

University of Nevada, Reno

**“Make the Biggest Little Mistake of Your Life” —
On-Screen Portrayals of Reno, Nevada, in Television and Film**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Science in Geography

By

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Abstract

Reno, Nevada, is a subject seen and mentioned many times in film and television over the past century. On-screen depictions use ways to create a sense of place that often focus on specific aspects of a place and omit others. Due to the wide audience that Hollywood productions receive, how places are viewed in film and on television affects the overall public perception of that place. Reno, Nevada, has been portrayed as a center for divorce, gambling, and prostitution, as well as being the place to go if you're washed-up, on the run, or are uneducated trailer trash. The public's perception of Reno changes over time, and can easily be followed by examining the films and television that feature this self-described "biggest little city in the world."

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Introduction

For the public at large, film and television have a major effect on their perceptions of what any given place in the world is like. With over 57,000,000 square miles of dry land surface on earth (World Atlas 2013), most people will understandably never have an opportunity to see the globe. Film and television give the average person a shot at learning about places they otherwise might never know. These unvisited places become known as they are portrayed on screen, regardless of how accurate that portrayal might be.

A great example of this is the continent-country of Australia. The average American has never been to Australia, yet nearly all could sit down and comment on what that landmass is like, offer a discourse on plant and animal life, and narrate how Australian citizens live and act. Most accounts will be similar, and only a small fraction of the accounts will be in the least accurate, because all but the tiniest number of exponents have only seen the place as it is portrayed in film and television (Beeton 2012). Many may be surprised to find the continent is not teeming with kangaroos, koalas, and crocodiles on every street corner, and that there are more alcoholic beverages available beyond Foster's brand beer.

Film and television tend to focus on what makes a place unique, rather than what makes a place similar, and because of this, they often

exaggerate the differentiating aspects of a place and omit the others (Carnes 1995).

There are many places in the world that are seen more on film than in person, and Reno, Nevada, is most definitely one such place. Reno is a city recognized by most, visited by some, and known by few who do not call it home. As of the 2010 census, the population of the Reno-Sparks Metropolitan Statistical Area was 425,417, making it the 117th largest area in the United States by population (census.gov). Despite a relatively small size, Reno has worldwide notoriety thanks to its unique historical relationship with divorce, marriage, gambling, prostitution, and sundry additional vices. It is understandable, then, that the city features in films and television, and because of that receives greater exposure and notoriety. The view the general public has of a city affects how that city is categorized into society. Analyzing how Reno is featured in film gives greater insight into how the viewing public perceives the “Biggest Little City in the World.”

Methodology

This thesis focuses on the interaction between place, history, and film to observe how the public perceives Reno, Nevada. Histories of Reno, the concept of sense of place, film theory, and film criticism had to be researched to properly analyze the films. Databases of films, such as the Internet Movie Database, were used to determine correct titles, locations, characters, release dates, and other relevant information. Rental and streaming sites including Netflix, Amazon, and YouTube were used to view and otherwise gain access to the needed material. Unless the word “Reno” is in the title of a film, or a film partly set in Reno was previously viewed, it can be hard to find a film that takes place in or mentions the city with a simple search on the Internet.

As a result, constant conversations with individuals, countless hours reading through film location guides, and research on Internet forums were used to find the relevant films and television programs. Hours of film and television were watched to determine how and if these productions portrayed, viewed, and discussed the city in a significant way. The films and television programs were then analyzed and critiqued to see how they portray Reno and how that portrayal was achieved. They then had to be compared to the historic record to determine how they fit within the city’s history. Unfortunately, some films that represent Reno were not able to be viewed due to their unavailability, the most notable of which is *The Motel Life* (2012). These unavailable films could not be in-

cluded in this work. Twenty-four feature length films, two short films, one television series, and two television episodes are discussed that mention Reno and include the city either as a setting or as a key element in the plot.

Sense of Place

Sense of place, as a concept in geography, attempts to explain how places are viewed and experienced by people. A lot goes into how one develops and perceives a sense of place, and it cannot be described in a simple sentence or two. A place in question is just that, one single place, a spot on the map, and it can be as large or small in scale as one wants it to be. It is the word “sense” that is the main variable in the term.

Many people when asked to describe a place focus on the physical details of a place, what the buildings look like, what kinds of plants are there, the types of business in an area, what the weather is like. These physical attributes are part of what creates a sense of place, but there are other aspects. When asked to *think* of a place, much more than the physical details are recalled. A sense of place relies on all of the senses. Smells, sounds, tastes, and textures can all be a part of how someone perceives a place. Experiences a person has had in a place are also a factor in how that place is perceived. Adding together these sights, sounds, smells, and experiences creates an overall feeling of what a place is like and how it can or should be utilized by the observer. This emotional tie with place is the largest component of what a sense of place is. It shapes how one feels about the place, and what aspects of that place evoke those feelings (Steele 1981).

Every day of our lives is full of almost infinite stimuli. Because of this, when someone is in a place, he or she cannot experience and pro-

cess everything about the surroundings, just those things that are relevant to feelings or needs at that time. For someone not to be overwhelmed, specifics have to be a main focus, while other things are by necessity filtered out. The ways that each person focuses and filters their surroundings in an area helps develop, for them, their sense of place for that area (Steele 1981).

A walk down a busy street in a major city is a completely different experience for the person that lives around the corner than it is to a tourist visiting from a small town. The two people will focus on different aspects of their surroundings because one is used to the city and one is not. The tall buildings and throngs of people will not be as noticeable to someone who deals with them every day, and the smaller aspects of the street, like the local shop that has cantaloupes on sale, will most likely be overlooked by the tourist. For this reason, an area's sense of place is not the same from person to person, but differs due to the things that each individual focuses on and filters out (Steele 1981).

These foci and filters are apparent when a place is remembered. When recalling a rundown neighborhood in a bad part of town, anything nice or functional is usually overlooked, because those parts of the neighborhood do not reflect the overall feeling one has of the area. The focus of the observer in recounting this blighted area is on the shabby buildings, vacant lots, beat up cars, the undesirable people walking along the streets, and the feelings these stimuli produced (Relph 1976).

In one's personal experiences they are left on their own to develop a sense of place in whatever area they find themselves, but in film, this is not the case. A film's sense of place is defined by what is being shown on the screen. The images have already been filtered and focused for the observer, who is, in effect, being spoon fed a sense of that place being portrayed in the film (McCort 2002). Directors, editors, set designers and others are in total control of what is and isn't included in a film, so the sense of place a film evokes is much more homogeneous than if the individual members of the audience were at that place themselves filtering the content on their own (Hallam 2010).

Because of films, books, the news, and other media, the public at large has preconceived notions of what places are like before they ever experience those places in reality. These preconceived notions of the public play a large part in how certain places are represented in film. If the film doesn't in some way portray a place as the public expects it, it will not be as believable of a setting for the plot. These public perceptions can change over time, and as a result how cities are shown in film changes (Barber 2002).

How film establishes place

One of the main ways a film notifies the viewer of its setting comes through the use of establishing shots, with features included that are considered representative or even iconic of that area. A film purportedly

set somewhere in New York City, no matter where in the film is actually made, will usually have a quick shot of the city's skyline, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, of the notch of green in Central Park, or all four before it focuses down to the exact setting. The buildings, the bridge, the statue, and the park immediately explain to the viewer where the film is without the need for any dialogue or subtitles (Webb 1987). Similarly, if a film is set in the South Pacific, the beginning of the film will include some shots of beaches, palm trees, luaus, hula girls, surfers, etc. By providing these establishing shots, the makers of the film are taking their fictional story and placing it firmly into a real setting, this way the story becomes more identifiable and believable to the audience (McCort 2002).

After initial establishing shots, a film will usually focus further into the setting, and show the specific area where the story takes place. These later shots don't just provide a general location in the world, but an insight into how the filmmakers want that place portrayed (Pramaggiore 2006). A film about gang violence in Los Angeles will probably have a quick shot of the Hollywood sign to provide a location, but won't have further establishing shots at the beach or in Beverly Hills, since that could be a distraction that would cause the viewer to think the film's setting is in areas of relative affluence. Instead, the following shots would be of drug deals in Inglewood and Compton, of low riders, and government assisted housing (Quart and Kornblum 2000). But consider how well Ed-

die Murphy's arrival in Southern California is telegraphed, in *Beverly Hills Cop*, as he drives down the famed city's palm-tree lined boulevard.

A film set in Chinatown in San Francisco will still most likely have a shot or two of the skyline and the Golden Gate Bridge, but it won't have any further establishing shots of Golden Gate Park or the Castro District, as these places don't evoke a feeling of San Francisco as a whole, but of their specific locations within the city. In order to create the correct mood and setting, the secondary establishing shots would need to be in and around Chinatown. In this way, establishing shots not only give the viewer a general location, but a more specific setting with a mood and feel for the upcoming plot. Focusing on the first few shots in each film (or the section of the film that features a new place) one can see the how a place is perceived by the general viewing public at that time (Pramaggiore 2006).

The Reno Arch

The iconic feature of Reno, Nevada, is the text of its famous arch. There have been four permanent arches in Reno's history and each arch has been used in film for an establishing shot in the city. The first arch was erected in 1929, complete with the new slogan, "The Biggest Little City in the World." The slogan was the first place finisher in a contest the previous year. There were hundreds of submissions from the sensible "Nevada's Silver Lilly" and "Where Life's Worth Living," to the comic "Reno: If

You Are In A Rush, We Will Get You A Divorce In Three Months.” The winning slogan has become a second name for Reno, just as immediately recognizable as Chicago’s “The Windy City,” or New York’s “The Big Apple.”

The first arch was only in existence for a few years before it was replaced by a flashier neon-signed arch in 1935. The second arch was well received and lasted for nearly three decades before it was replaced. This second arch is still in the city, now spanning the southern end of the Lake Street Bridge. A third arch was erected in 1964, and had a more modern look. It was much brighter and larger than its predecessor and served the city until 1987.

Reno’s downtown began to fall into decline by the 1980s and a new arch was seen as a way to revitalize the city. Arch number four was the brightest and biggest arch yet. It stands to this day, and symbolizes the city more than any other single image (Land and Land 1995). Almost every film that has any scene in Reno has an establishing shot of one of these four arches. It is so important to include the arch to establish the place in the mind of the audience that the film *Love Ranch*, which is set in the mid-1970s but filmed in 2010, has an establishing shot of the fourth arch that was erected in 1987; more than a decade after the film’s setting. The need to include the arch was greater than the need for his-

torical accuracy.



