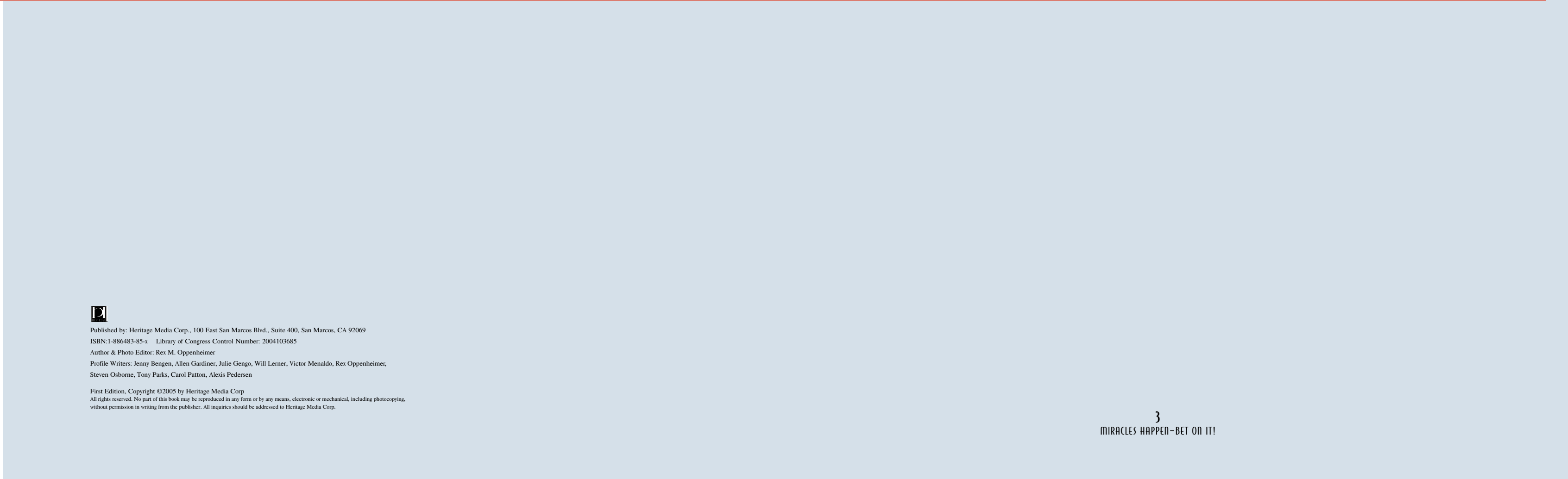
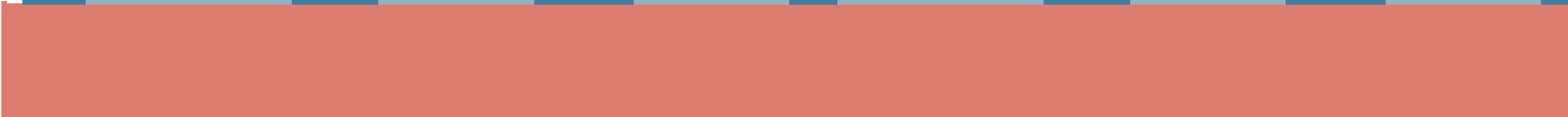


MIRACLES HAPPEN

YOU CAN BET ON IT!

THE STORY OF LAS VEGAS

Author & Photo Editor
Rex M. Oppenheimer



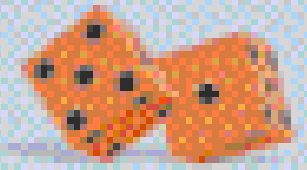
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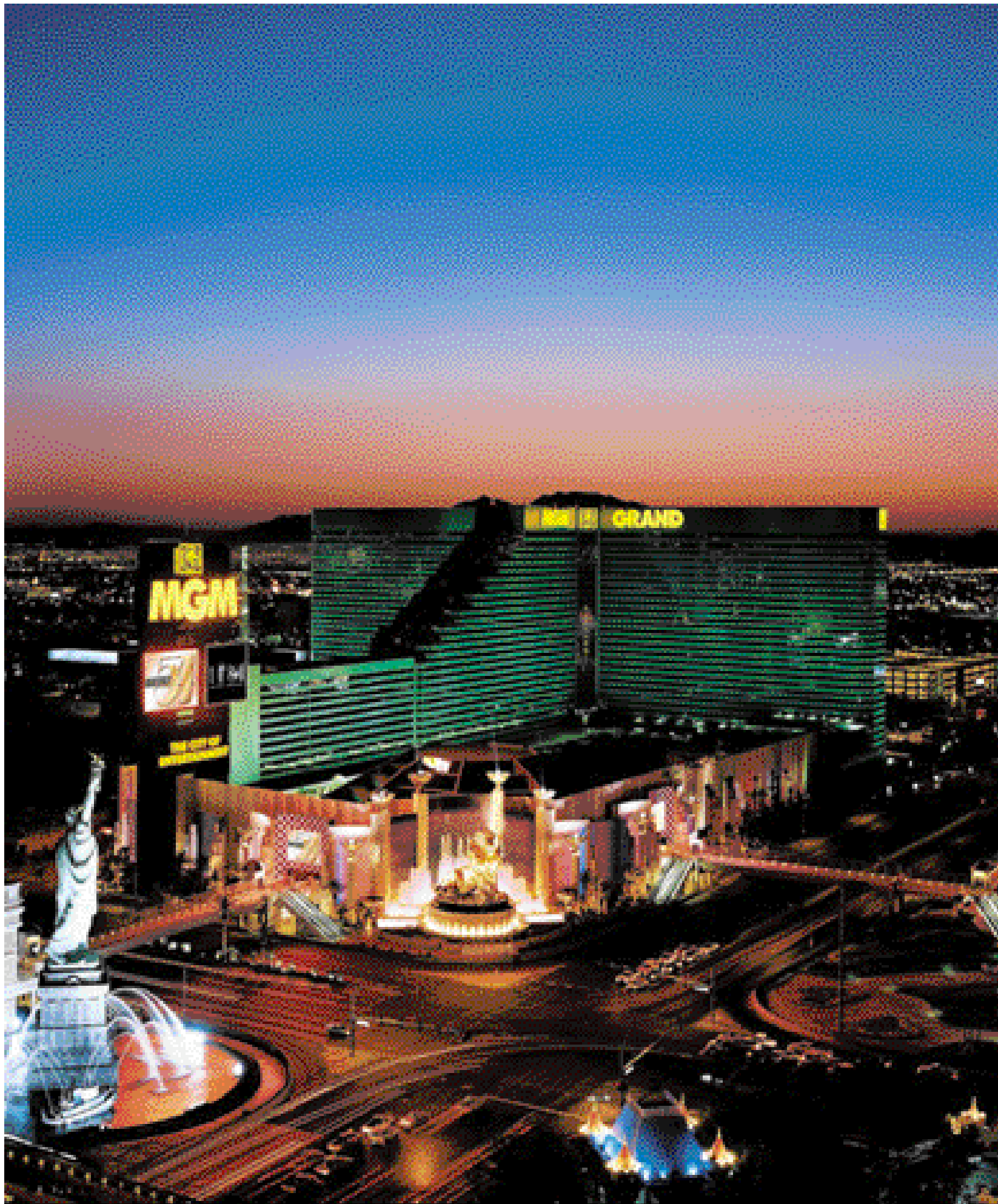
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The MGM Grand, MGM MIRAGE

