NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

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NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

284

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x' in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" Sign

other name/site number N/A

2. Location

street & town Las Vegas Blvd. S., in public right of way, approximately ½ mi. south of intersection with Russell Rd. not for publication

city or town Paradise Township vicinity

state Nevada code NV county Clark code 003 zip code 89119

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ronald M. Yoman, SHPO 3-23-'09
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☒ entered in the National Register.
☒ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Barbara Wyatt 5-1-09

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number ____ Page ____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 09000284 **Date Listed:** 5-1-09

Property Name: Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas sign

County: Clark **State:** NV

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusion, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Barbara Myatt
Signature of Keeper

5-1-09
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination

Section 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

This Supplementary Listing Record amends the level of significance to "locally" significant. Although the nomination indicates a national level of significance, only the case for local significance has been made.

Notification and Distribution
The Nevada State Historic Preservation Office was notified of this amendment.
This notice was distributed to the following:

National Register property file
Nominating Authority, without nomination attachment

Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Sign
Name of Property

Clark, Nevada
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(check only one box)

- ☐ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☒ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
1	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation/Culture: Monument/marker
Other: Advertising, identification

Current Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation/Culture: Monument/marker
Other: Advertising, identification

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Exaggerated Modern /Googie

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete footings
walls
roof
other Lexan, steel, plastic, neon, incandescent bulbs

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

☒ A Property is associated with events that have made

Areas of Significance
(enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Period of Significance
1959

Significant Dates
1959

Significant Persons
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder
Betty Whitehead Willis, designer

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☒ Local government
☒ University
☐ Other Name of repository:

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Sign
Name of Property

Clark, Nevada
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre.

UTM References
(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	11S	0/6/6/4/5/2/8	3/9/9/4/5/5/4
2	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /
3	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /
4	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Dorothy Wright and Angela Moor

organization Clark County Parks and Recreation date October 2008

street & number 2601 East Sunset Road telephone (702) 455-8242

city or town Las Vegas state NV zip code 89108

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets
Maps A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.
Photographs: Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.
Additional items: (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

name/title Young Electric Sign Company

street & number 5119 Cameron St. telephone (702) 876-8080

city or town Las Vegas state NV zip code 89108

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.).*

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Description

The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" ("Welcome") sign is located in the median of Las Vegas Boulevard South, just north of the historic stone pillars of the old McCarran Airport on the east side, and across from the Bali Hai Golf Club on the west side. It is .3 miles south of the Russell Road exit from Interstate 15. Clark County has had jurisdiction over the public right-of-way on the Strip since 2005. Previously, it was under the Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT). Young Electric Sign Company owns the sign.

When the "Welcome" sign was built in 1959, the closest hotel-casino was the Hacienda, which was a one-story rambling building on the site of the current high-rise Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino. There was no Interstate I5 until the early 1970s and traffic from Los Angeles traveled along the Las Vegas Strip, which was then U.S. Highway 91.

The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign is a classic roadside pole design, which faces north/south on Las Vegas Boulevard South. It belongs to the Exaggerated Modern/Googie design category. The sign is mounted offset on two flat poles which are joined by a cross piece at the top. The poles extend above the top of the sign. The sign is a horizontally stretched diamond shape, with the top and bottom angles pointed while the side angles are rounded. It is double-backed, internally lit, with a border of flashing and chasing yellow incandescent bulbs outside around the perimeter. Across the top of the sign are seven white neon circles, designed to represent silver dollars. The circles each contain a red painted letter, outlined in neon, which together form the word "welcome."

Crowning the sign, located between the two poles and just under the crosspiece is an eight-pointed, red-painted metal star outlined with yellow neon. The intersecting vertical and horizontal lines of the star extend over and wrap around the frame that is created by the two poles and the cross piece, which give the star a dynamic, explosive appearance.

The cabinet is faced with translucent white plastic and covered with blue and red painted text. The south side of the sign reads "Welcome" in the silver dollars, with "to Fabulous" in blue, in a 1950s-style cursive, underneath. The words "Las Vegas" are on the next line in red, all capitalized, and large, almost filling the width of the sign. Under "Las Vegas" is the word "Nevada" in blue, all capitalized, in a much smaller font. On the back or north side, the sign reads "Drive" on the top line and "Carefully" on the second in red capital letters, with "Come Back and Soon" in blue on the third and forth lines, in script.