Figure 1: Reno's four arches as seen in *Night Life in Reno* (1931) (upper left), *Charlie Chan in Reno* (1939) (upper right), *Melvin and Howard* (1980) (lower left), and *Love Ranch* (2010) (lower right) (images are screenshots of the films in question).

Choosing a Place as a Setting

When deciding on a setting for a film, there are two main options: use a fictional place or use a real place. If the setting is in a very small town, it is often a fictional place because most small towns have national anonymity. Setting a film in a small town rarely requires the viewer to have any previous knowledge of the town itself, only a general knowledge of the region that the town is in. Most films that are set in small towns could really be set in any small town in that region of the country and it

would serve the same purpose (Levy 1991). If a fictional city is decided upon, the city usually goes unnamed, and once again, has only the defining characteristics of the overall region in which the film is set (Barber 2002).

When a real place is decided upon, it is done for the characteristics of that specific place, rather than the overall region, otherwise, the director would have no reason to constrain themselves to the realities of that place (Yacowar 2000). In the case of places like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, or other major metropolitan areas, locating a story in these cities isn't just because the author or director wants a highly populated area, but because the plot requires the use of some finer aspect of the city.

A film set in New York, for example, usually can't be reset in Chicago or Los Angeles without major changes to the plot or back-story (Shiel 2001). These major cities usually have numerous defining characteristics. New York, for example is known for Wall Street, organized crime, the fashion industry, Broadway, the subway, taxi cabs, high concentrations of many different minorities including Italians, Jews, Puerto Ricans, and others, and a comprehensive list would go on and on. Most films that take place in New York use one or more of the city's notable characteristics of which it has so many (Yacowar 2000). Large and diverse cities allow the films set in them to be just as diverse (MacDonald 2003).

Not all cities however are known for so many different things. Cities known only for one or a few specific industries, cultures, or activities can only be the setting of a film if the plot includes those things (Harris 2011). For a film to be successfully set in New Orleans, for example, it needs to include in its plot something invoking the French Quarter, Voodoo, Hurricane Katrina, a Mardi Gras krewe, or at the very least a jazz funeral. If one of these elements is not included, there is little reason to have the setting be in New Orleans, and small justification for a viewing public to identify with and recognize the city.

Reno is very much in this category of city. Reno is a smaller place, not cracking the top hundred populated areas of the United States (U.S. Census 2010), but curiously, it has managed, nonetheless, to be known by just about everyone. The reasons for that have changed over the last century, but Reno has always been known for specific industries and “sinful” activities including divorce, gambling, prostitution, as a haven to the seedy element that participates in these activities, a place for dissolution and down-and-outers (Land and Land 1995). Whatever the public’s current view of the city is what will become the focus when a film is set in Reno.

History and Background

Reno began its existence as a river crossing over the Truckee River that was called Lake's Crossing, taking its name from a local landowner, Myron C. Lake, who charged tolls for the use of his bridge. The bridge was a busy transfer point for people traveling through the area, and soon Lake had built up the land next to the bridge with an inn, livery stable, grist mill, and other amenities. When the transcontinental railroad came through the region, Lake's Crossing was chosen as a suitable spot to place a station due to Lake deeding four hundred acres of land over to the rail baron Charles Crocker. The Railroad named their new city Reno after Civil War general Jesse Lee Reno, a friend of Crocker (Land and Land 1995). Reno's rail depot was the transfer point from the main transcontinental rail line to the Virginia and Truckee Railroad that serviced the silver-studded region of the Comstock Lode and all the money that flowed to and from that region. Reno used its prime location along the railroad to its advantage and as a result grew rapidly throughout the 1800s. Reno was content to do quite well for itself as a rail-based economy for decades (Moe 2008).

Reno Divorce

Commerce and the railroad were not the only reason to visit the city. The divorce laws in Nevada brought people into Reno. In the 1890s, New York lawyers discovered the simple divorce laws of Nevada (Cobb 2008). At the

turn of the 20th century one needed only to live in Nevada for six months to obtain residency and then could divorce for most any reason, including simply declaring “incompatibility.” In the rest of the country one could divorce only if there was solid evidence of adultery or battery, and even then the process was very expensive, usually took at least a year or more, and was not guaranteed to be successful in any situation.

Nevada’s relatively easy way to obtain a divorce gained notoriety over time, and after a while the process of moving to Nevada for the sole purpose of divorce came to be known as a “Reno Divorce,” so named because Reno was the largest city in the state, and the vast majority of lodgings available for those staying the needed amount of time were in Reno (Harmon 1998).

The divorces in Reno became extremely lucrative, and in 1927 the state changed the time requirement for residency from six months to three months and the number of divorces promptly increased (Land and Land 1995). A Reno divorce was now twice as affordable as before, allowing more than the very wealthy to take part in the practice. In 1927, neighboring California passed the “anti-gin” marriage law requiring a three day waiting period between the issuance of a marriage license and the wedding ceremony. The day-long drive over the Sierra Nevada was now the only way for eager couples in California to be married quickly, and soon the number of marriages in Reno outnumbered the divorces (Land and Land 1995). By 1929, there were so many non-permanent res-

idents using the city for divorce and marriage that Reno assigned itself a nickname: “The Biggest Little City in the World.”

In 1931, the residency requirement was again cut in half from three months to six weeks. This change lured even more people to Reno to get divorces, because now the cost of staying in the city long enough to claim residency and obtain a divorce was in the reach of most people earning a decent living (Harmon 1998). Reno divorces became so prolific that saying someone “went to Reno” became a slang term for divorce in general, whether that divorce took place in Nevada or not (Barber 2008).

Gambling

Gambling was a part of Nevada culture dating back to the days of the Comstock, and among local native tribes, games of chance date back thousands of years (Moody 1997). Prior to the 1930s, the state government had never publicly come out in favor of gambling, and numerous anti-gambling laws were passed and enforced (somewhat) since Gold Hill, in the Comstock District of Storey County, passed the first anti-gambling law in 1859 (Land and Land 1995).

Despite many attempts to suppress gambling in the state, gamblers continued the practice in back rooms, basements, and alleyway clubs. The State of Nevada finally gave up and legalized gambling in 1931 ushering in a new economic base for the state. Nevada was the only place in the United States where gambling was legal, and Reno was the state’s

largest city (Moody 1997). Reno had to wait almost five years however, before gambling really started to be a major draw for the city.

The first clubs and casinos were owned and operated by the people who were associated with gambling, or gamblers themselves, in Reno before the new gambling law was passed. These gamblers were used to operating in the back alleys and shadows, and as a result were minimally inclined to promote their businesses or expand their clientele even though their operations were now legal. There were plenty of people coming into Reno during this time to fill these newly legalized clubs, but the visitors were more due to the effects of the new divorce law than directly associated with gambling (Moody 1997).

In 1934, Harold Smith was sent to Reno by his father, Raymond, to set up a gambling parlor after the Smiths were fined and jailed for violating California anti-gambling laws by operating a penny roulette in Modesto, California (Moody 1997). When Harold arrived in Reno, he was disgusted that the house limits in the city were so low and wanted nothing to do with the city, dismissing Reno as a “tin horn town.” The Smiths later decided that legal gambling was the best choice, and Harolds Club set up shop on South Virginia Street in February of 1935, probably not coincidentally on Harold’s 26th birthday (Land and Land 1995).

Unlike the earlier Reno club owners, the Smiths were shameless promoters, willing to try anything to drum up business. The Smith’s club first gained notoriety for its “mouse game,” a game of chance that con-

sisted of betting on what hole in a table a mouse would walk into. The game only lasted a few days, as it was an easy game to rig, but it was able to make the papers and put a national spotlight on the city's gambling. Harolds Club was the first casino to be open for 24 hours a day, and was the first to add bright lights inside and flashing lights outside to entice passers-by to venture into the club.

Harolds was Reno's first casino to regularly employ female dealers, helping the casino attract women (and drawing in some hopeful men) who before were not regulars in any of the Reno casinos. Harolds Club's publicity, along with the changing practices of the other clubs and casinos to keep up, turned the once fairly modest practice of gambling into a new industry, capable of drawing people to the city for it alone (Moody 1997). To make things better still, the city already had a captive population of divorce seekers who had to stay in town for six weeks at a time. These transient residents had no other purpose in the city other than killing time waiting for their residency to kick in, and more often than not found themselves spending most of that time in the clubs and casinos. Spirits were often high due to their impending freedom and therefore purse strings were loose; a gambling boom had begun in Reno (Harmon 1998).

Reno (1939)

Reno is a film that chronicles the rise of divorce and gaming in Reno, Nevada in the beginning of the 20th century. The film begins with an old casino owner named Bill Shear standing trial for fixing a roulette wheel. He tells the court that in order to understand his reasons for cheating he needs to tell his life story. The judge approves, and Bill Shear's story is told.

Bill came to Reno at the turn of the century as a lawyer. He began a modest practice defending miners against the large firms that owned the silver mines in the region. His practice quickly gained fame among the local miners and business flourished. Unfortunately for Bill, the mines began to dry up and miners started leaving in droves.

Bill had grown to love Reno, and refused to stand idly by while his city turned into a ghost town. Desperate to find anything that would attract people to Reno, Bill finally came upon the state's divorce laws. Bill immediately recognized the opportunity that was before him and began to promote the city far and wide a place to go to get a divorce. Before he knew it, Bill had single handedly turned Reno into the biggest little city in the world, with himself being the wealthiest and busiest divorce attorney in town. In fact, it was he who came up with the city's famous slogan long before the arch was erected. His busy schedule got the best of him and Bill began neglecting his loving wife and child. Eventually his wife had enough and got a divorce herself, leaving the state with their child.

This catastrophic event began a downward spiral in Bill's life, eventually leading to his being disbarred, unable to practice law.



Figure 2: Bill and his friend watch as all the miners leave town in *Reno* (1939) (screen-shot of film)

Trying to salvage his life, Bill used what was left of his wealth and connections to buy a casino. He operated the casino for years, always regretting the decisions he made that led to his divorce. One day a woman came to his casino that he recognized as his daughter. Learning that she was in town for her own divorce, he was then determined to do all he could to get her to leave town before that could happen. He rigged the casino to steal all her money so she would not be able to afford to stay

the needed six weeks. Upon hearing his testimony, Bill's daughter forgives him and tells him that her mother never stopped loving him. She reconsiders her divorce and goes back home to be with her husband.

