for him. Wilkerson focused solely on the restaurant, while Hahn took point on the casino side. They weren't looking to compete with the Flamingo or Last Frontier—just offer a few good games for the right clientele.

Hahn found himself pulled away from Las Vegas as well. His 9-year-old son and 13-year-old daughter were suddenly stricken with polio. Unable to breathe without artificial respiration, they were fighting for their lives in a Los Angeles hospital. Hahn still commuted to Las Vegas, supervising the renovation and hiring the casino staff.

Meanwhile, architect Stanley Harris and designer Douglas succeeded at turning the sawdust joint into a model of Parisian sophistication. After four months, LaRue was ready to open. The décor, naturally, was as completely and authentically French as was possible

in Nevada. Shortly before the New Year, Wilkerson, Hahn, Good, and Pappas were ready to open the doors. Las Vegas was finally going to get a taste of France.

With any luck, the town would love it.

LaRue officially opened on Saturday, December 23. This was not the best time to open.

Still, LaRue was as authentically French as Wilkerson had hoped. The two doormen were dressed in uniforms that were duplicates of those worn by the *gendarmes*, down to the buttons.

“Where’d you get the idea for those?” a reporter interrupted Wilkerson as he was explaining about the doormen, gesturing at a nearby cocktail waitress. Their uniforms, truth to be told, showed a little more skin than was usual in Las Vegas.

As a strolling band of five troubadours serenaded the diners, Wilkerson looked over the restaurant. Tom Douglas hadn’t let him down: The place looked as fine as anything he had seen in Paris. The chefs had been imported directly from France. And the casino, from the croupiers’ uniforms to the selection of games, rivaled Monte Carlo.

And the place was packed—with starstruck locals, though, not well-off Angelenos. “It’s the most beautiful restaurant on earth,” Wilkerson heard a Las Vegas gush.

But once the locals figured out that they weren’t going to be dining next to Gregory Peck or Lana Turner, they stopped coming. Within three weeks, Wilkerson and Hahn instituted conflicting changes intended to lure diners back. On one hand, they offered a \$3 dinner. That wasn’t exactly cheap—the El Rancho Vegas had its famous \$1 all-you-can-eat buffet, and the Silver Slipper offered a five-course meal for \$2.50—but it was approachable for residents who might otherwise be intimidated by French cuisine. On the other, they doubled down on the French atmosphere. Wilkerson brought in Jack Scholl and the Gypsies, whose European pedigree was sealed by the Magyar/Gallic piano and accordion stylings of the Hungarian-born Paul Gardos. Nola Han added *chemin de fer* in the casino. A player-banked version of baccarat popular in French casinos, it was a bit of a novelty in Las Vegas, the game made all the more exotic because of the set of mother-of-pearl gaming chips Hahn had imported from Europe at a price of \$10,000.

Perhaps because of these mixed signals, LaRue struggled. Good, cheap food could be had at so many places in town, and gambling was everywhere. Getting dressed up to go out to eat exquisitely prepared French food just didn't have much appeal.

Wilkerson was around less and less. Partly it was LaRue's moribund performance, partly his continued losses at the tables, but partly it was because, even when he was winning, he didn't want to be away from Los Angeles. He started wooing Beatrice "Tichi" Noble, his maid's daughter. It didn't matter that he was 61 and she was 25. He wasn't lucky in Las Vegas...maybe he would be lucky in love. He was. They married in February.

The Saturday before he tied the knot with Tichi, Wilkerson formally sold his interest in LaRue to Steve Pappas, who, with Hahn, served as on-the-ground host and manager for the restaurant and casino, respectively.

Pappas introduced some more changes. LaRue now advertised "superb food at sensible prices" in a place "where continental charm prevails." By mid-March the mononymous Emile had replaced Wilkerson's hand-picked maitre 'd, Richard Hubert. And Jack Scholl's Gypsy Ensemble was replaced by the band of Sunset Strip veteran Frankie Ortega, who played instrumental versions of popular songs.

None of this was enough to change LaRue's luck. The atmosphere was sophisticated, the food second-to-none, and the tables empty. In April, a new maitre 'd, Johnny Saranto, arrived. He was renowned for his table-side prepared Roquefort dressing, famous for its "suspicion" of garlic.

Pappas and Hahn, unfortunately, couldn't get even a suspicion of profits. Shortly after hiring Saranto, they were no longer buying advertising. As Wilbur Clark and Moe Dalitz toasted the one-year anniversary of the Desert Inn, LaRue's owners simply hoped to last another week. Things looked grim.

But this was Las Vegas, where luck gives anyone hope.

It's a misconception, maybe from watching too many movies, that the last bet is climactic. We're conditioned to accept a certain pace to a desperate gamble, with stakes escalating in a climactic showdown. A royal flush beats aces full.

That's not how it usually ends up. Gamblers just keep plugging away until their bankroll is depleted. It might be that final chip, swept by the dealer when you bust after hitting a 13, or those last few cents played in a slot machine. It's the sound of a penny dropping.

Thus it ended with LaRue. Pappas and Hahn kept up the good fight as long as they could. By May, it was obvious that LaRue was not catching on with locals or visitors. When Hahn couldn't make payroll and Pappas and Good were no longer willing to throw good money after bad, it ended.

A few weeks later, the partners were liquidating the fixtures. Even the walk-in refrigerator. "Like new," the classified ad read. "Used only six months. See at LaRue restaurant, on the Strip." Another Las Vegas dream, ended.

Billy Wilkerson found something more fulfilling than a lucky streak that October, when Tichi gave birth to a baby boy. In his sixties, Wilkerson knew for the first time the joys of fatherhood. Holding Willie junior in his arms for the first time did something that more bad beats than anyone could count, five divorces, and a death threat from Ben Siegel could not. The gambler stopped gambling, cold turkey. He wasn't counting on luck anymore. He just wanted to be happy.

Nola Hahn didn't have such a happy ending. He was never quite able to get back on his feet after washing out with LaRue. In 1954, he bought a share of the Rosarita Beach Hotel, a seaside resort not too far south of Tijuana. His wife Ruth died two years later.

The following year, he drove back up to Los Angeles, checked into the Beverly Hilton Hotel, and overdosed on barbiturates. A maid discovered his body, sprawled across the bed, next to a sheet of paper with only three words.

"Nobody to blame."

It was the stoicism of the true gambler who knew that the wheel of fortune never stopped spinning. Life had given him money, success, love, then taken it away. These things happened—nobody to blame. And it might have been the epitaph for LaRue's as well. Wilkerson and Hahn thought that visitors to Las Vegas—and locals too, for that matter—were starved for sophistication, for elegance.

They were wrong. People coming to Las Vegas in 1950 didn't want a place to see and be seen. They wanted a place to relax, a place that felt like home, if they treated you like a winner at home.

Winner might be a loaded term. Las Vegas, as has been said, isn't

built on winners. The whole concept of a gambling casino is predicated on the fact that patrons will lose money playing negative expectation games. Casinos today report their “win,” which is, more accurately, the money lost by gamblers. Higher win is seen as a good thing, boosting company profits and bringing money into state tax coffers. The less successful visitors are, the better Las Vegas does. So in Las Vegas, a real winner isn’t someone who bets big and beats the house; instead, it is someone who is successful enough that they can afford to brush off big losses.

So it might be fitting that a big winner would eventually get involved with the now-shuttered LaRue, open a hotel over its bones that would give not just Las Vegas, but America a place where they could, if only for the weekend, feel like winners.