There have been reports that the sign was moved but there is no documentation to support this statement, either with Clark County or with the sign's owner, Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO). The surrounding landscape has been altered dramatically, especially with the

construction of the high-rise Mandalay Bay complex to the north. If the sign were moved, it would have been only a short distance. The original 1959 Clark County Commission minutes, which authorized the sign state that it was to be placed just north of (old) McCarran Airport, and that is where it is now located.

In 2007, Clark County installed decorative artificial turf inlaid with four playing cards underneath the sign. Currently, the county is building a twelve-space parking lot with two pullouts for tour buses, in the median just south of the sign to accommodate the many people and tour buses who now either park in the turn lane or park on the side of the road and run across three lanes of traffic to take photographs in front of the sign. That parking lot was completed in January 2009. The artificial turf was replaced, but without the playing cards.

Statement of Significance

The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A, for its association with the post-World War II entertainment, tourism, and advertising industries. The 1950s saw an explosion of casino construction on the Las Vegas Strip, and the 1959 "Welcome" sign represented the optimism and boosterism of Las Vegas casino owners and civic leaders. The 1950s also saw the development of national advertising into a fine art, which made Las Vegas a most desired tourist destination and indeed, a household word across the country and around the world. The "Welcome" sign is an important part of that advertising.

The "Welcome" sign is the best-preserved and indeed the most iconic expression of the remarkable ascendency of post-War Las Vegas and its famous Strip. While the Strip itself has changed dramatically since the 1950s, the "Welcome" sign remains virtually unchanged since 1959. The "Welcome" sign embodies, through its design and history, Las Vegas as it established itself as a nationally and internationally important center of gambling-related tourism. The period was made famous by the growth of the hotel-casino as an architectural form and as a business proposition. Situated at the historic entrance to the Strip, the sign remains as a symbol of how this segment of highway captured the national imagination. The design of the "Welcome" sign recalls a period when Las Vegas was taking its first strides towards international prominence. It was a time when, for example, the Rat Pack, a Las Vegas stage favorite composed of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Dean Martin, among others, made the Strip "hip," to use a term of the time. While so much of that period was demolished to make way for larger developments, and the Strip itself has transformed repeatedly over the years, the "Welcome" sign remains unchanged as a symbol of one of the more dynamic stories in the history of entertainment and tourism in the nation.

The "Welcome" sign is also eligible under Criterion C as an excellent example of Exaggerated Modern/Googie architecture (1940s-1960s). The sign utilizes a stretched diamond shape with curved sides, set against an angular double column, outlined with light bulbs to accentuate the unusual shape, which are characteristics of Exaggerated Modern/Googie. The sign has become a cultural icon, known and loved around the world, not just because of its historical value and association with Las Vegas, but also because it is one of the dwindling examples of Exaggerated Modern in the southwest and especially in Las Vegas.

The "Welcome" sign was designed by Nevada native, Betty Whitehead Willis. Willis' sign repertoire also includes the Blue Angel Motel sign and the Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino sign. In 1955 the Moulin Rouge became Las Vegas' first racially integrated casino and its

opening night was featured on the cover of Life Magazine. The Moulin Rouge was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on December 22, 1992.

Betty Whitehead Willis' imagery was aesthetically influenced by southern California designs, including Walt Disney's animated imagery, "I added a Disney star for happiness." The Googie influence is obvious, with the stretched diamond shape that is typical of the mid-century modern style. The Googie style, named after Googie's, a 1949 coffeeshop on Sunset Boulevard, was popularized as a concept first by Yale professor Douglas Haskell and later by Alan Hess, author of *Googie: Fifties Coffeeshop Architecture.* The style was influenced by the Streamline Moderne style of the forties and by the growing car culture of the fifties and sixties. The "Welcome" sign is an excellent example of "Googie" architecture with its space-age angles.

Historic Context: The Growth of Tourism and Advertising in Las Vegas

Las Vegas began as a railroad division point in 1905, with the railroad auctioning off lots to create a new town. In 1909, civic leaders lobbied successfully to create Clark County, named for railroad owner, U.S. Senator William Andrews Clark from Montana. The Legislature carved Clark County out of the southern half of Lincoln County. Las Vegas became the county seat.