Reno is an interesting film that gives an alternate account of how the city became the divorce capital of the world. Instead of the notoriety of Nevada divorce laws slowly building over decades, the film has a single lawyer make the city famous practically overnight. Gambling in *Reno* is seen as more of a side industry that one engages in when they can't make it in the divorce industry. This film romanticizes the city in its earlier, mining days and sees divorce as a wicked practice that corrupted an otherwise peaceful city. Divorce seems to infect all who are unwise enough to deal in it. The ending of the film implies that all Reno divorces take place simply because it's easier than dealing with one's problems, and that if one is determined enough, a Reno divorce is never necessary.

Night Life in Reno (1931)

Night Life In Reno is the earliest film about Reno that was found. It was filmed on the heels of the new gaming and six week residency laws, and only four years after the three month residency law went into effect. It is a perfect example of how quickly a city can gain nationwide notoriety.

The plot is about a woman named June Wyatt who finds out that her husband John is having an affair and promptly sets off to Reno to get a divorce. Upon arrival she finds out that divorces are not immediate, but

require a six week stay in the state. It is apparent that she had heard of the infamous “Reno Divorce,” but knew nothing of the specifics, thinking that the divorce laws are so lax in Nevada that she would be able to obtain one instantly upon arrival.

When the woman’s lawyer is notifying her of the requirements for divorce in the state, she is introduced to another woman named Gwen who seems to be a pro at Reno divorces. Gwen informs the lead character of all the ins and outs of the Reno divorce scene, and convinces her to use a pseudonym during her stay in the city so she can be more anonymous and therefore be able to enjoy what Reno has to offer to its fullest extent. June decides that the name Peggy is “thrilling,” but a new last name is not bothered with because “... they have so little value in Reno.” Changing one’s name is stated to be the norm in Reno among the resident divorcees, and is used as a key point in the plot of the film.

Meanwhile, June’s husband, John, learns of his wife’s intentions and sets off to Reno to stop the divorce proceedings. June’s lawyer is more than helpful due to his collection of a non-refundable retainer, and promises John that he will act as attorney to reunite the couple. The Lawyer gives John the information needed to find June, but does not provide her pseudonym, as that was decided upon outside of his presence.

John then sets off to the hotel where June is staying and meets another man named Roy who is in town waiting for his own divorce. Roy

is perpetually drunk and uses his waiting-time in Reno to be with as many women as possible. He convinces John to live it up and that there's no point in trying to rekindle a romance that has been extinguished. The two then set off in a drunken stupor to find women to share the night with and the two eventually come across Gwen.



Figure 3: Gambling clubs in *Night Life in Reno* (1931) are much more subdued and classy than they will later be portrayed in film and television. (screenshot of film)

Dates are set up for John to be with Gwen and for Roy to be with Gwen's friend Peggy (with the pseudonym, John doesn't know Roy is going on a date with June). During the date, passion is rekindled between John and June and their romance blossoms once again. They dismiss

the idea of divorce, and the film ends with the two getting on a train together headed for home and happiness.

The assumptions of the characters in *Night Life in Reno* say a lot of what the popular view of Reno was in the early 1930s. When the film was released, the residency law in Reno was brand new, but three month residency were in effect for four years and the city was already known the world over for divorce. Because the six week law was so new, the specifics were not widely known, and as a consequence, the public's knowledge of divorce in Reno was at that time based more on rumor than fact. In the film, June had heard of the new, easier to get Reno divorce, but had no clue on what the requirements actually were. The surprise of the six week requirement is filmed in such a way as to make the modern viewer believe that it is intended to be a surprise to the audience. The practice of using a pseudonym could not be confirmed in the historical record, and may have been fabricated by the filmmakers to add a twist to the plot. The fact that they decided that it was a plausible thing to do, does, however, speak volumes on the public's perception of Reno's values at that time.

With legal gambling so new in Nevada when the film came out, the gambling in the film is more a side note than the main focus. The characters are more interested in drinking in bars and hotel parlors than in gambling. In fact, the only main character of the film to participate in gambling is Roy, and he is seen making only a single bet on a roulette

table. The female characters of the film are never even seen in the same room as the club's gaming tables. In 1931, Reno's only nation-wide draw was in the form of divorce, thus including gambling in the plot would serve no purpose for the film makers.

The Merry Wives of Reno (1934)

The Merry Wives of Reno is a classic among Reno divorce films. The film follows two neighbor couples from New York City. The first couple, Tom and Lois, has been happily married for one year. The other couple, Frank and Madge, has been unhappily married for decades, and their daily arguments can be heard through the wall of the two apartments. The film opens with Tom and Lois exchanging anniversary gifts. Tom receives an expensive overcoat and is very grateful for the lavish gift.

Later that day, Tom is approached by a woman, named Bunny, at work. She is interested in buying a boat and wants Tom to come by her apartment that night to finalize the sale. Bunny has no intention to buy the boat, but is interested in seducing Tom. Tom comes to Bunny's apartment eager to make a sale and is mortified by Bunny's proposition and is about to leave. Suddenly, there is someone at the front door. Afraid it is her husband, Bunny pushes Tom into the other room. The man at the door is not Bunny's husband, but is Tom's neighbor Frank.

Frank thinks the current situation is hilarious and shouts from the entryway accusatory statements as if he is, in fact, Bunny's husband.

Fearful that he will be caught by the jealous husband, Tom absconds from the apartment through the window and down the fire escape, leaving his coat in the apartment. After Tom leaves, Frank somewhat successfully attempts to seduce Bunny, but while doing so there is once again someone at the front door. This time it actually is Bunny's husband and Frank is forced to leave the apartment in the same manner as Tom, also leaving his coat behind.

When Tom returns home, Lois immediately notices that he has no coat and questions him about it. Tom, worried that his wife won't believe the truth, tells her that he gave his coat to a beggar. Lois is skeptical of the story and decides that since she can no longer trust her husband, her best course of action is to travel to Reno for a divorce. Frank's return home yields the same results. Frank is fine with the idea of getting a divorce, but is unhappy about his wife demanding more than the \$50 a week in alimony that he's willing to give. Both men team up to travel to Reno to stop their wives from getting divorces, Tom out of love, and Frank to save money.

The scene where the women arrive in Reno is different from any other establishing shot in other Reno films. After showing the arch with the famous slogan, the camera pans across dozens of signs for law firms, highlighting the city's need for divorce attorneys. The rest of the film consists of the main characters getting drunk at parties and accusing one

another of being unfaithful. In the end neither woman wants a divorce, to the delight of Tom and misery of Frank.



Figure 4: In *The Merry Wives of Reno* (1934), Frank (left) and Tom (right) decide to team up to stop their wives from successfully divorcing them (screenshot of film).

This film focuses little on gaming, as the large, famous clubs weren't very established yet, and instead shows Reno as being a city that serves no purpose other than facilitating divorce and lasciviousness. The dozens and dozens of law firms that are shown establishes an economy that is entirely dependent upon divorce.

***Story Conference* (1934)**

Story Conference is a short film starring Lillian Roth as herself. The plot consists of some movie producers coming to Ms. Roth to inform her that she has been signed to star in a film. The producers then hold a “story conference” to determine what the film will be about. The rest of the film consists of a series of musical numbers for the producers to choose from to be featured in the new film.



Figure 5: Lillian Roth and some recently divorced dancers sing about the virtues of Reno divorce in *Story Conference* (1934) (screenshot of film)

One of the musical numbers, titled “Alimony Sal,” is about a woman who has just gotten a divorce in Reno. The bulk of the number takes place in front of a backdrop of a courthouse that reads “Reno County

Courthouse.” Lillian Roth sings the title song about a woman who has just been “Reno-vated,” for the fifth time. The entire song is full of one-liners about divorce, marriage, and staying in Reno. During the number Vivian is joined by dozens of dancing women who all have their divorce papers in hand. Near the end of the song, the women dance into the “Alimony Hotel” where other women waiting their six weeks sing lines about their impending divorces.

Story Conference is a perfect example of the 1930s view of Reno and the divorce industry. Reno divorce is seen as a trivial thing because it can be done so easily and for almost no reason at all.

Charlie Chan in Reno (1939)

By 1939, the gaming laws had been in effect for eight years and Reno gambling was in full swing. *Charlie Chan in Reno* uses “the Reno Divorce” as its main plot point, but by this time gambling was rising as an element in the public’s perception of Reno, thanks to famous clubs like Harolds, so to provide a more thorough sense of place, gambling is included throughout the film and in establishing shots.

Charlie Chan in Reno is the twenty-second installment of the popular Charlie Chan film series and had a large audience (Mitchell 1999; Huang 2011). The film follows the Asian American detective Charlie Chan while he is solving the murder of a woman in Reno. The main character, Mary Whitman, is in Reno to get a divorce. The film begins during her

cab ride to her hotel. The cab driver is talking about the divorce laws of Nevada and how every person in the city is in the process of getting a divorce. He tells Mary what Reno is about, and apparently that begins and ends at divorce, stating "I owe my living to divorces, same as the most of the people in this town." When she interrupts him by asking how much longer it will take to get to her hotel he replies, "Oh, you're in a hurry are ya? No matter how soon I get you there lady, it still takes six weeks." When she arrives at the hotel, the hostess refers to her as "another lost soul here for the cure." In the first couple minutes of the film it is very clear that divorce is the main industry in the city and that divorcees are so common that everyone would be surprised if one was in the city for any other reason.

Mary isn't in town voluntarily however; her husband wants to marry another woman and is basically forcing her to stay in Reno so he can get his divorce. For her, Reno is the last stop of an unhappy life, but it seems that her new life will be no happier. Other people in the hotel are enjoying themselves and seem to be happy about the whole process. Every woman at the hotel is apparently getting a divorce, and every man in the hotel is taking advantage of the situation.

On her first night at the hotel Mary runs into Jeanne Bentley, the woman who her husband plans to marry after the divorce. Jeanne publicly embarrasses Mary, and Mary leaves the lounge of the hotel ashamed and humiliated. Later that night Mary is found in Jeanne's room stand-

ing over Jeanne's dead body. She is promptly arrested for the murder as she proclaims her innocence. Charlie Chan is a personal friend of the accused, and heads for Reno straightaway to prove Mary's innocence. It goes without saying that Charlie Chan is successful, and that Mary and her husband are reunited through the experience.



Figure 6: Gambling is more of a focus in *Charlie Chan in Reno* (1939), and shows men and women both participating in the pastime (screenshot of film).

