

Preservation Association of Clark County

September 2007

Las Vegas High School

Las Vegas High School Neighborhood: mixed use, mixed messages

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

When the original Las Vegas High School was constructed in 1931, there was a general consensus in the community that it was built too far out of town at 315 South Seventh Street. Nevertheless, through the 1930s and early 40s, residents built their homes surrounding this school which was designed in the classic Art Deco style of the time. This once graceful example of a 1930s neighborhood continued, as recently as the 1990s, to retain much of its historic ambience—enough to allow a visitor an opportunity to feel transported back in time and experience a neighborhood environment of another era.

The tree-lined streets, driveways with grass strips that led to detached garages, the old-fashioned alley ways behind the houses that allowed owners to enjoy long ago services such as milk deliveries or trash pick up at the back door, and the homes, all uniquely designed rather than the cookie cutter development of today, all lent to an irreplaceable example of American life in early Las Vegas history.

The Las Vegas High School Historic District, roughly between Bridger and Gass on one side and Sixth and Ninth Streets on the other, was designated historic in 1991 with its placement in the National Register of Historic Places. This distinction, however, offered neither protection nor incentives for property owners to retain the historic integrity of this neighborhood. Because of the changing demographics of the area and the proximity to downtown Las Vegas and its courthouses, the homes that were family residences became office space primarily for attorneys or other professional services. The transition from home owners

to business owners altered the perception of this area and the properties became investments for owners who have little to no sentiment for the historic flavor of the high school community. Through time, variations from the original zoning laws have transformed this area into a business district with multi-level office buildings; some built over two or more lots. Few of the original homes remain residences.

The city of Las Vegas has on several occasions acknowledged the historic value of the Neighborhood even if it was inconsistent with zoning practices. It was listed over twenty years ago as a historic resource in the city's Preservation Plan. It continues to be listed as such in the recently revised plan approved by the City Council just this year. Indeed, the Director of City Planning, Margo Wheeler, specifically stated in a letter to the editor for PACC's newsletter that the Las Vegas High School Neighborhood was an example of one of the many efforts the city was making on behalf of preservation in Las Vegas (PACC Newsletter August 2006). But the actions of property owners and the City Council would suggest a different message that leaves one to wonder, is this old neighborhood worth preserving, or not?

The city's Historic Designation Ordinance is intended to give city government the means to preserve historic sites. But if a property or district is not listed in the city's Historic Property Register, and is not involved with federal funds, the city has no legal process (and in some cases, no incentive) to protect sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places. An example is the railroad cottages; some of which were owned by the city,

and were either destroyed or relocated in spite of being listed on the National Register (PACC Newsletter Oct 2005).

To their credit, about a decade ago, the city's Historic Preservation Commission sought to protect the High School Neighborhood by attempting to get it listed on the city register. Unfortunately, the majority of property owners did not want a city historic designation out of fear it would limit their property values by preventing them from selling to commercial developers.

To further add to the metamorphosis of this historic gem, the City Council approved in 2003 an amendment to the Redevelopment Plan Area that created zoning for mixed use commercial development within the historic district. The mixed use category allows low to high density residential, office, service commercial and general commercial buildings with a limit of two stories.

This redevelopment plan catapulted the opportunity for property/business owners to demolish the old homes and merge lots to make way for office buildings.

Essentially the motivations of the property owners and the actions of the city have demonstrated that properties listed on the National Register have little value as such. But ironically in a recent publication, *Las Vegas Growth Watch*, Summer 2007 the city states, "...the city is committed to preserving our community's significant historic buildings..." But this commitment is primarily reserved for situations where federal money is involved which then requires the city to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. In *Growth Watch*, the city was excited to announce that a database was created to help city departments whose projects involve funds from federal sources, to assess the impact their projects may have on historic or archaeological resources eligible or potentially eligible for listing on the National Register. This assessment is federally mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act. While it is encouraging the city is using modern technology to identify historically significant sites, it does not add any more value to the sites already on the National Register that are not involved with federal funds as was suggested in a recent survey by PACC of the High School Neighborhood.

Of the 34 historic houses featured in the city's brochure for a walking tour of the Las Vegas High School Historic District, eight have either been destroyed or soon will be such as 400-408 S. Seventh. Others not in the brochure have also been demolished. This summer alone with City Council approval, we lost 501, 507 and 511 S. Eighth Street as well as 701 and 711 S. Seventh and 709 Garces to make way for commercial buildings. Others previously have been highly modified or also replaced with two-story office buildings on merged lots.