The little town grew slowly but remained stable until 1922 when local railroad workers joined a national strike and shut down Las Vegas operations. In retaliation, the Union Pacific closed the machine shops and many lost their jobs. The future looked bleak until in the mid-1920s when the federal government revealed plans to build a huge dam in southern Nevada to tame the unpredictable Colorado River. The influx of workers brought jobs and customers for Las Vegas stores, saloons, and service providers.

Las Vegas leaders knew that the Dam construction would provide only a temporary boost to Clark County's economy. They needed a new industry, one that would last. Tourism was the answer. In 1931, in response to the economic downturn of The Great Depression, the Nevada legislature liberalized Nevada's gaming laws, which already allowed for card games and slot machines, although forbidding cash prizes. In 1931, table games were legalized. The other ace in the hole was divorce—liberalized to a six-week waiting period, also in 1931. Together with already lax marriage laws that required no waiting period, gambling and divorce were to form the bedrock of the early tourism industry. In 1933, with the repeal of the Volstead Act, which had instituted Prohibition against alcohol, Las Vegas was poised to receive visitors with open arms and flowing liquor.

California was a major source of tourists, and improved roadways aided the influx of travelers. Highway 91 (also known as the Los Angeles Highway) became a major route, and some far-sighted entrepreneurs took advantage of it, building nightclubs that would intercept

travelers before they got to Fremont Street. Air travel grew in the 1930s, with Western Air Express handling airmail as well as passenger travel.

Civic leaders in the 1930s did not just wait for tourists to find Las Vegas. When Hoover Dam was completed in 1935, it immediately became a popular attraction. But more attractions were needed, and so the Chamber of Commerce created Helldorado, a weeklong event with a parade, a rodeo, and fairgrounds, to capitalize on the Wild West image that the town cultivated. Today, events such as the National Finals Rodeo and NASCAR are major components of the Las Vegas marketing plan.

Divorce took a little longer to develop as an industry in the 1930s. Although Reno was first out of the gate in the divorce business, with women flocking to northern Nevada for their six-week "Reno-vation," Las Vegas got a big boost with the Clark and Ria Gable divorce in 1939. Mrs. Gable cheerfully cooperated with the Chamber of Commerce publicists who photographed her gambling, boating on Lake Mead and enjoying the snow on nearby Mt. Charleston. The pictures made the national news and suddenly Las Vegas was the place to go. Along with divorce, the marriage industry blossomed, often with the same people receiving their divorce just before engaging in a quick and easy Las Vegas re-marriage.

Weddings were an important element of Nevada's burgeoning tourism industry beginning in the 1930s. When Nevada liberalized its divorce laws and re-legalized gambling in 1931, its already liberal marriage laws became another attraction for out-of-state visitors. Nevada already had no waiting period and required no blood tests for marriages. Marriages were important both in Clark and Washoe Counties, but throughout the 1930s, Reno led the pace.

Toward the end of the decade, Las Vegas began to overtake Reno as both the divorce and wedding capitol. Then in 1939, California passed a law mandating a blood test before marriage. This was added to that state's three day waiting period to prevent "gin marriages." Suddenly, Las Vegas weddings seemed much more convenient to southern Californians.

Also in 1939, Las Vegas was the site of singer Nelson Eddy's highly publicized wedding, which unleashed a torrent of marriages. By June 1940, Las Vegas set a new one-day record: one-hundred-four marriage licenses were granted. That made nearly four thousand since the beginning of the year; twice the number for the same period in 1939 and triple that of 1938.

The marriage and divorce industries were closely linked; many celebrities came for the six-week divorce period and immediately got married when the divorces were final. The 1940s saw the proliferation both of wedding chapels on South Fifth Street (later Las Vegas Boulevard) and of dude ranches where prospective divorcees could wait out their six weeks in style and comfort. In the 1940s, the former Lorenzi Resort became the Twin Lakes Lodge catering to divorcees; the Kiel Ranch became the Boulderado Ranch; and cowboy star Hoot Gibson's D-4-C, located just west of the Strip, became a rival with its own airstrip and clubhouse.

Tourism leveled out during World War II as the nation cut back on travel and shifted into keeping up the home front. But as soon as the war was over, the boom began, both in casino construction and in visitors to southern Nevada. Fremont Street was still the main attraction, with more casinos and bigger and more lavish signs creating what became known as "Glitter Gulch." The Young Electric Sign Company, also known as YESCO, which had operated in Las Vegas since 1932 without a plant, finally opened a production facility in 1946. YESCO quickly dominated the neon sign market, and while it had competition over the years, it never gave up its dominance of the industry.