Charlie Chan in Reno portrays everyone in Reno as either actively getting divorced, skirt-chasing the divorcees, or facilitating divorce in some way. In this film, Reno is a place where morality and virtue take a backseat to the sins of divorce and gambling.

The Women (1939)

As the title suggests, *The Women* is a film starring women, without a single male role in the entire picture. Following many different storylines over the course of multiple years, *The Women* is an account of high-society, Park Avenue women and their intertwining misadventures that contribute to them all arriving simultaneously in Reno to obtain divorces from their husbands, and the aftereffects of their divorces (and remarriages).

The main character in the film is Mary Haines, almost exclusively referred to as Mrs. Steven Haines. She finds out through the gossip mill at the local salon that her husband is seeing another woman. Too proud to confront him about it, Mary sets off on a train to Reno so she can be seen as having the upper hand in the situation when the story hits the society pages of the paper. The woman that is having the affair with Mr. Haines is the perfume girl at the local department store, Crystal Allen. Crystal is in it for nothing other than the money, and the spark quickly fades between her and Mr. Haines, who is also too proud to admit he has made a mistake.

In the meantime, a few other high-society women are on their way to Reno, some to get divorces because their husbands are having affairs and others so they can get married to men that they are having affairs with. Not surprisingly, the women that are being cheated on and the ones doing the cheating are all staying at the same ranch to wait their six

weeks to claim residency. The ranch is run by a hard living woman who is missing teeth, has ratty hair, never seems to be in a clean shirt, and refuses to ever get married. She is representative of the local population on the outskirts of Reno: uneducated, unkempt, and disillusioned by the divorce industry. At the ranch the truth of who is cheating on and with whom comes to light, and the women get into a fight (although “brawl” may be the better term) and the cheaters all become bitter rivals of the cheated upon women. When they all return to New York, their rivalries continue and Crystal Allen Haines is accepted into the cheaters faction.



Figure 7: Mrs. Haines (right) and Crystal Allen (left) come face to face before Mrs. Haines flees to Reno in *The Women* (1939) (screenshot of film).

Two years later, Mary Haines is still upset over having to divorce her husband and wishes that the two could reconcile, but doesn't see how it could ever happen. She then hears, through her daughter, that Crystal may be having an affair and that Mr. Haines is extremely unhappy in his current marriage. Realizing that this is the opportunity she's been looking for, Mary quickly sets off to investigate. In the end, Crystal's affair is publically uncovered allowing Mr. Haines to divorce her and re-marry his former wife, Mary. The final shot is of Mary running toward her husband (who is never shown) with outstretched arms ready to swallow her pride and forgive all his transgressions, if that's what it takes to once again be called Mrs. Steven Haines.

The Women portrays Reno as the only place in the country that views marriage in the same trivial light as New York's high-society. A place where one can change their husband or wife in the same way they change their winter coat according to that year's fashion trends. All one needs to do is spend a six week vacation on a ranch before they marry their next ex-husband or wife.

Romantic Nevada (1943)

In the documentary short *Romantic Nevada*, the divorce industry is the focus in its segment on Reno. *Romantic Nevada* is an installment of the "FitzPatrick Traveltalk" series, the self-proclaimed "voice of the globe" produced by James A. FitzPatrick. FitzPatrick was known for his travel

oriented documentary short films. Over a thirty-year period from 1925 to 1955 FitzPatrick produced, and often directed and narrated, 274 travel documentary shorts (IMDb). These were seen in movie theatres all over the United States as part of their regular programming along with the newsreels, cartoons, and main features. FitzPatrick's documentaries ranged from domestic locales such as the Carolinas, Minnesota, and Oregon, to European travel destinations like Paris, Ireland, and Venice, to "exotic" lands including the Far East, South America, African nations, and the South Pacific. These documentaries were made to show the viewer what is unique to each area, and to be somewhat of a substitute to traveling to that place (Bronzini 1980).

Romantic Nevada begins as a scenic tour of Lake Tahoe and Pyramid Lake, highlighting the natural beauty of the region, then transitions to a working dude ranch to show the viewer that Nevada's cowboy culture is alive and well. The last half of the film focuses on Reno, and more specifically Reno divorce. The first time the city's name is mentioned is in the line "The Mecca of the disillusioned bride is Reno, the gay little metropolis of Nevada, which has become world famous for its association with marriage and divorce."

FitzPatrick lays the groundwork of his Reno segment by first discussing the women who are in the city to obtain a divorce, referred to as being "disillusioned" multiple times in the short film. While showing women walking across the Virginia Street Bridge, he states, "Immortal

wedding marches of Wagner and Mendelssohn become sadly distorted here in the hearts of the countless brides who come and go, free of their marital obligations but completely disillusioned in their dreams of conjugaled felicity.” After introducing the viewer to Reno’s divorce industry, FitzPatrick does concede that the people getting married and divorced in the city are visitors to the area, and that the average Reno citizen lives a life like any other American in a city of Reno’s size. After explaining this however, he then states, “Nevertheless, the main theme of Reno life revolves around marriage or divorce.”

FitzPatrick then explains that marriages in Reno outnumber the divorces and chalks it up to the lack of red tape that allows couples to marry “before the spirit of romance cools off.” FitzPatrick adds to the perception of quickie non-committal marriages by changing the background music from Mendelssohn’s wedding march to the traditional “Sailor’s Hornpipe” as a sailor and a woman walk up the courthouse steps to get married. In a following shot, a woman who has just gotten her divorce is leaving the courthouse and meets a man who is walking up the steps. She promptly turns around to enter the courthouse once again in order to marry her newfound man.

FitzPatrick mentions some of the divorcee traditions in Reno, such as kissing a pillar of the courthouse and throwing one’s wedding band into the Truckee River. Gambling is never mentioned in the film, although the city’s “clubs” are referred to near the close of the segment. As

far as FitzPatrick is concerned, marriage and divorce (and sometimes both) are the sole reasons for someone to visit Reno, Nevada, “...where marriage and divorce walks hand in hand.”



Figure 8: A divorcee is kissing a pillar of the Washoe County courthouse as a way to thank the city after getting a divorce in *Romantic Nevada* (1943) (screenshot of film).

***Maisie Goes to Reno* (1944)**

Maisie Goes to Reno is the eighth of ten “Maisie” films starring Ann Southern in the title role as Maisie Revier (IMDb). The film begins with Maisie working as a riveter supporting the war effort. In the opening scene she loses it, attacks both a coworker and her boss, and is sent to the doctor to be evaluated. The doctor says that she has a nervous condition

caused by never taking any time off work and orders her to take a couple weeks vacation. Not long after her vacation starts, Maisie runs into an old friend who is managing entertainment at a casino hotel in Reno and he asks her to come out and sing in the evening show. With nothing else to do, Maisie decides to accept the offer and heads off to the bus depot.

After buying the very last ticket to Reno, Maisie is approached by a soldier named Sergeant Bill Fullerton. He's trying to get to Reno to save his marriage. His wife is convinced that he married her only for her family fortune and he is trying to get to Reno before her six week wait is over to convince her otherwise. Maisie gives him the ticket, but before Sgt. Fullerton is able to depart he is informed that his unit has been ordered back to base and that his leave is no longer approved. He gives the ticket back to Maisie with the charge of personally delivering a letter to his estranged wife, Gloria.

Upon arrival in Reno, Maisie delivers the letter to a woman claiming to be Gloria Fullerton, but who is actually Wini Ashbourne, Gloria's secretary. Wini, as Gloria, tells Maisie that Sgt. Fullerton is nothing more than a moocher, and that she has no intentions of saving her marriage, but thanks her nonetheless for delivering the letter.

The next day, Maisie runs into the real Gloria at the hotel, and soon suspects that the secretary and her assistant, Roger, are conspiring against Sgt. Fullerton and his wife. An investigation promptly ensues, and before long Maisie has recruited a bellhop and a blackjack dealer to

help her uncover the nefarious plot. In the end, the villains are brought to justice, the Fullertons are reunited, Maisie has found herself a new beau in Flip the blackjack dealer, and all is right in the world.



Figure 9: Maisie performing a song and dance routine at a casino hotel in *Maisie Goes to Reno* (1944) (screenshot of film).

Maisie Goes to Reno puts a new spin on the misunderstanding-leading-to-divorce plot that had been done numerous times in earlier years by having others purposely set up the divorce for their own financial gain, and having the wronged party unable to get to Reno due to being in the military. Even with those added twists, it is still basically the same plot as the Reno divorce films of the 1930s. In this film, Reno is the

place one runs to when they are mad or wronged by their spouse, and the isolated location of the city prevents the supposed wrongdoer from making amends. Every character in the film is quick to jump to conclusions, unwilling to listen to explanations, and slow to change their opinions once explanations are finally heard, the allusion being that this way of acting is the reason they think a Reno divorce is the proper course of action to solve their problems. *Maisie Goes to Reno* shows Reno as being a city full of people getting divorces only because they refuse to plainly talk about their problems to their spouse before they run off to the biggest little city in the world.

The Misfits (1961)

The Misfits is another film that focuses on the “divorce industry” of Reno. Much like *Charlie Chan in Reno*, *The Misfits* isn’t about divorce, but uses divorce as a vehicle to set up the plot. The film starts with the star of the picture, Marilyn Monroe, playing a divorcee named Roslyn Taber. She is at the end of her six weeks and is discussing with her friend the correct things to say to the judge to ensure her divorce goes through. She seems to be tired of her wait and ready to start her new life, but she doesn’t know what that life should be.

After successfully getting her divorce, she leaves the courthouse and stops on the Virginia Street Bridge, talking with her friend about the ritual of throwing her wedding ring into the Truckee River for good luck.

The friend states that, “There’s more gold in that river than there is in the Klondike.” Roslyn decides against tossing the ring and the two straightaway head to Harrahs Club to ponder her life; Roslyn figures that since Reno was where she had just ended her old life, it could as readily be the setting for a new beginning.



Figure 10: Roslyn Taber contemplates whether or not to toss her ring into the Truckee River as a sign of her freedom in *The Misfits* (1961) (screenshot of film)

During a discussion of her future, she comes across Gay Langland, played by Clark Gable, a man who has a hobby of picking up divorcees, having a good time, and after the divorce is finalized, seeing them off at the train station. In their conversation, Roslyn states that it doesn’t look like there is much of anything outside of town, and Gay quickly inter-

rupts her saying that “everything’s” outside of Reno, and that it’s a place where you can “just live.”

