

Flamingo[®]

LAS VEGAS

A Brief History of the Flamingo Hotel/Casino

by **Allan Anderson**

Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel came to Nevada after running a national horse race wire service and gambling ships off the coast of Southern California. After gambling was shot down in the state, Siegel and his partners purchased the El Cortez Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Six months later the group sold the hotel and negotiated to purchase the Flamingo property from Billy Wilkerson.



Legend has it that the Flamingo was named after the legendary legs of his girlfriend Virginia Hill. She was nicknamed “The Flamingo” due to her red hair and long legs.

The grand opening of The Flamingo was scheduled for December 26, 1946, with Jimmy Durante as the opening act. In order to attract and transport celebrities to the grand opening, flights were char-

The Flamingo, having the reputation of being the first hotel/casino on the strip, was actually built five years after the El Rancho Vegas and four years after The Last Frontier.

Some say “Bugsy” Siegel muscled in on Billy Wilkerson, the original



Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel

dreamer of the resort; others say he did indeed at least scuff a foot in the sand to mark the unofficial groundbreaking for his “real class joint.” It was Siegel who took 30 acres of flat desert and turned it into 105 beautiful rooms surrounded by a health club, gymnasiums, steam rooms, tennis, badminton, squash and handball courts, stables with riding stock, a championship swimming pool, a trap-shooting range and a nine-hole golf course. Siegel convinced his under-world colleagues to bankroll his dream.

Del E. Webb was hired as the contractor and construction began in 1946, without a complete set of plans. Webb’s company would build what Siegel wanted and an architect would draw up the plans from what was built.

tered but bad weather in Los Angeles grounded the planes. Few celebrities showed up and, as a result, the opening consisted mostly of locals. Since the hotel had not been completed, gamblers took their winnings with them to where they were staying which caused the casino to lose money in it’s first week of operation. It shut down after the second week. The casino re-opened in March, 1947, after the hotel was finished. By May, the casino started showing a profit.

On June 20, 1947, in Virginia Hill’s mansion in Beverly Hills, California, Siegel was assassinated by a volley of bullets. Rumor has it that Virginia Hill helped set up the assassination. The day after, Meyer Lansky, Morris Rosen, Gus Greenbaum and Moe Sedway met with El Rancho owners Charlie Resnick and Sanford Adler to talk about a new partnership for the Flamingo hotel. After a brief

partnership, Greenbaum took over as owner and ran a profitable business including turning a \$4 million profit the first year.

Greenbaum surpassed the standards of elegance and showmanship that Siegel dreamed about. In the early 1950's, the cream of the entertainment world performed on the hardwood stage at the Flamingo. Over the years, some of the entertainers who performed were Pearl Bailey, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Nat "King" Cole, Lena Horne, Ted Lewis, Ray Bolger, Jimmy Durante, Shelly Winters, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Jack Benny, Count Basie, Danny Thomas, Bobby Darin, Wayne Newton, Phyllis Diller, Led Zeppelin, Bobby Vinton and many others. Joey Bishop was the last to perform on the stage on July 13, 1988. Long running revues took their places.

Greenbaum sold the Flamingo in 1955. From there, the hotel underwent several ownership changes and would-be changes, including a failed attempt by a Japanese corporation to take control. In 1967, Kirk Kerkorian agreed to pay \$13 million for the Flamingo. Kerkorian started a massive expansion and renovation program by adding a 350 seat casino theater lounge and a sky-room restaurant and demolishing the legendary champagne tower. The entertainment changed from the old school to the hottest pop groups of the 1960's. In 1970, after acquiring MGM studios, Kerkorian signed away his first two Las



The Flamingo with the champagne tower in the 1950's

Vegas hotels, the Flamingo and the International, to Hilton Hotels Corporation. In 1971, the name changed to the Flamingo Hilton.

In 1976, construction of the now world-famous flowering marquee fronting the Las Vegas strip was completed, and a new 28-story tower was added. The room total climbed from 700 to 1,250 rooms. Four years later, the Flamingo Hilton added another 500-room tower. Three years later, 500 more rooms were added, bringing the total to 2,250 rooms. Another tower with 800 rooms was

added bringing the total to 2,920 in 1989. In 1990, the fifth tower was erected, upping the room total to a whopping 3,530. It was the second largest hotel in the world at that time. Four years later, the final phase began and with it came the demolition of the last of the original buildings – 489 garden rooms that stood in what is now the Flamingo Hilton's lavish new Wildlife Habitat area which consists of flamingos, penguins, swans, parrots and ducks. A

sixth tower in 1994, added 612 more rooms and the first timeshare in Las Vegas to adjoin a hotel or casino.

In December 1998, Hilton Corporation created Park Place Entertainment and spun it off as a separate company. In 1999, Park Place decided to remove the name "Hilton" from the Flamingo name.

The Flamingo has 3,638 rooms, a 70,000 square foot casino with a Race and Sports Book, 25,000 square feet of meeting space, two olympic size swimming pools, a health spa, one kid's pool, two Jacuzzis, waterfalls, streams and lagoons and four tennis courts. There are luxurious restaurants for every taste, a chapel as well as an outdoor gazebo and a variety of shops.



These last remaining buildings, where Bugsy Siegel holed up amid thick walls and a maze of tunnels, came down in 1994

I'd like to thank Lynn Berk of the Flamingo Las Vegas for supplying me with the pictures and background information for this article.