Contrary to what the brochure states, this is no longer "a well preserved and cohesive group of buildings," that "retains its architectural and historic integrity." Considering this dismal trend in the Las Vegas High School "Business District," what lies ahead for this National Register site?

Given the impact of so much modern architecture, the only hope is to focus on the few remaining homes that are truly indicative of the original neighborhood and encourage property owners to preserve what remains of this old community. One example of a property owner committed to retaining the historic integrity of his High School Neighborhood structure is attorney Richard Segerblom who owns and uses the Henderson House for his legal practice. Segerblom initiated the process to place his property in the city register. While the City Council approved the nomination of the Henderson House to be listed in the city's Historic Property Register on September 6, 2006, they also continue to approve the destruction of other historic houses in the same neighborhood.



Henderson House, 704 South 9th Street. Spanish Colonial Revival, built in 1930. Photo by Corinne Escobar.

The Neighborhood in its original context is gone. The Preservation Association of Clark County encourages other property owners to follow Segerblom's precedent so that a listing on the city's Register will offer some protection of these old houses as single entities rather than a historic district. Otherwise what is left of the old neighborhood will soon follow the way of the once historic railroad cottage neighborhood that represented housing development in Las Vegas between 1909 and 1911. Less than a handful of these early Vegas homes survive in situ and all neighborhood identity is completely lost. If we also lose what remains of our 1930s architecture in the Las Vegas High School Historic District, we are saying a listing on the National Register of Historic Places is essentially meaningless in the city of Las Vegas. But the loss of this neighborhood as a tangible expression of the quality of life in 1930s Las Vegas is the real tragedy.

Maude Frazier Hall

Mid-Century Modern Architecture?

By PATRICK KLENK



UNLV is considering razing Frazier Hall as part of their effort to improve the campus master plan. The building was the first built on campus in the University's current location. It was approved in February 1956 and built in 1958 being designed by the campus architects, Walter Zick and Harris Sharp Architects. The building is still in use today with about the same outward appearance as it had in the early 60s.

I was recently asked if Frazier Hall is a good example of Mid-Century architecture and worthy of saving as such. I believe the simple answer is no. Mid-Century Architecture as a style is identifiable by its jet-age, sleek, futuristic designs—the Jetson's cartoon of the 60's exemplified this look. As a style, it is seen mostly in residential architecture and interior design (including furniture and industrial design) applications. There are various examples of this type of expressionistic architecture throughout the country in a residential context. In Las Vegas we had one of the relatively few examples of Mid-Century architecture in a larger commercial environment in the old Sand's Resort by McAllister. Other examples would be Saarinen's 1962 TWA Terminal in New York and Lapidfus' 1954 Fountainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach. Frazier Hall is not this.

The University's first building is an example of Modern Architecture (Rationalism or the International Style) which was created from the 1940s to the 1970s. The characteristics of Modern Architecture tend to have simple, clean lines with flat roofs. There was a minimum of decoration and a predominance of hard durable materials such as concrete or steel. Often there was an expression of structure on the exterior of the building with simple, sometimes intersecting volumes or massing. There was an emphasis on honesty of materials, durability of the materials, and the dependence on technology to maintain the environment. Depending on the decade, these expressions will vary in the strength of their presence. At Frazier Hall, many of these characteristics can be seen in various degrees of resolution.

Perhaps this is the fundamental issue with Frazier Hall, in an architectural sense, which must be resolved to answer the question asked. Is Frazier Hall a strong enough to be saved as being architecturally significant? Clearly the lines and the massing of the building are "clean" and simple. There is a nod to the structure of the building by the "peek-a-boo" exposed exterior columns found in the corners of the building. There are some details resulting from recognition of some of the tributaries of Modernism seen in the window placement and the entry sequence, but after that the architecture begins to unravel. The building professes a hardness of material (i.e. concrete) that is betrayed in the soffits as something less. Though the base, or main body of the building, is of concrete masonry the cantilevered roof line does not maintain a consistent expression of material and construction. Many of the details are "plucked" from the styles of the time and placed in the building without the energy of other architecture. It seems to lack a creative inspiration and appears to follow a formulaic approach to its expression. Architecturally, this building tips to the banal and denies its significant place in the formation of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Will the loss of Maude Frazier Hall be another architectural loss to the Las Vegas valley? In terms of architecture, no. There are better examples of Modern or Rationalism, to be found from the same period. Walter Zick and Harris Sharp Architects produced a number of pieces of architecture that were executed with more deftness than Frazier Hall.