The Strip began to rival Fremont Street starting in the late 1940s. Back in 1941 California hotel owner Tommy Hull bet on the El Rancho Vegas, which he built just outside the city limits, on today's Sahara Avenue. Shortly afterward, Texas theater magnate R.E. Griffith took a chance and built the Last Frontier in 1942 on the site of the Pair-A-Dice Club. Then nothing happened for four years because of the War. In 1946, however, the Flamingo opened, and the Thunderbird and Sahara both opened in 1948.

The 1950s saw the first big explosion of casino building on the Strip. The Desert Inn, the Silver Slipper, the Sahara, the Sands, the Riviera, the Dunes, and the Hacienda all opened in the first six years. This was accompanied by a new and aggressive marketing campaign that aimed to make Las Vegas a nationally known destination.

In the late 1940s, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce hired the nationally known J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency. They were replaced in the early 1950s with Steve Hannegan's agency, which created the Desert Sea News Bureau, which became the Las Vegas News Bureau, an arm of the Chamber.

For the next two decades the News Bureau, along with the hotel's publicists, sent out a torrent of photographs and news releases across the country showing both celebrities and attractive "home-town" Americans on vacation, having "fun in the sun." Together, the News Bureau photographers and the hotel publicists dreamed up such stunts as the "floating crap game" with a picture of a craps table in a pool surrounded by bathing-suited players, and "Miss Atomic Blast" with a giant mushroom cloud covering her bathing suit.

The creation of the "Welcome" sign in 1959 was a product of the cooperative marketing of the 1950s in which elected officials, casino owners and the Chamber of Commerce worked hand-in-hand to boost Las Vegas and the Strip. Western Neon Sign company salesman, Ted Rogich, was approached by a group of hotel and casino owners who wanted to place a welcome sign on the south end of the strip. Roadside welcome signs proliferated in the southwest and indeed the entire United States in the post-war period as Chambers of Commerce boosted their communities. Las Vegas did not want to be left out. However, the roadside welcome sign for Las Vegas was not to be a simple wooden pole mounted affair.

The Clark County Commission agreed in May 1959 to fund the sign and place it in the median of Las Vegas Boulevard, which was at that time Highway 91; the only road into Las Vegas from Los Angeles. Interstate 15 would not be completed until the 1970s so anyone coming into town would pass the sign. The County planned to place it just north of the old airport, even though at the time they had no jurisdiction over the right-of-way, which was controlled by the State of Nevada.

The project was awarded to Western Neon for $4,000 in May 1959. Betty Whitehead Willis, one of a very few female sign designers in Las Vegas, got the job of designing the sign. The "Welcome" sign, as noted in the description, was meant to be as dazzling and eye-catching as possible. Her design, with its unusual shape and its flashing and chasing lights, was approved by the Commission and erected soon after.

The Golden Age of Neon Signs

In Las Vegas and nationally, the 1950s to the early 1970s, were considered to be the "Golden Age of Neon." Signage became an integral part of Las Vegas marketing. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing through the late-1970s, neon was the hallmark of Las Vegas signs. Neon reached its apogee in Las Vegas.

Frenchman George Claude developed the first use of neon as a light source in 1910. He devised a way to use neon and other gasses to display a rainbow of colors in glass tubes that could bend and flow. The first neon signs reached America in 1923 when Earl C. Anthony ordered two large signs for his Los Angeles Packard dealership. After that neon spread rapidly across the country with "Claude Neon" licensed shops.

Neon reached a crescendo in New York's Times Square in the 1920s, due in large part to advertising genius Douglas Leigh. Not only were the signs huge, they also employed intricate designs, animation, and clever effects, such as the Camel cigarette ad that blew smoke rings. With signs towering overhead and on every building, the collective glow coined the nickname "The Great White Way."

Early Las Vegas Signs

In Las Vegas in the mid-1920s, there was not yet a hint of the magical nighttime lighting spectacle that Fremont Street was to become. Then, on September 28, 1928 the *Las Vegas Review* reported, "The Overland Hotel is displaying a new Neon gas-electric sign, of the most modern design, adding considerably to the appearance of that section of the city." The Overland was, if not the first, certainly one of the first neon signs in Las Vegas.