INTRODUCTION

When astronauts orbiting through the dark reaches of space gaze homeward to Planet Earth, the first signs of life they report seeing are the amazing lights of Las Vegas. These far-reaching beacons, with their beckoning sparkle and promise of excitement and good fortune, reportedly draw 35 to 50 million visitors to the city every year — making it the world's top tourist attraction.

More people are also making Las Vegas their home. Long America's fastest-growing metropolitan area, between 1950 and 2000 Clark County, Nevada, grew more than 25 times in size, its population increasing from 48,000 to 1,375,765. How did this “miserable, dinky little oasis town,” as Meyer Lansky called it, become what some reporters are describing as a paradigm for success in the 21st century?

Some observers say it's no mystery — gambling is the fuel that sent this rocket to the moon. Others praise the city's metamorphosis from the home of gangland vice to the world's greatest showplace for mainstream entertainment. Some commentators tout the rise of nongaming revenues, the broadening variety of the city's expanding business base, and its increasing sense of community and normalization. Other analysts have argued that the primary force behind the city's astronomical ascendancy is crime.

These critics assert that nefarious powers from all points on the globe use the city to acquire and launder ill-gotten gains. They claim that besides gaming, premier entertainment and plain old opportunity, it is drug money in the billions, political payoffs and massive corruption that have helped turn this artificial paradise in the middle of nowhere into the world's most popular destination.

Crime is part of every city's story. Las Vegas is no exception, and the city has specialized in activities that most other communities have deemed, or used to consider, immoral, offensive or sinful — gambling, drinking, faithlessness and unbridled hedonism. Yet, Las Vegas' brand of recreation reportedly takes in six times more revenue than all spectator sports and other forms of entertainment in the United States combined.

Rather than gambling, gangsters, entertainment or enterprise, perhaps the one element most responsible for the phenomenon known as Las Vegas is the very thing people come to Las Vegas to find — luck.

For many years Las Vegas skidded along, just another town seeking to survive far from the centers of commerce and sophistication. The city was lucky and it didn't even realize it. It benefited from its geographical situation and natural resources. Las Vegas began as an oasis that offered refreshment and hope in the middle of a burning

desert. It was lucky when good people came, such as the early Mormon settlers and ranchers who helped make it hospitable to settlement. It was lucky when the railroad came, and it was lucky when federal dollars flowed in and buoyed the city through the Great Depression upon a reservoir of wealth as big as Lake Mead, which was created by Hoover Dam, the largest of the government projects.

Las Vegas was lucky when the bad guys came. The mobsters turned it into a goldmine unlike any other — one that attracted prospectors who filled it up with gold. People brought the gold and the gold brought people.

They come to Las Vegas for a chance. Pundits have proclaimed that many come to Las Vegas to escape a dark past, to make a fresh start or a new beginning. Today, many individuals come seeking the city's seemingly limitless opportunities, not to hit a jackpot but to build a good life.

Yet, what people have historically sought in Las Vegas is a release from care, the end of woe, the wide-open gates of endless paradise. They came to find luck and drink at the fount of transformation. They sought its power to reverse an aberrant fate, right past wrongs and wipe the slate clean. They hoped luck would pour forth like those artesian springs on the desert, the fountains of destiny that marked Las Vegas and began its journey through history.

It was an ironic journey. For while people came to characterize Las Vegas as Sin City, but what this caldron of desire and desperation actually became was a cathedral. A house of worship where the walls, floor, ceiling and very essence are made out of the object of worship — luck.

The rich, the poor, the young, the old, a multitude of races and nationalities, all come to worship at the altar of luck. They bring their offerings of bright, shiny gold, and they create opportunity. In Las Vegas, the streets are paved with it.