Roslyn likes that idea and decides that her new life should involve Gay in some fashion. They move out to the countryside, fix up an old house that belongs to Gay’s friend, and promptly settle in, acting like newlyweds. They go to a rodeo and meet up with a posse of Gay’s hard-living friends. While in town, Gay’s drinking and other habits upset Roslyn, and he is forced to change his ways to keep her in his life. Later they go to round up some wild mustangs and Roslyn is unhappy when she finds out that after the horses are sold, they’re killed. She identifies with the wild horses, herself just recently being set free by her divorce. She is able to convince Gay of the injustice of catching the horses, and he cuts them loose. In the end they are still together, their future uncertain but happy nonetheless.

The Misfits is kinder to divorcees than *Charlie Chan in Reno*, but still portrays the divorcees as being lost souls in search of a new existence, unsure of who they are now that they are not married. It portrays Reno as a place where lasting relationships can’t be made, only destroyed. In this film, every time Roslyn and Gay venture away from their country retreat into town their relationship is strained. When Gay states to Roslyn when he first meets her that “everything” is outside of Reno, what is going unsaid is that within Reno there is nothing worth having.

Desert Hearts (1985)

Desert Hearts, made in 1985, is a period film set in 1959. It is the story of Vivian Bell, a professor at Columbia University, who is in Reno to get a divorce. The ranch she's staying at while she waits her six weeks is owned by a woman named Francis Parker. Francis lives on the ranch with Cay Rivvers, the daughter of her deceased husband. Cay is a young, free spirited woman who is open about her bisexuality. This openness both puts off and intrigues Vivian, who finds herself strangely attracted to the younger woman. As Vivian and Cay grow closer together, Francis begins to resent the relationship and is worried that Cay will leave her alone at the ranch.

One night after an engagement party, Cay takes Vivian up to Lake Tahoe and there kisses her. Vivian is both surprised and elated by Cay's actions and tells Cay that she wants to be with her. When the two return to the ranch, Francis is furious, and assuming that it is Vivian who seduced Cay, kicks Vivian off the ranch. Cay is upset and leaves the ranch herself.

Vivian then heads into town to finish her stay in the state at a hotel. Both Vivian and Cay are upset at the situation more than each other, but have a hard time sorting through their feelings. After a few days, Cay finally comes to Vivian's hotel room and the two make love. Vivian and Cay are then certain that they want to be together, but are unsure of how it will work. Vivian is concerned about the reception she'll receive among

her friends in New York, and Cay is unsure on what life will be like back east. The film ends with Vivian convincing Cay to board the train with her, giving her until the next stop to convince Cay to continue on to New York.



Figure 11: Vivian and Cay discussing their future on the Washoe County courthouse steps in *Desert Hearts* (1985) (screenshot of film).

Desert Hearts paints a different picture of the confused, lost-soul divorcee. In many of the Reno divorce films the women become disillusioned of men and marriage, but in no other film does that disillusionment lead to the woman discovering that she is attracted to other women. *Desert Hearts* shows Reno as a city where one can go not just to lose a man, but find one's true self. Most films use Reno as a setting to cut ties with an old life, leaving the main character to pick up the pieces and

start over somewhere else. In *Desert Hearts*, Reno is seemingly the only place where that new life could be found.

***The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)**

The Shawshank Redemption is about two friends serving life sentences at a federal penitentiary in Maine and their experiences over a twenty-year period. One, Andy Dufresne, was unjustly convicted of murdering his wife in 1947. The couple's relationship was tumultuous before she was murdered, and he was the primary suspect. He was seen arguing with his wife days before her murder when he confronted her about her infidelity.



Figure 12: Andy Dufresne standing trial for his wife's murder in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) (screenshot of film).

Andy recounts the argument in court at the beginning of the film saying, "It was very bitter. She said she was glad I knew. That she hated all the sneaking around. She said she wanted a divorce in Reno. I told her I would not grant one." The District Attorney then retorts, "I'll see you in Hell before I see you in Reno.' Those were the words you used, Mr. Dufresne, according to the testimony of your neighbors." Andy is wrongly convicted for the murder of his wife in part because he was seen yelling to her about the biggest little city.

Mad Men 3:13: Shut the Door, Have a Seat (2009)

In the cable television series *Mad Men*, the main character, Don Draper, is a high-powered New York advertising executive in the early 1960s. A heavy drinker, he is a near-constant womanizer, in spite of having a wife and two kids in the suburbs.

In the finale of season three of the series, Don's womanizing has caught up to him, and his wife, Betty, wants a divorce. She goes to an attorney and he lets her know that Reno is her best course of action saying, "I know it's hard to understand, but the State of New York doesn't want anyone to get divorced. That's why people go to Reno. It's painless. I met my second wife [there]." Not only does the attorney recommend the Reno divorce, he's done it himself, and even found a new wife while he was at it. Betty notifies Don of her plans on the day of President Kenne-

dy's assassination, and her leaving for Reno is part of the dramatic end to the season.



Figure 13: Betty Draper's Lawyer explains to her that her only option is a Reno Divorce in *Mad Men* (2009) (screenshot of season 3, episode 13: *Shut the Door, Have a Seat*).

***Eddie & Pen* (1996)**

Eddie & Pen is unique among Reno divorce films in that it isn't set during the heyday of the Reno divorce industry, instead taking place in the "present day" of 1996. The film opens with the two main characters Eddie and Pen, played by Jennifer Tilly and Stockard Channing respectively, flying into Reno to get divorces. Somehow their divorces will only take a single day. Pen is upset over her divorce, wishing that there was some way to save her nineteen year marriage, but knowing that it is a lost cause. Eddie, on the other hand, is quite excited. She's divorcing a husband that

she lived with for only two weeks a few years ago so she can marry her current boyfriend in Acapulco, Mexico, a destination she's leaving for the following day. The two women have the same lawyer and obtain their divorces within hours of arriving in the city. When Pen is asked why she's getting her divorce in Reno, she states that her husband divorced his last wife in the city and his lawyer suggested that he do it the same way this time.

Eddie and Pen later meet by chance at a local bar, swap stories, and begin to become friends. Meanwhile, a local playboy named Harry, who looks like a ranch hand but is apparently a pharmacist, won't leave Pen alone and eventually his presence is tolerated by the women. Everyone in town, from bartenders and bellhops to policemen and cab drivers, seems to know Harry and his philandering ways.

After a night of excessive drinking, Pen and Harry discover that Eddie's boyfriend is Pen's husband. After some questioning, it is apparent that Eddie is convinced that her man is forthright, honest, and above all, not married. By the end of the film, Pen has told Eddie the truth about her fiancé and has fallen in love with Harry. Eddie heads off to Acapulco anyway and Harry commits to stop his womanizing and settle down with Penn.

Despite its more current setting, *Eddie & Penn* portrays Reno in basically the same way as the earlier divorce films. Reno is seen as a small town where the local tomcat is known by all and is set to take advantage

of the transient divorcees. The city is also small enough to allow two women who would otherwise never meet, find each other at a random bar. All the locals in the film are cowboy, hick types, with even a pharmacist donning a cowboy hat and boots. As far as this film is concerned, Reno has hardly changed since the 1930s.



Figure 14: (from left to right) Edie, Pen, and Harry sit down together for breakfast in *Edie & Pen* (1996) (screenshot of film)

The Decline of Divorce and a Focus on Other Vices

The divorce industry worked well for Nevada and especially Reno for decades. However, over time the divorce laws in other states began to change. By the 1970s hard evidence of infidelity or battery was no longer the only way to get a divorce, and “irreconcilable differences” began to be a common reason for divorce in many states. Reno divorce was no longer the only way out of a marriage, and there was no longer a monetary or length incentive either. It was during this time that Reno, and Nevada as a whole, shifted its efforts to focus solely on gaming as a way to lure people to the region (Barber 2008).

The decade saw an unprecedented expansion of the gaming industry in Reno with most of the modern-day casinos being built. These casinos included the MGM Grand (now the Grand Sierra Resort), Circus Circus, The El Dorado, Harrah’s, The Sands, Fitzgerald’s, The Sundowner, The Peppermill, and others. Up until the mid-to-late 1970s, Reno was the gaming capital of the world (with Las Vegas coming in as a close second), and the money to be made seemed to have no limit (Barber 2008).

Prostitution in Reno

During the 1970s another of Nevada’s vices grew in notoriety, prostitution. Prostitution has been somewhat legal in Nevada since the nineteenth century, but brothels historically had a hard time near cities, constantly being shut down as public nuisances. In the early 1970s, through

a series of legal battles, the modern laws and regulations of legal prostitution in Nevada came about, allowing brothels to operate more freely than they were able to in the past (Lewiston 2008).

The most notable brothel of its time was the Mustang Ranch, located a short drive away from Reno in Storey County. The ranch's owner, Joe Conforte, capitalized on the county's small population and used the inhabitants of a large trailer park that he owned to help vote in county officials that benefited his business. His plan worked and prostitution became a legal enterprise in the county. Since then, nine other counties in the state have legalized the practice of prostitution and are the only places in the United States to do so. Prostitution has always been a small segment of the Nevada economy, and is not often featured in film, but nevertheless it has given notoriety to the region (Symanski 1974).

California Split (1974)

California Split follows the semi-professional gambler Charlie Waters, played by Elliot Gould, and the more respectable business professional Bill Denny, played by George Segal. The two meet at a poker club in Los Angeles, as they are both subjected to the wrath of a disgruntled player, and soon become fast friends. The following day they go to a racetrack, and after winning on a horse with twenty to one odds, decide that they're good luck for each other and team up to make their fortune in gambling. Charlie soon disappears however, and Bill's luck doesn't hold out.

Although he does have a few wins, Bill sinks further and further into debt while gambling at racetracks, boxing matches, basketball and baseball games, poker clubs, and anything else he comes across the Los Angeles area. Bill is desperate and needs cash fast to pay off a loan shark that has been hounding him for weeks. When Charlie returns, Bill is packing for a trip to Reno to win big at poker. Charlie asks him why he isn't choosing closer Las Vegas, and Bill says the luck is in Reno. Charlie tells him that Reno has "tough action" because it's full of "cowboys and rich guys," but Bill is intent to make it big in the biggest little city, and the two head out on the road.