Not long after, in April 1929 the Las Vegas Neon Electric Sign Company opened for business and began building neon signs. On April 30, 1929 the *Las Vegas Age* reported that the Golden Hotel was sporting a new neon sign, courtesy of Las Vegas Neon Sign Company. According to *The Age*, the sign, which was eight feet long, was "one of the finest in Las Vegas, and the proprietor, Mrs. Thomas R. Hodgens, has expressed pride in it." The Golden Hotel was to be short-lived but it had the distinction of having one of the earliest neon signs.

On August 13, 1929, the *Las Vegas Age* reported that the Las Vegas Neon Electric Sign Company had moved to a larger space at Third Street and Charleston Boulevard. The owners, Barrett and Clout, said that "due to their many new contracts, they were seeking another partner." The company was about to complete work on a "big new sign" for the Northern Club. By 1930, it had also installed signs at the Gateway Hotel, Beckley's Clothing Store and the Mission Cigar Store. (Barnard, *The Magic Sign*, p. 64.)

Soon other companies took advantage of neon's new popularity. By July 1930, the Nevada Neon Sign Company announced it also was open for business. The Las Vegas Neon Electric Sign Company continued to thrive. F.G. Keyes was another sign installer which produced its own signs, and also installed for out-of-town manufacturers.

In 1932, the Salt Lake City-based Young Electric Sign Company opened a branch office in the new Apache Hotel, under a license agreement with QRS Signs of California. QRS (Quality, Reliable Service.) QRS also manufactured signs for Las Vegas in addition to licensing other sign makers, including one for the Oasis Confectionery. (Barnard, *The Magic Sign*, p. 66.) YESCO was not to open a Las Vegas plant until 1946, and used the Nevada Electric Sign Company to service their signs. YESCO's ad said, "For estimates on neon, call Mr. Thomas Young, New Apache Hotel—without obligation."

YESCO was to usher in a new era of fabulous and artistic signs, an era in which they would play the dominant role as each hotel-casino vied for the biggest and brightest "spectacular." In May 1933, the *Las Vegas Review Journal* proclaimed, "Boulder Club has Giant Neon Sign." In addition to the name, the sign depicted a stein of foaming beer. The story added, "Being one of the most attractive signs of its kind yet installed in Las Vegas, it likewise is declared to be one of the largest in southern Nevada."

Shortly afterward, in August 1933, the Big Four Club erected a large sign on South 2nd Street. Installed by the Gelber Electric Company, the sign is described as showing a flowing beer tap and glass on one side and a shower of coins falling into a moneybag on the other side of the words "Big Four," with the word "Club" across the bottom of the sign.

Not to be outdone, in October 1936, the Boulder Club sign was remodeled by YESCO to feature high intensity lights and new colors. A large, six-foot neon clock was added to the bottom of the sign which, as the *Review-Journal* reported, "would be known to the residents of Las

Vegas as the town clock." YESCO would again remodel and enlarge the Boulder Club sign in 1945. This time it was, according to the *Review-Journal*, "as high above the building as the building is high." The 1945 Boulder Club sign featured a picture of the dam with moving water, according to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

Other new signs in the 1930s included the Bank Club by YESCO in 1936, as well as most of the hotels downtown. They all had vertical signs announcing the name of the establishment. Some had more elaborate and larger signs.

In 1939, the Nevada Electric Company took out a large ad announcing their new manufacturing plant in Las Vegas. "Gone forever is the long wait while replacements have to come from Los Angeles or Salt Lake," they proclaimed. They proudly listed their recent installations, "The Yucca Club, Mission Bar Marquee, Sans Souci Auto Court, The Green Shack, Apache Bar Marquee, National Hotel, Salt Lake Tavern, Las Vegas Barbeque, Navajo Auto Court and Nevada Motel."

During the 1940s, especially after YESCO opened its Las Vegas plant in 1946, the sign wars heated up on Fremont Street. The history of YESCO in Las Vegas is almost synonymous with the history of West Coast signage, as it came to dominate the market. Its first venture after the new plant opened was with the Pioneer Club. The Pioneer Club on Fremont Street erected what they called Nevada's largest sign, which was placed across the street from the Club on the roof of the Las Vegas Pharmacy Building on first and Fremont. The sign featured the head of cowboy Vegas Vic, the Chamber of Commerce mascot, cigarette protruding jauntily from his lips, surrounded by the words, "Here it is! The famous Pioneer Club." An arrow pointing in the direction of the Pioneer Club swooped over the letters. Jack Young, Las Vegas manager of YESCO, proclaimed that the sign "had been stressed to withstand winds of over 100 miles an hour."

