

A copy of this story is on file at the Neon Museum in Las Vegas. It was written by Benson Parker as told to him by his father Paul B. Parker.

## **Las Vegas 1955**

by Paul B. Parker

In June 1955, a *Life Magazine* cover story was titled, *Las Vegas – Is Boom Overextended?* After reading the article my wife and I decided to make the road trip to Las Vegas that we had talked about for years so a few weeks later we loaded up the Buick, left our home in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and headed for the small, western-themed town of Las Vegas, Nevada.

It was hot so we took turns driving all night and slept in air-cooled tourist courts during the day. Coming from the swamps of Louisiana to the Mohave Desert was like going to another planet. The night we arrived in Vegas it was over 100 degrees and the air was so dry you could strike a match on it, but we loved it. We saw car tags from nine different states.

There were only about ten hotels on The Strip, the Riviera and the Dunes had just opened earlier that year. The hotels were set back from The Strip and had parking lots in front of them with their famous signs out by the road. The Sands Hotel marquee announced Dean Martin and my wife was a big Dean Martin fan so that's where we pulled in. Like many tourists we decided where to stay based on who was headlining there knowing that we stood a good chance of seeing our favorite performer off-stage if we

were staying there. This was before the paparazzi ruined it for everyone and it wasn't unusual to see performers gambling in the casinos, eating in the restaurants, or hanging out in the bars, or poolside; people didn't usually intrude on celebrities in Vegas.

Even back then Vegas was a happening place, some of the bartenders, cocktail waitresses, dealers, change girls and other casino employees were making \$500 a week - in the 1950's!

After three wonderful nights we stopped for gas on our way out of town and when I went in the gas station I noticed that there were five slot machines lined up against one wall; a penny machine, a nickel machine, dime, quarter, and dollar machine. I paid for the .27 cents a gallon gas then noticed that I had a penny, a nickel, a dime, a quarter and a silver dollar in my change. I went down the line dropping a coin in each one armed bandit and pulling the handle; the penny machine, then the nickel, then the dime, the penny hit and paid out, then the quarter, the nickel hit and paid out, then the dollar, and then I watched in amazement as the dime, quarter and dollar machines all hit and paid out. I won enough money to pay for our trip and smiled all the way back to Louisiana.

I fell in love with Las Vegas and came back a few years later, joined the Union and worked for the next 20 years tending bar on The Strip.