

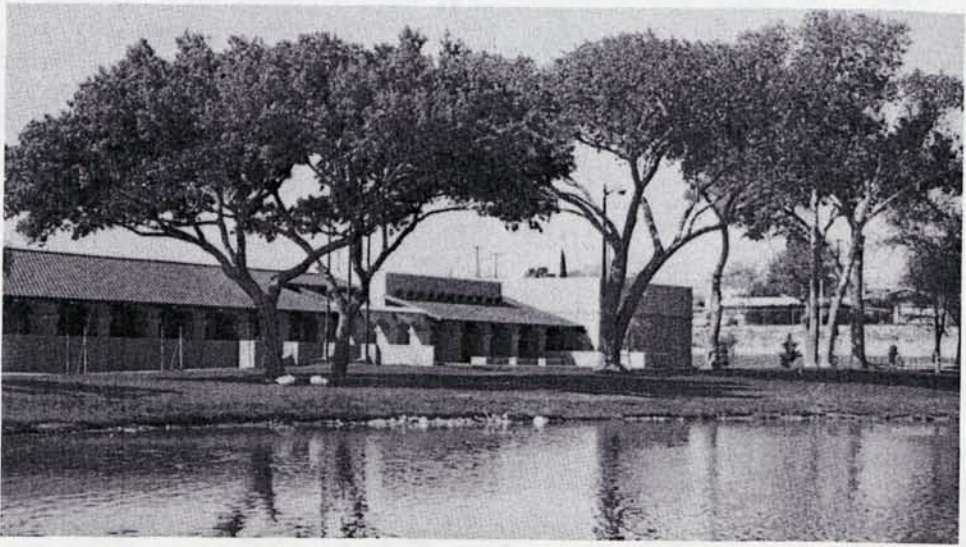
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Lorenzi Park: A Social, Cultural, and Service Center of Las Vegas

THE NEVADA STATE MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY building opened to the public on November 3, 1982. Located at Lorenzi Park in Las Vegas, the facility features four spacious galleries, and thousands of square feet of office, research, and work areas; it promises to be one of the most important cultural attractions in southern Nevada as well as in the state. The exhibits focus attention upon the biological, anthropological, and historical backgrounds of the immediate area. The State Museum and Historical Society staff members have expertise in those fields; several received their training at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, or have previously taught there.

The new institution is by no means the first cultural, artistic, or service organization to be located in Lorenzi Park. Purchased by the city of Las Vegas in 1965, the park has become the location of a number of agencies, including the Lorenzi Adaptive Center (for the handicapped), which is operated by the city's Department of Recreation and Leisure Activities. By 1982, the Nevada State Federation of Garden Clubs, the American Association of Retired People, the Las Vegas Art Museum, the Southern Nevada Association for the Handicapped, and other agencies and clubs were all located at Lorenzi, in addition to the

Research, text, and photo selection by David Millman of the staff of the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society, Las Vegas, with some assistance rendered by Gary Roberts, Editor of the *NHS Quarterly*. Grateful thanks are extended to Alice Rissman of the Architects' Wives League, who generously shared her clippings, notes, and photos dealing with Lorenzi Park.



Nevada State Museum and Historical Society, Las Vegas.



D.G. Lorenzi (right), founder of Lorenzi Resort in Las Vegas, and Lloyd St. John, its later developer. *(courtesy of St. John collection)*

regular park facilities, tennis and basketball courts, and jogging areas. In short, the park has gradually been transformed from its original recreational orientation under private ownership to a varied, multipurpose public center with more of a service and cultural focus; at the same time, however, the city has continued to develop and improve the site as a park for both children and adults.

The growth of Lorenzi Park along these lines is only the latest phase in its history. In a sense, the park has evolved in ways that to a limited extent reflect the maturation of the city of Las Vegas itself. Not even Mr. Lorenzi could have foreseen these developments.

David G. Lorenzi, a native of France, had mining and farming interests in several western states before arriving in Las Vegas in 1911. Trusting in the growth of the new community, he purchased eighty acres two miles from the railroad tracks as a potential site for agricultural pursuits.