In 1951, the Pioneer Club topped its own sign with a bigger one that was destined to become a Las Vegas landmark. YESCO was hired to create a full size version of the cowboy who would be attached to the side of the Pioneer Club building. From the top of his Western hat to his the bottom of his cowboy boots he was sixty feet tall, towering over the building. Vegas Vic's arm waved back and forth, and he hollered out a friendly "Howdy, Partner!" every few minutes. According to long-time YESCO employee Steve Weeks, the figure was patterned after one of their installers who was tall and slim and usually dressed like a cowboy. Vegas Vic presided over what was to become "Glitter Gulch" as the fifties and sixties saw even more "spectaculars" built, such as The Mint, The Horseshoe and The Golden Nugget.

The Strip

Meanwhile, during the 1930s, the Las Vegas Strip did not exist as we know it today. It was Highway 91, the road to Los Angeles. During the 1920s and 1930s, Americans were taking off in their new cars, as improved highways made automobile travel less arduous. By 1930, Highway 91 from California was becoming relatively well-traveled, and by March 1931, the newly-paved Boulder Highway was ready to bring Dam workers to spend their paychecks in Las Vegas on the weekends.

There were only two major clubs on Highway 91, the Pair-A-Dice, owned by Frank and Angelina Detra, and the Red Rooster. Not much happened in the 1930s even after gambling was legalized and prohibition ended. Then in 1941, hotel developer Tommy Hull came to Las Vegas and by some accounts stood on Highway 91 counting cars as they drove by. He decided that he could make money with a new hotel-casino, the El Rancho Vegas, which he built just outside the city limits to avoid city taxes and regulations.

California transplant Guy McAfee had already purchased the Pair-A-Dice in 1939 which he renamed The 91 Club. McAfee reportedly bestowed the name "The Strip" on the street, modeled after the "Sunset Strip" in Los Angeles. McAfee sold The 91 Club to Texas developer R.E. Griffith and his nephew William Moore. In 1942, they incorporated McAfee's club into their new resort, the Last Frontier.

It was not until 1946 with the opening of the glamorous Flamingo Hotel and Casino, and 1948 with the Thunderbird, that signs on the Las Vegas Strip began to rival those on Fremont Street. The El Rancho added a large sign in 1946, which was also built by YESCO in their first year of having a full-scale presence in Las Vegas.

The 1950s began the golden age of neon signage on the Las Vegas strip. Starting in 1953 with the Flamingo's 80-foot cylindrical "champagne tower" covered in neon bubbles, the signs got bigger and more spectacular. The Stardust sign built in 1958, and the huge pylon marquee sign added to the Stardust in 1968, dominated the Strip for many years and remained the favorite of many. The Stardust marquee sign is now in the Neon Museum Boneyard in Las Vegas, moved there in pieces at a cost of more than $200,000 in 2007.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an explosion of new signs on the strip and downtown. The stunning Flamingo sign designed by Raoul Rodriguez, famed designer of Rose Bowl floats, used a pink and orange feather motif. The Dunes Hotel with the gigantic Sultan, Caesars Palace with its Roman columns and larger-than-life centurions, the Aladdin with its neon-emblazoned lamp, and the colorful clown at Circus Circus were all defining "spectaculars" of that era. Downtown's Golden Nugget and Horseshoe added miles of neon tubing to contribute to the "brighter than day" effect on Fremont Street.

In 1973, the huge MGM Grand Hotel (now Bally's) debuted without a large pylon sign. The general manager declared that the elaborate structure was all that was needed, and a sign would be superfluous. Additionally, the extravagant porte-cochere served as a focal point. While there would be more large pylon signs to come, the emergence of the elaborate porte-cochere was a new trend away from traditional signage (Barnard, *The Magic Sign*, p. 115.)

The 1980s saw the advent of the "classy" look as exemplified by the Desert Inn's black glass-clad exterior, and the Golden Nugget's new understated Rodeo Drive-style façade, at first having no sign at all. While there have been other sign spectaculars in some off-Strip properties such as the Rio and the Palace Station, the 21st century trend is to use huge electronic reader boards and video displays similar to Times Square in New York. The 2008 Planet Hollywood, occupying the old Aladdin site, is a prime example. Although some of the digital signs are compelling, the glowing artistry of neon is largely absent in today's new signs.

