



The **Las Vegas Tourist Guides Guild**

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Block 16 - Home of Sin City's original sin, Block 16 housed prostitutes, alcohol during prohibition

By Stephanie Kishi | Thursday, May 15, 2008 | Sun Archives

See also:

EarlyVegas.com: Block 16

Online Nevada Encyclopedia: Las Vegas' Block 16

UNLV Libraries: Centennial Celebration of Las Vegas Gaming

Dusty saloons, gambling tables, whiskey and gin flowing like a river, and of course, scantily-clad women with loose morals. That describes many towns in classic Western movies, but don't expect John Wayne or Clint Eastwood to ride into this one. That's because this place was real, this place was Block 16.

Block 16 became famous in 1906, and it's where Las Vegas' moniker of "Sin City" originated. Located on First Street between Ogden and Stewart avenues, Block 16 got its name from its designation on the town map that was used to create Las Vegas. Initially, both Block 16 and 17 had gained notoriety as the only blocks that could legally serve liquor without licensing restrictions, but soon Block 16 distinguished itself from Block 17 by blatantly offering prostitution. Block 16 was designed to cater to the worker and the traveler. Rail yard workers had a place to go after work, and weary railroad travelers had a place to hang out between train stops.

According to Michael Green, a history professor at the College of Southern Nevada, Block 16 started to distance themselves from the dusty saloon, and moved more towards prostitution in 1910. The brothels were located in back rooms or the upper floors of a saloon.

Most saloons would rent out back rooms to prostitutes, who often acted as semi-independent contractors. They would give a cut of their profits to the saloon management, often the ones running the prostitutes, for use of the rooms and the drinks. The clients would get a dance, buy drinks and then both would go up to her rented room. Even though it was understood that the client would buy her a drink, according to "Young Las Vegas, 1905-1931: Before the Future Found Us," many prostitutes would not actually drink alcohol while on the job. Their drinks were just colored water.

Other saloons on Block 16 did not include brothels. Bars like The Gem, Turf and The Arizona Club did not have a brothel. The Arizona Club, considered to be one of the best bars in town, was also the first saloon and gambling hall, until 1912, when the Arizona Club changed management. The new owner built an entire second floor over the bar to house a bordello.

"The most famous saloon was the Arizona Club. It was known as the 'Queen of Block 16,' and it was the best known and the longest lasting club," said Green. "It was famous for its slow gin fizz and its 40-foot mahogany bar."

For many years Las Vegas citizens and officials did not approve of Block 16, but made no move to try and shut down the saloons and brothels.

"[Sheriff] Sam Gay used to say 'if you're not bothering people, go about your business,'" said Green.



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Block 16 was not only famous for its prostitution; it also gained notoriety in 1920 for its disregard for the 18th Amendment, which banned the sale and transport of all alcohol around the country. Prohibition did not slow down the sale of alcohol, it just made it more difficult, and saloons had to sell hard liquor in secret. Despite numerous threats of fines and raids, Block 16 continued to sell alcohol until the amendment was repealed in 1933.

Life went back to normal on Block 16 until 1941, when the U.S. Army built the Air Corp. Gunnery School, now known as Nellis Air Force Base. Army brass did not approve of the prostitution on Block 16 and told the city administration that the city would be off limits to all army personal if the prostitution continued. Since the city was so eager for the business, they decided that they could no longer ignore Block 16.

Authorities, including the police commissioner, raided the block on Dec. 2, 1941 and arrested 22 women on charges of prostitution. Most of the women posted bail and the brothels reopened. The raids and releases continued for several weeks until the city finally voted to revoke the liquor and slot machine licenses for all saloons on the block. Shortly after, the saloons and brothels closed because there was no source of steady cash flow.

According to Green, after the brothels shut down, they moved down to the "Formyle" at Boulder Highway, and that lasted through the '50s.

Throughout the rest of World War II, the brothels became cheap rooming houses until January 1946, when the city declared them to be hazardous. Block 16 was ordered to be demolished and was eventually paved over to become parking lots. Tourists can still visit this distinctive piece of Las Vegas history by parking behind Binion's Casino, just east of the California Hotel.