

DIVERSIONS

GO WEST:

Viva! Las Vegas!

By Geoff McMurtry



Butch Ireland/ Daily Nebraskan

Author's note: The following story is basically true. The names have been changed because no one is innocent.

It's kind of hard to find Elvis this time of year, but we knew exactly where to look.

Las Vegas. Sin City. The City That Never Sleeps. The Jewel Of The Desert. The ultimate experiment in pure capitalism. Where anything you can't have or do anywhere else on the globe is not only readily available, it's reasonably priced.

The West

The whole idea behind it all was to see some horrible, fat, old, glitzy, out-of-tune Elvis impersonator in some cheap, tawdry lounge, while drinking cheap watered-down gin, and to do it on Christmas day. Everything the Russians hate and fear about America would be summed up in one tidy, festive little family holiday package. But things didn't quite work out.

With that in mind and six of us in a Dodge Diplomat with a dinosaur for a hood ornament, we set out at midnight. We would get to Las Vegas about midnight a day

later. We had some beer, some Chex Mix and three or four tapes of songs by or about Elvis to get us there. We had a life-size poster of The King in the back window so everybody would know where we were going and accord us the proper respect. We even had a Frank Sinatra tape, just in case someone gave us trouble.

OK. You're driving down Interstate 15. As you come around that final turn, between the last two mountains, you suddenly see the lights. Then you see more lights. Lights fill the sky, like in a Spielberg movie.

Although you're still 20 miles or so away, you notice something unusual. The city seems to be slithering. You blink your eyes and look again. No doubt about it. Las Vegas slithers, like a huge snake. And, just like when you see a huge snake, your first impulse is to turn and flee. Your second impulse is also to turn and flee.

After a moment, you notice you're not fleeing yet. You haven't moved. You can't look away. No matter how disgusting it is, no matter how repulsive, the worse it gets, the more you want to look.

As you drive across the barren waste toward certain doom, you reflect on snakes you have known.

You know that it has probably seen you by now, and the only thing on the lowly beast's carnivorous mind is to reach out, bite you, squeeze the living hell out of you, then swallow you up and gulp you into its digestive pit with all the bones, bamboo hats, sunglasses, cameras and bermuda shorts of all the other brave, foolish explorers who got this far. The only real difference is that, unlike other large, nefarious snakes you've seen, this one isn't caged. It's right there in front of you, crawling across the desert, thinking of nothing but chomping down on your head. Ten miles away, and you can almost hear the forked tongue whispering, offering you a free drink and a friendly game of blackjack.

Somewhere in the back of your mind you know Marlin Perkins is watching from the truck, and you silently curse him.

Day one wasn't so bad. Of course, that's the oldest trick in the book, but we were younger then and easily buoyed by the empty lull of success. Our false euphoria actually began clear back by the gates of the zoo.

Before you even get to Las Vegas, you have to get past the Nevada State Line. Just like in every other state in the Union, there

is a big green sign saying, "Welcome to (name of state, in this case Nevada)." Unlike every other state in the Union, about 6 inches from the damn sign is a stadium-sized casino, powered by more neon than in all of Ethiopia. This is the city of Mesquite, Nev.

When we had passed it, "Ace," the gambler of the bunch, had to stop and partake of their wares. Sure enough, he picked up 20 free dollars in just a few minutes of casual fun. The rest of us were so happy with our free drinks, given to us just for standing close enough to the table to look like we were playing, that we didn't even notice the separating jaws that were probably hovering over our heads.

Just like that, we were back on the road, laughing at how that poor ignorant casino had paid us \$20 to drink their booze. Were we ever stupid.

So, there we were. Ten miles away, staring straight into the Depths of Hell, and not even having the good sense to laugh back at its face as a final gesture of defiance before being devoured.

Oh, we laughed all right. We laughed plenty. We laughed at all the ignorant greedy simpletons who had come here before us, thinking they'd make a killing to

pay off the car loan, only to end up leaving the car on a craps table. We laughed at all the grubby little fools who came here for a new beginning, a new start in life, to change and better the lives they'd left behind, only to lose every penny they'd brought and end up selling their clothes and, ultimately, themselves, just for bus fare home. Falling short of this, they would just wander the streets and the casinos, naked, hoping to find a dropped poker chip to cash in so they could finally escape from Hell, forgetting that it is written, "Once arriving, thou shalt never leave."

We even laughed at all those nice Midwestern families who came just for a little weekend vacation, who thought it'd be nice to get the family all together for a few days, and maybe even teach the kids a little about finance; who only ended up donating their life savings so that the West Coast arm of the Mastaccioli Family could build yet another towering neon monument to their greed and stupidity. The nice couple would never retire, and the kids would never go to college. And we laughed.

See LAS VEGAS on 6