Of course the Fremont Street canopy, erected over four blocks of Fremont Street in late 1995, radically altering the historic look of Glitter Gulch. The signs seem diminished without the black velvet backdrop of the night sky.

Today's signs are no longer hand-designed, but put together using computer templates. There likely would be no market for a hand-lettered sign such as Betty Willis's Moulin Rouge.

The Popularity of the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" Sign

The "Welcome" sign's status as a popular cultural icon was confirmed in 1993. In that year, some officials and hotel owners proposed tearing it down because they thought it was outdated. A California company was hired to design a new entry to the Strip, and that company declared the sign was "twenty years out of date." However, a public outcry saved the sign and it was preserved and refurbished. The new entryway was never built and the sign gained a new lease on life, becoming a popular photo site for tourists.

In 2005, the City of Las Vegas celebrated its centennial. A major source of the centennial celebration's revenue was from a license plate depicting the "Welcome" sign. That license plate was, and is, so popular that as of 2009 it was still generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue annually. Additionally, during the centennial there were many popular souvenir items available depicting the sign, including miniature versions with working lights.

During the Las Vegas centennial the City of Las Vegas erected a duplicate of the "Welcome" sign inside the city limits. The sign reads "Welcome to Fabulous Downtown Las Vegas." The Convention and Visitors' Authority erected a similar sign on Boulder Highway, to welcome visitors coming from Arizona.

YESCO now owns the Welcome sign and maintains it under a contract with the county. The sign has never been copyrighted although YESCO has trademarked the image. However, it is not their policy to restrict use of the image unless they deem that use to have a negative impact. As a result, the image has been widely used for commercial purposes. Today, the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign is one of the most recognized images in the world. Because it is copyright-free, it can be used for T-shirts (often with the wording removed and replaced by whatever caption the customer wants) and any other logo application. A quick check of the Internet reveals sales of framed photos, small working models of the sign, souvenir cups, T-shirts, and other apparel, all from a wide variety of vendors. Like Las Vegas, the sign is known around the world and is itself a popular tourist destination.

The continuous change that is the hallmark of Las Vegas itself, makes the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign even more worthy of recognition, not only as a remnant from the past but as one of the few constants in the evolving Las Vegas landscape. For residents of the town and for returning visitors, the "Welcome" sign is one of the few things that can be counted on to remain in place after 50 years.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The boundaries of The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign are the sign's footprint: two posts measuring 11 x 11 inches and spaced 40 inches apart.

Boundary Justification

The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign is located in the public right of way of Las Vegas Boulevard South. Although the setting has not changed in the sense that the sign was always situated in the midst of the public right of way, the right of way is not included in the nomination because there have been changes in the width of the road and in the nature of the pedestrian access on either side of the road. In addition, Clark County has provided visitors with a turn out and parking area near the sign in the center of the right of way to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of visitors who annually seek to have their photographs taken in front of the sign. Before the modifications, visitors ran across the lanes of traffic, and so the alteration of the turn out was needed as a safety issue to protect those who wish to celebrate the internationally significant aspect of the sign. The dimensions of the sign, which is unaltered since its creation, constitute the boundary.

Representative Photographs

1. The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign
2. Clark County, Nevada
3. Dorothy Wright, Photographer
4. January 30, 2009
5. 100 North Stewart Street
   Carson City, Nevada 89701
6. The "Welcome" sign: Front, looking north
7. Photo #01

6. The "Welcome" sign: Front (close-up), looking north
7. Photo #02

6. The "Welcome" sign: Rear, looking south
7. Photo #03

6. The "Welcome" sign: Rear (close-up), looking south
7. Photo #04

Historic Photographs

1. The "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign
2. Clark County, Nevada
3. Unknown photographer
   Reproduced from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Special Collections
4. 1960s
5. Las Vegas Blvd. S., in the public-right-of-way, approximately .5 mile south of Russell Rd.
6. The "Welcome" sign: Front, looking north
7. Photo #05

4. 1995
5. Las Vegas Blvd. S., in the public-right-of-way, approximately .5 mile south of Russell Rd.
6. The "Welcome" sign: Front, looking north (note the Hacienda entrance in the background)
7. Photo #06

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