When they arrive in Reno, Charlie is impressed with the city saying, "Feels good! Red carpets on the street, men in orange suits, where else?" When they find the game that Bill heard about, it's in a back room of the Mapes Hotel casino, and the buy in is \$2,000, which is all the money they have. The table is full of career players who only play high stakes, and Charlie is afraid that his partner has bit off more than he can chew.

After an afternoon of playing, Bill is up \$18,000. He quits the poker game and promptly loses almost all of the money playing blackjack, roulette, and other games out on the casino floor. Charlie wants to give up, but Bill refuses to let the house win. Suddenly Bill is positive his luck has turned back around after hitting number 26 in roulette. He goes

to the craps tables and can't lose, winning all his money back and then some in a run longer than either of them had ever seen before.



Figure 15: Charlie is so happy that Bill has rolled four elevens in a row that he kisses his friend in appreciation in *California Split* (1974) (screenshot of film).

The pair ends up with \$82,000, split down the middle. Excited about the winnings, Charlie wants to head out to the Mustang Ranch to celebrate. After discussing their streak, they come to the conclusion that “it don't mean a thing,” when you can't lose. The two leave Reno rich men with the sobering knowledge that gambling isn't about the money, it's about the thrill of the chase.

Unlike the previous films about Reno, *California Split* never mentions divorce, and prostitution is referred to a couple times. This film shows Reno as the home of serious gamblers, who are willing to play for high odds and high stakes. It is a town where fortunes can be won or lost

in an instant, and as a result, the city is a place where, in the end, money has little value other than the excitement it brings at the gaming tables. The two men went to Reno to make a fortune and succeeded, but they leave the city just as sad as they would have been if they lost it all. Their luck in Reno has ruined the thrill of gambling forever.

Love Ranch (2010)

Love Ranch is based on the Mustang Ranch near Reno, Nevada, and its owner Joe Conforte, during the 1970s. The film stars Joe Pesci as Charlie Bontempo, a man who is consumed with excess and owns Love Ranch, a legal brothel in fictitious Comstock County, supposedly set just outside of Reno. He sees his life as one big party and everyone is invited as long as he's the star of the show.

The film begins on New Year's Eve entering 1976 with a lavish party at the famed ranch. Charlie is smoking a cigar wrapped in a hundred dollar bill to ring in the new year. There are prostitutes dancing and everybody is having a great time. While giving a short speech, Charlie is interrupted by the sheriff, and it looks like he's there to shut the party down, but instead he invites himself up to the stage and gives a short speech of his own, congratulating Charlie on his success. The sheriff is somewhat inebriated and having just as good a time as everyone else.



Figure 16: The county sheriff joins Charlie Bontempo on stage at the Love Ranch's New Year's Eve party in *Love Ranch* (2010) (screenshot of film).

Meanwhile, a warning light goes off and Charlie's wife Grace, the madam, goes to one of the rooms to rescue a prostitute who is in trouble. After an extensive fight involving the man, a bouncer, Grace, and Charlie, the man is finally knocked unconscious in the middle of the main room where the party is being held. There is a brief pause to the festivities, and after the commotion is over, everyone, including the sheriff, goes back to partying. This start to the film shows the broad acceptance of legal prostitution, and its accompanying vices, in the Reno area.

The main plot of the film rests on Charlie's underhanded dealings pertaining to the brothel and his obsession with financing a professional Argentine boxer. The boxer begins an affair with Grace, and Charlie be-

comes enraged to the point where he shoots the boxer dead right in front of the sheriff. Charlie has the entire county in his pocket, and uses his leverage to have one of his employees take the fall and only be convicted of justifiable homicide.

In this film, prostitution is shown to be just another part of society in Reno that is accepted by most people, including the local law enforcement. Charlie's bribes, extortions, and blackmails seem perfectly commonplace, and in many ways expected. *Love Ranch*, perhaps more than any other film about Reno, portrays the city as a place where sin and excess are not only present, but celebrated. All the dealings that would normally be in the shadows of organized crime in the larger cities of the country are, in Reno, out in the open and tolerated by the law.

Reno as a Second-Rate City: A Sophisticated Sort of Down-and-Out

By the end of the 1970s, Reno had begun to take a distant backseat in apparent prestige to its southern rival, Las Vegas. Las Vegas became the new darling of the Nevada gaming industry and was the new destination for the bulk of out of state vacationers. There was still expansion in Reno's gaming industry (John Ascuaga's Nugget was built during the early 1980s, as were new towers for many casinos), but due to Las Vegas' newfound fame, Reno slowly transitioned away from being a nationwide destination for gaming, to being only a Northern California destination for gaming (Barber 2008).

Although traveling to Nevada from the population centers of Northern California is only a half a day's drive, it does involve multiple hours driving over high mountain passes. Once there, one feels obligated to stay the night due to the long drive back, making any gaming excursion a multiple day event, which kept the hotels just as full as the gaming floors (Eadington et al 2010). The constant supply of Northern Californians seemed to be more than enough to support the city, so Reno's gaming industry kept growing. It was in 1987 however that Reno's fortunes would take a drastic turn with the Supreme Court of the United States making a decision on the legal rights of a Southern California Indian tribe to facilitate high stakes bingo.

In 1987, *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians* was decided in the Supreme Court of the United States. The decision stated that

since Indian tribes are regulated by the federal government and not the states, any legal practice in a state cannot be regulated by state authorities on Indian land. Every state that has at least a lottery has legal gambling, even if it is highly regulated to the fact that the lottery is the only gambling that exists, therefore any Indian tribe located in that state is only subject to federal regulations on gambling, not the state's.

When the case was decided, however, there was no official federal regulation on Indian gaming (Hick 2006). Quickly, Congress drafted and passed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 (IGRA), covering all facets of Indian gaming. The IGRA splits Indian gaming into three classes. Class I gaming is defined as traditional games of chance, and is permitted in every state. Class II gaming is defined as bingo, games similar to bingo, and non-banked card games, meaning card games with no house participation, and is permitted in any state that allows a form of gaming, regardless of any regulations they might have. Class III, known as "Las Vegas style" gaming, is exactly that, the type of gaming found in Nevada casinos: slot machines, craps, roulette, blackjack, other house-backed card games, and all other forms of gaming permissible in the United States.

Class III gaming is only permitted when states have expressly allowed it (Congress 1988). The wording of this act signifies how large Las Vegas' nationwide recognition had become. If the law were passed fifteen years earlier, Class III gaming would probably be known as "Nevada style

gaming,” and if it were passed fifteen years prior to that, it would have been “Reno style gaming.” Las Vegas had risen so far and Reno has sunk so low in the hearts and minds of the public by the late 1980s, that even acts of congress inferred that Las Vegas was the only place to go if one wanted to gamble.

During this tumultuous time, films begin to portray Reno as a place to go when you’re washed up and can’t seem to make it anywhere else; the assumption being that if you had a future, and were going places, you’d be in Las Vegas. Reno became the place for has-beens and second-rate acts that wouldn’t even be considered for the showroom stages of more up-and-coming cities.

Another common theme that arose in the 1980s and continues into the present is that Reno is a place where criminals can freely operate. Casinos are often associated with the criminal element and organized crime. As Reno solidified its second-rate status, the washed-up nature of the city began to offer a unique setting in films as a place available to desperate criminals who are otherwise unable to make it in other cities where crime needs to operate in the shadows. Along with the crime, Reno also began to be portrayed as a good place for one to hide, since no one pays attention to the washed up inhabitants of the city.

Melvin and Howard (1980)

Melvin and Howard, a film about the “Mormon will” of famed billionaire Howard Hughes, shows Reno in this light. The film follows Melvin Dummar, a Nevada native who can’t seem to get a fair shake in life. The film starts following Melvin’s life one night when he picks up a stranded and injured old man in the desert and drives him into Las Vegas where the old man thanks him and reveals that he is Howard Hughes. The remainder of the film follows Melvin through a series of misadventures where he is constantly trying to get ahead in life to only have his plans backfire. Every time it looks like he may have figured things out, something disastrous happens and he winds up worse than when he started.

In the beginning of the film, Melvin is living with his wife and daughter in a trailer in deeply rural Nevada. His life is going nowhere fast and they are living day to day and paycheck to paycheck. His wife, frustrated with their life and tired of Melvin’s futile attempts to improve their standing, leaves him and their child.

After some searching by Melvin and a friend, she is finally found dancing in a Reno topless bar. The bar is sleazy and rundown, and the dancers are less than second-rate (one dancer has a cast on her arm). The film portrays the bar as being an average Reno establishment, since no one comments on its shabby appearance. Even though dancing in a Reno topless bar would most likely be a low point in most people’s lives,

Melvin's wife is having a good time because life in the trailer with Melvin is worse.

Melvin's trip is unsuccessful and he winds up divorcing his wife instead of getting her to return with him to their trailer. The point of this portion of the film is to show that Melvin's life is so bad that his wife prefers to dance topless at a sleazy bar in Reno to being with him. Melvin has now sunk to a new low.



Figure 17: Melvin's wife and her injured coworker are dancing at a club in Reno when they are interrupted by Melvin in *Melvin and Howard* (1980) (screenshot of film).

***Sister Act* (1992)**

Sister Act shows Reno as a place of desperation and unfulfilled hope as well. The film, starring Whoopi Goldberg, is about Deloris Wilson, a lounge singer working in Reno who is the head of a group called "The

Ronelles” that covers female Motown hits from the 1960s. During the opening credits of the film, Deloris is singing in her lounge act in a sad looking casino where no one is paying attention to the performance. There are a few people sitting in the front row, but it is quickly revealed that the front row is a bar, and those sitting there are at that spot just to drink and play video poker. After her act, Deloris goes to see her boyfriend Vince, who is the manager of the casino and has ties to the mob. He is a married man that refuses to leave his wife for Deloris, but doesn't want Deloris to leave him either. Deloris is obviously sad about her current lot in life, and it is made very clear that she wants more, but her career has landed her in a place where there is no future.



Figure 18: Deloris and the other Ronelles sing to a couple drunks from the stage of the Nevada Club in *Sister Act* (1992) (screenshot of film).

When confronted by Deloris about their dead-end relationship, Vince gives her a mink coat to lift her spirits. Deloris later finds his wife's name embroidered in the lining, and this is the last straw. Upset about the coat, Deloris decides that she is finally leaving Reno for anywhere else, and goes to confront Vince. She arrives at his office just in time to see Vince and his mob thugs shoot a police informant. She quickly runs off and tells the police about the murder. Eager to convict Vince, the police offer to put her under protection and hide her until the trial so she can testify.