In terms of the social and cultural development of Las Vegas, I will have to leave that answer up to another. As the valley grows and the university moves ahead with their planning, it would be difficult to disrupt their development by an attempt to preserve Frazier Hall in its current form.

Patrick Klenk is President of Westar Architectural Group. He is a member of the Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission. .

Frazier Hall

Historically significant

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

No one person has done more for establishing formal education in early Las Vegas than Maude Frazier. She was the high school principal who convinced the public to pass a \$350,000 bond to build the Las Vegas High School (now the Academy) in 1931. She persuaded the state to appropriate \$200,000 to build a university in Southern Nevada and then raised an additional \$100,000 to finish the job. It was only fitting that the university's first building should be named after Southern Nevada's most influential early educator. Frazier Hall stands as a

monument to a great lady. But more than a structure that bears her name, Frazier Hall is an important benchmark in the history of UNLV and Southern Nevada. It was the first building on campus and although its simple, streamlined appearance is hidden behind well placed foliage to camouflage the lack of architectural luster, it nevertheless is *the* historic symbol of where and how UNLV began and has been part of the experience for every student that has walked the halls of their alma mater. Rather than being demolished, Frazier Hall should be used to showcase UNLV history. Instead of being embarrassed of Frazier Hall, UNLV should be proud to show the point from which it began and how it contrasts with what is UNLV now.

In Memoriam



Jerry Fifield
1931 – 2007

The Preservation Association of Clark County extends a posthumous thank you for Jerry Fifield's efforts in drawing attention to the plight of Kiel Ranch. Jerry was a descendent of Conrad Kiel's brother, William, and took a personal interest in wanting to see Kiel Ranch preserved. Although he resided in Montana, Jerry took the time and the expense to fly to Las Vegas to speak before the North Las Vegas City Council when they heard public comments July 19, 2006 regarding their treatment of this historic site.

An avid genealogist, Jerry supplied PACC with a wealth of information on the Kiel family and history. Just prior to his passing he generously donated \$100 to further our cause in saving Kiel. Your PACC president spent many hours with him during his visit, exchanged a multitude of emails and appreciated his quick wit and dry humor. Jerry passed away in his home on August 8th. We extend our deepest sympathy to his family.

PACC Annual Meeting

Review Journal tour terrific success



photograph by Joe Thomson

PACC viewed the presses in operation.

PACC members and their guests were treated to an extraordinary opportunity to tour the Las Vegas Review Journal as part of the Annual Meeting and Program held last May 12, 2007. About 50 visitors were able to view the process involved in producing the daily newspaper including observing the presses in operation. After the tour Charles Zobell, Managing Editor, spoke on the historic presence the local newspaper has in the community while PACC enjoyed a beautifully presented luncheon also provided by the Review Journal.

Each year PACC recognizes individuals or organizations that have made significant contributions to preservation in Clark County. This year there were two recipients, Virginia "Beezy" Tobiason for her life long work in saving and restoring the Old Logandale School in Moapa Valley and Sherrie Klute for her efforts in preserving the Frank Wait House in downtown Las Vegas. Both structures represent 1930s architecture.



photograph by Joe Thomson

The RJ hosted luncheon was held in the paper room. Stacked behind the PACC guests are rolls of newsprint.

Kiel Ranch

Teachers and Local History: A Lesson in Community Building
By JEFF HINTON

Clark County School District is the nation's fifth largest school district, serving over 300,000 students taught by 18,000 teachers in 336 schools. Not only is it one of the nation's largest districts but it is also one of the fastest growing.¹ Despite the hectic pace of construction of new schools the district continues to face a chronic shortage of qualified teachers to fill classrooms across the valley. Anyone who has lived in the area for a period of time is familiar with the perennial dilemma but there is good news...sort of. The Review Journal reported that unemployment in the eastern part of the country has led many teachers to relocate to our valley, cutting the reported 1,200 teaching vacancies in half to just 565.² You might be thinking that is fantastic news for the valley's youngsters, but hold on a minute. Before we start celebrating our good fortune we must consider the downside to this apparent blessing in disguise, especially as it pertains to local history.