The land was cleared, wells were dug, and everything from fruit trees to cantaloupes to alfalfa was successfully cultivated. An energetic entrepreneur, Lorenzi was not content with mere agricultural pursuits. In 1922 the farm was developed as a resort, and was equipped with a swimming pool and a band shell for outdoor concerts. A team of mules helped construct a lake, which today remains the largest artificial body of water in the city of Las Vegas. In 1926, the dome pavilion was built, and a commercial opening took place in May of that year.

Starting a tradition which would continue for many years, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce voted to celebrate July 4, 1926 at Lorenzi's resort. A local newspaper trumpeting Lorenzi Lake as "A Real Oasis in the Desert" wrote it was ". . . a good example of how the desert may be transformed into a thing of beauty by devoting time and painstaking care in the growing of vegetation and constructing adornments to add to nature's efforts."¹

Las Vegas welcomed its new resort at the July 4 celebration, which included the new dome pavilion, bathing beauties, fireworks, and a 4,000 foot parachute drop. The newspaper reported a thousand automobiles formed a solid procession on the road between Las Vegas and the resort. "Nothing approaching it had ever been seen in Las Vegas."²

By 1929, the resort comprised twin lakes covering twelve acres, a pool 90 by 140 feet, fireproof buildings and dressing rooms, an expanded pavilion which could hold 2000 people, and a restaurant. The leaders of the community continued to shower praise on Lorenzi and

¹ *Las Vegas Age*, June 12, 1926.

² *Ibid.*, July 10, 1926, 1:1-3.



Twin Lakes Resort (Lorenzi Park) at time of purchase by the city of Las Vegas, 1965. (courtesy of St. John collection)



Boating, fishing, and horseback riding were among the popular activities at Lorenzi Park. (Las Vegas News Bureau)

his work: "The name of Lorenzi is, in Las Vegas, a synonym for industry and accomplishment."³ "The resort is a tribute to the industry and ingenuity of its builder and owner, Mr. Lorenzi, as well as to the possibilities of Las Vegas."⁴ Lorenzi's good name was soon to suffer, however, and the resort was to know its share of controversies.

Only a few weeks after the Nevada Legislature legalized gambling in the spring of 1931, the new lessees of the resort applied for a gaming license.⁵ They were to become an integral part of the fight for a wide-open policy of freely granting gaming licenses. After the statewide law passed, the Las Vegas City Commission debated for weeks on a system of licensing. The cry of "monopoly" was raised by those (A.W. Ham and others) who opposed any policy of restricting licenses;⁶ however, the Commission decided to oppose the issuance of any *new* licenses for the time being.⁷

Nevada Attorney-General Gray Mashburn rendered an opinion that made Nevada's new gambling law "a local option measure"; it did not throw the state open to gambling, but merely permitted each locality to permit gambling if desired.⁸

The new management at Lorenzi's was denied a license to operate a crap game and filed suit against the city commission to force it to issue the permit. Charles L. Horsey, later a justice of the Nevada Supreme Court, was the attorney for the resort.⁹ The case was brought before the state Supreme Court at the end of May, 1931. The main issue of the trial was whether the city commission could have discretionary power in regulating gambling licenses.¹⁰

The *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, a powerful opinion-maker in the city, supported the commission in the suit. In an editorial entitled "A Wise Decision," issued after the city had denied the Lorenzi permit, it stated:

Glowing pictures were painted of the great hotel that will be reared at Lorenzi's resort if the gambling license is granted . . . guaranteeing to bring untold hundreds of thousands of dollars into this community if only granted their license. The Lorenzi group is attempting to force the issuance of their license, and the City is resisting that action.¹¹

³ *Ibid.*, July 2, 1929, 22:4-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, April 1, 1931, 1:5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1931, 1:1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1931, 1:3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, April 15, 1931, 1:6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, May 4, 1931, 2:2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, May 28, 1931, 1:1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1931, 8:1-2.

