



CHAPTER ONE
OASIS



Deserts have long been the refuge of exiles. For time immemorial outcasts were banished to their harsh, barren terrain.

Deserts have been the birthplace of revelation. Dwelling in isolation among the daunting distances imposed by a parched, almost endless landscape, jagged peaks and a beautiful but unforgiving sky, people have drawn out of themselves a link to spiritual salvation.

And so it was for millennia. But in 20th-century America, a desert was given a new definition, never before conceived or realized, and it was — Las Vegas!

Yet, the area that is now known as Las Vegas wasn't always Las Vegas, and it wasn't always desert. Between 10 to 15 thousand years ago southern Nevada was lush. Glaciers flowed from snowcapped mountains, vivid blue lakes and fresh running streams were abundant. Mammoths, native horses, giant buffalo and huge, tank-like ground sloths were among the wild creatures roaming the region's green valleys.

They named this gentle valley in the middle of the burning desert Las Vegas, Spanish for the meadows.



Many successive ancient cultures populated the Las Vegas Valley
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There were people, too. Nomadic hunters and gatherers, probably part of a river of humanity that had flowed across the land bridge connecting the tip of North America to Siberia and down through the generations into what would one day become present day Las Vegas. Based on finds, such as the ancient residue of campfires, charred animal bones and stone tools, some archeologists believe that nomads, thought to be the Clovis people, camped at Tule Springs just two miles west of modern Fremont Street about 11,000 years ago.

Beginning about 9,000 years ago, the once lush valleys and forests in what is now southern Nevada grew arid and barren. Lizards darted and snakes slithered. The sun's fierce heat baked the earth hard and dry. Conditions were less hospitable to life. The large, lumbering beasts had gone, but human foragers still wandered the territory.

Long before it became an entertainment mecca, a fountain of wealth, or America's playground, Las Vegas distinguished itself from its barren surroundings. Ancient people who hunted and foraged in the hot deserts would establish camps in the hospitable valley where water, once trapped in the geological formations beneath the earth's sun-baked crust, rose to the surface through artesian springs.

Many successive ancient cultures populated the Las Vegas Valley. In addition to the Clovis people, there were the Lake Mojave people who lived in the area between 10,000 and 7,500 years ago. The Pinto Basin culture evolved from the Lake Mojave people as the area became more arid. The Gypsum culture followed and remained until about 1,500 years ago. Archeologists have found stone weapons and tools, including leaf-shaped points and millstones for grinding seeds, made by the Gypsum culture. The Gypsum also left puzzlingly poignant petroglyphs carved into sandstone cliffs and canyon walls. While some archeologists debate the meaning and purpose of the carved pictures and designs, the petroglyphs do document some facts of these ancient's lives, such as the progression

from spears to bows and arrows as a more efficient method of hunting.

The Basketmaker hunters are named for the tightly woven baskets that have been found in archeological digs. Pit-houses discovered in the area suggest these nomads, ancestors of the Paiute tribe of Native Americans, whose descendents still inhabit the Las Vegas Valley, were in the region between 300 B.C. and A.D. 700.

The Virgin Anasazi appeared in the area about 1,500 years ago. Related in a distant way to the more complex culture of the Anasazi in the Four Corners region, they built small, single story pueblos from adobe. Unlike the hunter-gatherers that had come before, the Virgin Anasazi also practiced agriculture, raising corn, beans and squash. The Virgin Anasazi lived in the Las Vegas Valley and the Muddy and



Baskets woven by the Southern Paiutes, who came to the area sometime after A.D. 1200, are today prized by collectors.
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Virgin River valleys until about the 12th century when for reasons not entirely clear, they abandoned the area and left it exclusively to the ancestors of the Southern Paiutes.

The Southern Paiutes came to the area sometime after A.D. 1200. They comprised 16 bands, each an independent economic cluster made up of several camps of families. Although they engaged in some agriculture, the Paiutes were primarily hunters and gatherers, roaming their vast territory, which included southern Nevada, southeastern California, southwestern Utah and northwestern Arizona, according to the natural cycle of ripening plants. They also trapped and hunted game, including rabbits, wood rats, lizards, desert tortoises, birds and occasionally bighorn sheep and deer. The Southern Paiutes made a variety of baskets. Originally created for use in the preparation, storage and transportation of food, today the baskets are viewed as a symbol of Paiute culture and are prized by collectors.

Loosely governed, the Southern Paiutes had no central or political authority. The bands were relatively

separate economic entities comprising several camps of families. Most bands did have a head man, or pakwinavi, "big talker," but his power was more advisory than real.

The Las Vegas band, known as the Nipakanticimi, meaning "people of Charleston Peak," had camps at Las Vegas, Indian Springs, Ash Meadows and Cottonwood Island on the Colorado River. They occupied the largest geographical area of all the Paiute bands.



Petroglyphs found in the Las Vegas area document various aspects of the lives of ancient peoples.
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