The place provided for Deloris to hide out for a few months is a convent in San Francisco where she is forced to pretend she is a nun. Bored of the quiet life in the convent, she takes charge of the choir and gets them to start singing 1960s Motown hits with reworked lyrics pertaining to God and religion. The novelty of a Motown-nun choir quickly gains the public's attention and soon the choir is performing to a packed house every night. As a nun, Deloris is able to do what she never was able to in Reno: become a famous singer. The idea that it is easier for a lounge singer to make it as a nun in San Francisco than as a performer in Reno is what the plot of the film rests on.

At the climax of the film, Deloris is kidnapped by the bad guys and is taken back to Reno to be executed. The nuns fly to Reno to rescue Deloris from Vince and wind up swarming the casino. Having a dozen nuns in a casino makes for a funny juxtaposition of virtue against sin and vice,

and this is not missed by the makers of the film. After recovering Deloris, the nuns make a break for it, and a nun chase ensues. In the end, the nuns successfully rescue Deloris of course, but the fact is that the murder (or threat thereof) could not happen in San Francisco, the city where her dreams came true, but only in Reno, the city where everything, including life, inevitably must meet a dead end.

The Muppets (2011)

Another film portraying Reno as the last stop in a downward spiral is *The Muppets*, which has nothing good to say about the city. *The Muppets* is about the reuniting of the cast of the 1970s variety show, *The Muppet Show* in order to have one more appearance to raise money to save the Muppet Theatre from an evil oil baron intent in its destruction.

The second act of the film involves Kermit the Frog crisscrossing the nation and picking up the other members of the Muppet Show cast. In every situation that each Muppet is found, they are pursuing other careers, but are desperately longing for the good old days of *The Muppet Show*. In none is this desperation more apparent than in Fozzie Bear. The gang finds out that Fozzie is living in Reno singing in a lounge act. To them, a regular gig in a lounge act sounds like a pretty good life, and they are prepared to do all they can to convince him to quit and join their cause. When they arrive they discover that Fozzie Bear is worse off than they originally thought, performing in a group of Muppet knockoffs

known as “the Moopets.” The Moopets’ act consists of singing about the amenities of the casino in which they are employed. When Fozzie starts singing a bastardized version of “The Rainbow Connection” that talks about the free parking and the casino’s buffet, everyone in Kermit’s group looks very depressed. Fozzie’s abasement brings down the spirits of everyone in the film.



Figure 19: Kermit the frog and Fozzie Bear discuss Fozzie’s current life in his “dressing room” on a fire escape behind the fictitious Pechoolo Casino in *The Muppets* (2012) (screenshot of film)

When Kermit corners him in his dressing room, Fozzie tries to act like he’s doing well and that his career is great, but he eventually admits that he’s sunk as low as he possibly can. In fact, Fozzie Bear’s dressing room isn’t even a room, but a landing on a fire escape in an alley where

gunshots and police sirens are the constant background noise. When the viewer thinks that Fozzie's life couldn't possibly get any worse, it starts raining and Fozzie exclaims, "Oh, no! Not this again! Quick, save the cushions!" As they duck under an awning in the corner of the fire escape holding the couch cushions, *The Muppets* makes it clear to the audience that working in Reno is the lowest one can sink.

The Waterhole (2009)

Most likely the best film about Reno being a dead-end town is *The Waterhole*. The plot follows four friends in their mid-twenties who are wasting their lives away in a local Reno bar. The main character is Miller, who basically lives at the bar owned by his friend Murphy. Murphy lets Miller drink for free, so Miller never leaves unless it is to sleep or go to work stocking shelves at the local record store. Miller recently discovered his girlfriend has been cheating on him and as a result has become bitter about life in general. Jim, another regular at the bar and Miller's roommate, has just gotten engaged, and his fiancé is constantly nagging him about the time he spends at the bar with his friends. He always has to lie on the phone and take showers and wash his clothes to get out the cigarette smell so she won't find out where he's been. The fourth friend is named Cracker, a notorious party animal and heavy drinker.

Cracker vanished months earlier after a night of binge drinking, and suddenly reappears at the bar one night. When pressed as to what

happened, Cracker finally admits that his parents were fed up with his poor decisions and sent him away to rehab. He's now sober and enrolled in school on his way to becoming a lawyer. This surprises his friends, most notably Miller, who can't see past his friend's former drunk self. Miller begins to feel upset about his own life's decisions as he doesn't seem to be doing anything while his three friends are either becoming a lawyer, getting married, or own their own business. Rather than turn his life around, Miller sinks into a depression and starts drinking more and more.



Figure 20: Jim (left) and Miller (right) discussing life at Murphy's bar in *The Waterhole* (2009) (screenshot of film)

One night when Miller arrives at the bar, Cracker is there getting drunk. Cracker states that he wasn't able to stay sober and he is there to get wasted before he goes back into rehab the next day. The same night,

Jim and his fiancé break up because of his unwillingness to stop spending all his free time at the bar. Watching both Jim and Cracker drink their futures away snaps Miller out of his depression and forces him to reevaluate his life. His final decision at the end of the film is that the only way to make something of his life is to leave Reno.

The Reno depicted in *The Waterhole* is a sad town with absolutely nothing to offer but disillusionment and broken dreams. Murphy is the only character in the film that has accomplished anything with his life, but his accomplishment of owning a bar seems to be the source of the other characters' failures. By the end, Miller is not certain of what he's going to do with his life, but he knows that Reno is full of nothing but dead ends.

Pink Cadillac (1989)

Pink Cadillac sees Reno not as a place to go when you're washed up, but as a place to go if you want to hide from the world. The film stars Clint Eastwood as Tommy Nowak, a bounty hunter who works for a bail bondsman based in Sacramento. He's been assigned to capture Lou Ann McGuinn, a woman who is on trial for counterfeiting money and has jumped bail. Contrary to the evidence, she is innocent of her crime, and the counterfeit money actually belongs to her husband who in turn got it from a militant group of white supremacists known as "The Birthright." She steals her husband's pink Cadillac and flees from the men in the

counterfeiting operation. Unfortunately for her, there are hundreds of thousands of counterfeited dollars in the trunk of the car, which The Birthright doesn't want to lose.

Lou Ann's sister lives outside Reno, so she decides that that would be a good place to go. Her sister and brother in law convince her that their house is no place to hide, and encourage her to go to Reno and have a good time with the counterfeit money. As long as she's spending money in the casinos, they tell her, she'll fit right in and no one should find her. Tommy, hot on her trail, follows her to Reno and may have not found her if he hadn't spotted the flashy Cadillac parked in an alley. Tommy promptly captures Lou Ann and is in the process of taking her back to Sacramento when she convinces him to turn around so she can retrieve the counterfeit money from the car so she can turn it in and receive a more lenient sentence. Once he has his hands on the money, Tommy decides to use it to live it up and get a fancy hotel room with the intention of bringing Lou Ann to Sacramento in a day or two.

While at the hotel they realize that the counterfeit money they've been spending isn't counterfeit after all, and Lou Ann is in more trouble than she thought, as she has "over a quarter of a million dollars" of The Birthright's real money. While in Reno they run across some other criminals who have skipped bail, Lou Ann gets accosted by a drunk, homeless flasher, and they are found by The Birthright, forcing a showdown be-

tween them and Tommy. By the end of the film, Tommy and Lou Ann are romantically involved and the bad guys are brought to justice.



Figure 21: Tommy Nowak prevents Lou Ann McGuinn from escaping his grasp by blocking Douglas Alley on Virginia Street in *Pink Cadillac* (1989) (screenshot of film).

Reno, in *Pink Cadillac*, is a place where criminals and thugs freely walk the streets, and where fugitives from justice can go to hide. Vagrants abound on the filthy streets, and the only law to be found anywhere is a lone bounty hunter from Sacramento. Reno is anything but safe in this film's portrayal of the city.

***Fathers' Day* (1997)**

Fathers' Day portrays Reno as a place for transients and people wishing to hide. The film stars Billy Crystal and Robin Williams as Jack Lawrence

and Dale Putley, respectively. Jack is a high powered lawyer and Dale is a washed-up poet and playwright. They are both confronted by an old flame and told that either of them may be the father of her seventeen year old son, Scott, who is missing. She convinces them both to find Scott in order to find out which one is the father.

The two opposites join forces in the search and soon locate Scott, who has been following the rock band Sugar Ray across the country. They find him passed out backstage in Sacramento and take him back to a hotel room in San Francisco so they can catch a flight home the following day. The next morning Scott gets the jump on Dale and escapes to Reno, the next stop on the Sugar Ray tour. Reno proves to be an easy place to hide, and Scott quickly disappears into the throngs of transient pleasure seekers at a casino hotel.

Arriving in Reno, Dale is quickly distracted and blows all of his money in a gas station slot machine, only leaving because Jack forcefully tears him away. As they're leaving, Dale, infected with gambling fever, keeps rambling about how they should go to a blood bank to get more money to gamble with. After a fruitless search in the city, the two finally happen on Scott by chance when they hit him with their car as he's running across Virginia Street.

The film then shows a side of Reno that most movies never show, that part city without casinos, bars, or wedding chapels. They sit and talk while watching an intramural softball game in a local park. It is only

here, away from the glare of neon signs and ringing bells of the slot machines, that the two men are able to get to know and form a relationship with the boy that might be their son. In the end, the bond that is formed in the neighborhood park in Reno is what allows for the happy ending that follows, as lifelong friendships are formed in spite of the fact that Scott's mother was lying the whole time and told the story to Jack and Dale just to get them to search for her missing son. If they had not had that time together, away from the distracting sights and sounds of the casinos, the three men's bond would have never had the chance to develop.



Figure 22: Jack and Dale bond with Scott over hot dogs and sodas at a local Reno softball game in *Fathers' Day* (1997) (screenshot of film).

***Blind Fury* (1989)**

Blind Fury views Reno as a place where criminals can freely act, and where violence is an everyday occurrence. The film follows the exploits of Nick Parker, a Vietnam War veteran played by Rutger Hauer. During the war, Nick was injured by a mortar shell leaving him blind. After wandering in the jungle for an unknown amount of time he is found by some villagers who take him into their care and nurse his wounds. The villagers teach him to overcome his blindness by using his other senses, mainly his hearing, and train him in sword fighting. After some time he becomes an expert swordfighter, being able to sense his surroundings as if he could see.