The case attracted statewide interest, and it was seen as the first test of the new gambling law. In July, the Nevada Supreme Court ruled against the Loferzi license application by a two to one vote. The decision upheld the right of the city to regulate and control gambling; it could grant licenses at its own discretion within the city limits. The city attorney, Frank Stevens, remarked, "It is a vital decision from the standpoint of the City of Las Vegas."¹²

An Associated Press report commented on the decision, remarking that it was the first time the court had dealt with the gambling issue since the new legislation. The report indicated the court supported the city because for the court, gaming was in the same class as liquor, that the "nature of gaming was a source of evil," and that the city would necessarily need to "exercise a wide discretion."¹³

During the court fight over licensing, an incident occurred at



Beauty queen contests were an ongoing part of the resort's activities. This is a 1961 version. (*Las Vegas News Bureau*)

¹² *Ibid.*, July 8, 1931, 1:8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1931, 4:4.

Lorenzi's which did not enhance its case. A large brewery was uncovered with 2,500 gallons of beer, located in the building used to house the ice manufacturing plant (the first privately-owned ice plant in Las Vegas). Lorenzi was arrested, but he claimed he had no knowledge of the brewery, having leased the resort some time ago. He remarked, "I've always made a strong effort to keep my place clear of liquor and have been successful up to now."¹⁴ Lorenzi was soon exonerated of the charges, because no evidence could be found to connect him to the alcohol.¹⁵

Having been granted the right to regulate gaming licenses, the City Commission now decided to grant Lorenzi's resort a permit. Roy Grimes paid \$200 in gold to the city, \$100 of which was to defray the city's cost in the supreme court suit.¹⁶ The Monte Carlo Casino opened at the resort in the east half of the dome pavilion, advertising dancing, a cabaret, dining, and free bus service to and from town.¹⁷ Legalized gambling at Lorenzi's did not last long; the Monte Carlo Casino failed to renew its license after only a month of operation.¹⁸

Throughout the thirties, the area continued to be the most popular and successful resort in Las Vegas. Possibly overenthusiastic newspaper articles reported that 2,500 Las Vegans attended the 1931 July 4 celebration.¹⁹ By 1934, the July 4 celebration was reported to have attracted 3,500 residents, and the resort now featured a race track and rodeo area to complement its other attractions.²⁰

Lorenzi, possibly tiring after his many years of hard work, moved to California in 1943. This attempt to remove himself from Las Vegas was not too successful, for eight months later he returned, remarking, "I couldn't stand it any longer away from Las Vegas and my friends. I guess I'm just one of those old desert rats that just can't be happy anywhere else."²¹

He returned in time to be able to view the next major phase of the resort's history. In 1947, a local realtor, Lloyd St. John, and his son Richard acquired the property. By then known as Twin Lakes Lodge, the site became an immensely popular resort area in the late 1940s and 1950s. The St. Johns dredged the lakes, stocked a trout pond, and in 1949 opened a forty-eight unit motel in the northwest corner of the

¹⁴ Ibid., May 20, 1931, 1:5.

¹⁵ Ibid., July 20, 1931, 3:7.

¹⁶ Ibid., July 16, 1931, 2:1.

¹⁷ Ibid., Sept. 5, 1931, 9:1-8.

¹⁸ Ibid., Oct. 7, 1931, 5:4.

¹⁹ Ibid., July 7, 1931, 6:2.