Recently a Review Journal reader asked rhetorically 'Community' in Las Vegas? Hardly, and went on to write in a letter to the editor that Las Vegas, "will be nothing more than an area where a large number of individuals just happened to make their home."³ While an allegiance to a hometown is evidenced by many of our citizens that devotion does not seem to transfer to Las Vegas, despite many years of residency. The valley, despite its large population, remains void of a sense of community. Could it be due to a lack of knowledge of local history? It is widely known that citizens of old established metropolises generally have a strong sense of community, usually as the result of a shared heritage. For example, no student in the city of Boston gets out of public school without having heard, *ad nauseam*, about the "Boston Massacre" or the "Boston Tea Party." Yet how many students in Las Vegas have ever heard of Kiel Ranch or the Old Mormon Fort?

Not having an awareness of history has other consequences. Historian and Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin once said that, "Trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers."⁴ The valley's spectacular growth has been built upon an unsteady foundation; the roots of community have been pulled up and discarded in the name of expediency. A collective understanding of history, to "know our roots" is integral to building a

sense of place. The challenge lies in the fact that Las Vegas thrives not by looking back to the glory of the past, but by looking to the future of almost unlimited possibility. The city's ability to transform and reinvent itself has proven integral to its survival; unfortunately, it is a zero sum gain as it applies to historic preservation. While resources and energy continue to focus on new properties in the valley, historically significant properties have fallen into disrepair due to neglect.

A sense of community in Las Vegas can be developed if we, as citizens, demand of ourselves and our legislators, that our local history be valued. We must preserve our local sites and we must teach our children about the past. Unfortunately, the majority of Clark County's teachers have little knowledge of the state's history, and as the old saying goes "you can't teach what you don't know." New teachers are not required to take a Nevada State History course and, therefore, the only impetus to learn our history is a teacher's personal desire to do so. Needless to say, ignorance of our state's past remains high amongst our educators.

Tragically, our historic sites are disappearing as quickly as the teachers are arriving. The best example of the failure to protect our local treasures is Kiel Ranch, home to one of the state's oldest standing structures. The adobe has been left by the City of North Las Vegas to wither on the vine and will eventually disintegrate (it doesn't have much further to go). As a history teacher I am saddened by the message we are sending our children—that our local history is of no importance. Further, I am fearful that our new teacher's perception that Las Vegas is a place without a past will be validated if we continue in our present course of inaction.

If we are ever going to be more than "a large number of individuals who just happened to make their home here" we need to start planting the roots of community. To do this we need to preserve and respect our shared history, by caring for historical sites and by educating our children and the teachers who teach them. Las Vegas has a long and interesting past that every child should be aware of, and we need to take action to make sure that happens.

Teachers, students, and the general community can learn more about Kiel Ranch at the "Kiel Ranch Then and Now: History of A Nevada Landmark" webquest.
<http://mrhinton.org/kielranch.htm>

Jeff Hinton is a local high school history teacher and a member of the PAAC Kiel Ranch Committee.

¹ <http://www.edutopia.org/node/1159/print>

² <http://www.lasvegassun.com/sunbin/stories/text/2007/jul/14/071410566.html>

³ RJ July 18, 2007

⁴ <http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001530.cfm>

Visit our website at www.pacc.info

From the president's desk...

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

The PACC Annual Meeting and Program held at the Las Vegas Review Journal was a terrific experience for our members and their guests. PACC does not charge for the programming we offer as part of our mission to educate the public on the history of Clark County. In the past, our members have visited the Atomic Testing Museum, the new visitor center at the Old Fort, The Old Post Office (now the PostModern), the Neon Museum bone yard, Woodlawn Cemetery, and Kiel Ranch to name a few. On occasion we offer lectures and workshops. We also inform our members of events sponsored by other organizations that offer more learning experiences about Clark County history and heritage.

Spreading preservation awareness is critical to our goals and so I invite new members to join PACC and start enjoying the program we offer. Our dues are modest but the benefits are great. If you are currently a member, please tell everyone you know what a great deal we offer.

On a final note, if you have never visited the Las Vegas High School Neighborhood, print a copy of the city's brochure by going to www.lasvegasnevada.gov/hpc for a walking tour to see the fine homes that remain and get a glimpse of a 1930s neighborhood. See for yourself what makes this area unique before any more homes are destroyed.

Membership Dues Needed Now!

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Sustaining 250.00

Contributing 100.00

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*Send to: Preservation Association of Clark County
P.O. Box 36365 Las Vegas, NV 89133
Or go to www.pacc.info, click Membership*

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As a nonprofit organization we need your support. Your tax-deductible dollars go to publishing and mailing the newsletter and to our programs and projects including our website. Please join or renew. We can't do it without you!

The Preservation Association of Clark County, a nonprofit organization established in 1974 for the preservation of Clark County heritage, publishes this newsletter quarterly.

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