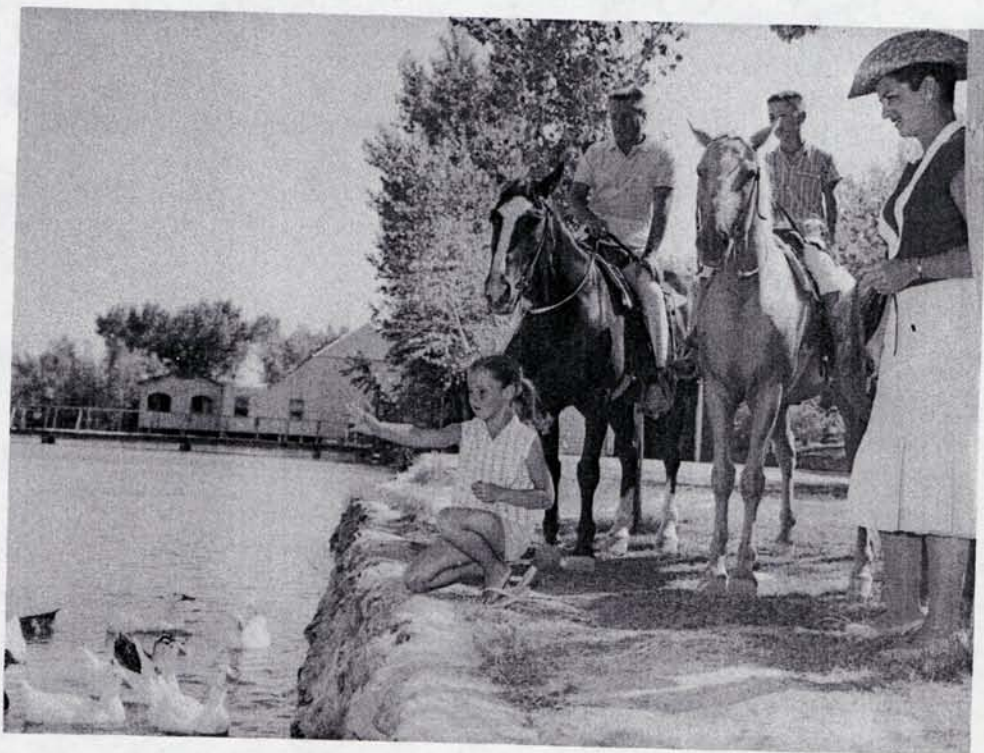
²⁰ Ibid., July 5, 1934, 6:6.

²¹ Ibid., March 8, 1944, 3:6.

park. Ties from the historic Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad were used in the construction of the motel buildings.²²

Twin Lakes Lodge was a complete dude ranch, and it capitalized on the thriving marriage and divorce business of Las Vegas. It offered something for nearly everyone; movie stars vacationed there, and Las Vegas children learned to swim in its pool. Corporations booked conventions at the lodge facilities, and there were rodeos, barbeques, and beauty contests. During the building of the Atomic Test Site in the early 1950s, the lodge was home to many scientists and their families.

In 1965, the city of Las Vegas purchased the property for \$750,000, and David Lorenzi's farm became a city park. The cottonwoods and willows planted by Lorenzi still decorate the grounds, and some of the motel buildings still exist, and provide housing for service agencies and club activities. To help preserve these buildings and to call attention to



Actor George Gobel and his family at Twin Lakes, late 1950s. (courtesy of St. John collection)

²² Lorenzi had sold the property to Thomas Sharp in 1940; Sharp had controlled it through an option for over two years. See *Ibid.*, June 29, 1940, 1:3.

their importance, the Architects' Wives League of Las Vegas has undertaken a plan to restore the structures, which have been ~~officially~~ designated as historical landmarks by the city. Dedication ceremonies were held on October 21, 1980, and the historical plaque installed by the Architects' Wives League emphasizes that the remaining buildings are "historically significant and emblematic of Old Las Vegas."²³

Another era in the history of Lorenzi Park opened with the funding of a new Nevada State Museum and Historical Society facility by the 1979 state legislature. This action was reaffirmed during the next legislative session in 1981, and construction commenced in the summer of that year. An agreement was reached with the city of Las Vegas for a ninety-nine year lease of a portion of the southwest corner of the park. The facility opened in late 1982 as a result of this cooperation between the city and the state, and it also serves as the first major cooperative effort between the staffs of the State Museum and the Historical Society.

But the presence of the museum, with its new research facilities and exhibition galleries, constitutes only one aspect of the park itself. After humble beginnings, and then many years as the major recreational center of the Las Vegas Valley, Lorenzi Park has truly emerged as a multi-purpose cultural, artistic, and service center as well.

plaque installed by garden center - still there?
in front of hotel El Dorado
Sketch of D. Lorenzi - desert sculptor
1930
East
should be restored
Ball Tower 1913 - Murray Peterson Foundation
Rose Garden - 35-40 years
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