The film catches up with Nick years later. He is now in Florida looking for a friend of his from the war, Frank Deveraux. Meanwhile, the film cuts to Frank who is working in Reno for a dangerous casino owner named MacCready. Frank, a chemist by trade, had been hired to make designer drugs, but no longer wants to do the job. After unsuccessfully threatening Frank's life, MacCready tells Frank that he's going to harm his son if he doesn't do as he's told. Back in Florida, Nick meets Frank's ex-wife, Lynn, and son, Billy, and is told that Frank is now living in Reno. While they are visiting, two police officers and one of MacCready's thugs, named Slag, come to the front door and ask to see Billy, saying he is needed for questioning, and begin searching the house. Nick asks if they have a warrant, and after they say no the altercation turns violent.

In the end, Lynn is shot by Slag and Nick has killed both officers with his sword. Before she dies, Lynn tells Nick to take Billy to Reno to be with his father.

Nick and Billy head off to Reno with Slag in pursuit. After a few close calls and a few more casualties as a result of Nick's sword, the two finally make it to Reno, only to be nabbed by MacCready's men as soon as they knock on Frank's door. They manage to escape amidst a hail of misaimed bullets and abscond in their captor's vehicle. When MacCready's men hijack a passing motorist to give chase, the old woman who owns the hijacked car promptly pulls out a large revolver and shoots at the men as they leave.

Nick and Billy eventually find out that Frank is being held captive in a back room lab in MacCready's casino. In order to create a needed diversion, Nick uses his keen senses to win thousands of dollars at a roulette table. When the roulette operator then cheats by using an electronic ball, Nick uses his sword to cut open the table to reveal the electronic equipment and incites a riot. During the confusion Nick is able to sneak into the secret drug lab and free his friend, slaying a few more of MacCready's men in the process.

The final showdown of the film involves Nick and Frank killing over a dozen men to gain access to MacCready who is now holding Billy ransom for Frank's drugs. In the end, both MacCready and Slag are killed, Frank and Billy are reunited, and Nick continues to wander the country-

side, presumably to continue in his adventures like a blind version of the television series *Kung Fu*.



Figure 23: Nick uses his sword to reveal illegal electronic equipment under the roulette table in *Blind Fury* (1989) (screenshot of film).

Reno is a dangerous and deadly place in the world of *Blind Fury*. The city's casinos are owned by malicious drug lords, intent on killing all who stand in their way. The casino's dealers and game operators are using the latest hi-tech gadgets to cheat the gamblers out of their money. Even the little old ladies driving down the street are packing heat and ready to shoot anyone they consider a threat. In this film, when one travels to or stays in Reno they are risking life and limb to do so. *Blind Fury* is a warning that danger lurks around every turn in Reno, Nevada.

Hard Eight (1996)

On the surface, *Hard Eight* is about the Reno gaming industry, but as the plot unfolds, the viewer realizes that gambling is just a vehicle used by the filmmaker to uncover the layers of crime and violence in the city. *Hard Eight* opens with a younger man, John, sitting outside a diner. He's out of money and out of luck. His mother has recently died, and he tried gambling to raise the cash for the funeral but instead lost it all. An older man named Sydney sees John, and feeling sorry for him, invites him into the diner to buy him a cup of coffee. After hearing his story, Sydney takes pity on John and offers to take him to Reno and show him how to gamble. John reluctantly agrees and the two head off to the biggest little city.

Upon their arrival in Reno, Sydney gives John \$150 and shows him how to scam the casino foreman into thinking he is a big spender by circling money from one cashier to another while conspicuously spending a few bucks here and there in the slot machines. Within a couple hours John gets a free dinner and a comped room for the night and is very grateful to Sydney for his help and advice.

The film then cuts to a few years later. Sydney and John are now partners in crime, making a decent living off gambling and scamming the casinos out of free meals and rooms. John has recently made a new friend of Jimmy, a foul mouthed, money flashing, sometimes pimp who works at the Sands. Sydney warns John that a friendship with Jimmy

could lead to trouble, but John assures Sydney that under his crass exterior Jimmy is a nice guy. At the same time, John falls in love with a cocktail waitress named Clementine both he and Sydney know from their time spent in casinos. John is seemingly growing apart from Sydney, but Sydney doesn't seem to mind too much, instead being somewhat proud of his protégé's success.



Figure 24: Sydney explains to John how to scam the casino to get free food and a room in *Hard Eight* (1996) (screenshot of film).

Everything changes when Sydney gets a call late one night from John. John says he's in trouble, but won't tell Sydney what's going on until he promises to help. Sydney agrees and shows up to the seedy motel room where John is staying. In the room is an unconscious man handcuffed to the bed, and Clementine is sitting on a chair in the corner. John informs Sydney that he and Clementine got married earlier that

day, and that Clementine is a prostitute on the side. The man on the bed is a client of Clementine's and owes her \$300, but won't pay. The two are holding the man ransom until his wife comes up with the cash.

Sydney is furious with John for implicating him in the crime and is reluctant to help, but eventually agrees. He takes John's gun, which he acquired from Jimmy, and wipes down the room for fingerprints. They then lock up the room and come up with a solution. John and Clementine are to leave town immediately. Since they just got married, a honeymoon is the perfect cover. Unsure of a safe place where they can run to, the couple finally decides Niagara Falls is a good destination. Sydney then hands John a large wad of bills and the two head off toward upstate New York. Sydney ditches the gun in a storm drain and keeps a close eye on the police.

While staking out the motel, Sydney is confronted by Jimmy, who is looking for his gun. Sydney explains that the gun was involved in a crime and that he had to get rid of it. Jimmy is upset and takes off. Later, Jimmy returns and notifies Sydney that he's investigated into his past. Jimmy informs Sydney that he is aware of his involvement in the mob in Atlantic City and that he killed John's father. He then threatens Sydney that he will tell the story to John unless Sydney comes up with a large sum of money. Sydney agrees and gives Jimmy all the money he has in the hotel safe. Jimmy then takes off for a night on the town. The

film ends with Sydney killing Jimmy, recovering his money, and maintaining his relationship with John.

Hard Eight combines most elements of Reno films into a single story. The film involves gambling, prostitution, organized crime, violence, marriage, dead-end life, and escape from the authorities. *Hard Eight* views Reno as a place where the cheating nature of the casinos spills over into the lives of all who frequent their gaming floors. The expression is that the house always wins, and it seems that in the world of *Hard Eight*, if you think you've beaten the house it will just find some other way to bring you down.

***The Deep End* (2001)**

The Deep End is different among films involving Reno in that very little of the film is set in the city, or is specifically about the city. The Film stars Tilda Swinton in the lead role as Margaret Hall, a protective mother of two who is willing to do anything to keep her family from falling apart while her husband is away on a ship in the Navy. The Halls live in Tahoe City, a resort community on the California side of Lake Tahoe, about forty minutes from Reno.

The film begins in Reno at a nightclub named "The Deep End." Margaret is there to speak with the owner of the club, Darby, about his relationship with her son, Beau. Beau was recently in a car accident involving alcohol, and Darby was present at the time of the crash. She does

not approve of the two's friendship as there is a considerable age difference, and she is concerned that Darby is a bad influence on Beau. Another implied concern that Margaret refuses to specifically mention is that Darby and Beau are in a homosexual relationship. Darby informs Margaret that he'd be willing to cut ties with Beau for the right price and the meeting ends with neither party being satisfied.

Back home in Tahoe City, the viewer is introduced to Beau, a very kind, polite boy who is about to go to college on a music scholarship. Beau and his mother discuss Darby, with Margaret forbidding Beau from seeing the older man and telling him about his proposal of taking money in exchange of not associating with Beau. This revelation angers Beau, who then retreats to his room. Later that night, Darby shows up at Beau's window and the two go out to the boathouse to talk things over. They get into a fight after discussing Darby's suggestion of money being worth more than their relationship and Beau ends up with a black eye. After Beau storms back to the house, Darby leans against the railing of the boathouse, which gives way, and he falls to the beach below, an anchor piercing his lung.

The following morning, Margaret asks Beau about his black eye, but he is unwilling to discuss it. She then goes outside and finds Darby, dead under the dock. Suspecting the worst, Margaret decides that the best course of action is to put Darby in the boat, take him to a rocky area of the lake far away from their house, and dump the corpse into the wa-

ter. Her plan seems to work; after discovering the body, the police have no leads into what happened and the investigation seems to be floundering.

Soon after the body is found, however, Margaret is visited by a man from Reno named Alek. He has in his possession an explicit videotape of Beau and Darby having sex. Alex states that Darby owed him and his partner, Mr. Nagel, \$50,000. He then tells Margaret that he will give the videotape to the police, making Beau a prime suspect in Darby's murder, unless she pays the \$50,000. Alek continues to come by the house multiple times daily, each time with escalating threats when Margaret states that she has yet to raise the cash.

Sensing that there is no way to collect; Alek tries to convince Mr. Nagle to drop the issue and move on to their next job. Mr. Nagle refuses and gives Alek one last try to get the cash before going to Tahoe City himself to forcefully collect the money. Margaret pawns all of her jewelry in Reno, but is still unable to cover even half of the necessary cash. Her low offer offends Mr. Nagle, who rushes off to Tahoe City, determined to either collect his money or kill Margaret in the process. After Mr. Nagle roughs up Margaret in the boathouse, Alek finally intervenes, and in the end both Alek and Mr. Nagle are killed in a car wreck on the highway outside of town. The film ends with Beau's future being secured, although Margaret still suspects that he murdered Darby.



Figure 25: Margaret pawns all her jewelry in Reno to try and raise money in *The Deep End* (2001) (screenshot of film).

In *The Deep End*, Reno is the source of all evil in what would otherwise be a placid resort community. Reno is the place where Beau was introduced to the sins of alcohol and homosexuality, as well as the base of operations of two dangerous, blackmailing con artists. When Margaret needs quick cash, Reno is the place she needs to go in order to pawn her possessions. If it wasn't for the close proximity to Reno, it seems that no problems would ever arise in their serene life on the shore of Lake Tahoe.

***El Cortez* (2006)**

The El Cortez Hotel in downtown Reno is the unsurprising setting for the film *El Cortez*. The film stars Lou Diamond Phillips as Manny DeSilva, a man recently released from either prison or a mental institution—it is

never made clear which—who is the night manager of the hotel. Manny likes his job and takes pride in his duties and accomplishments repairing and maintaining the hotel as well as serving the guests. He does recognize that the guests can at times be less than considerate toward him, but he doesn't let those people get him down.



Figure 26: An establishing shot of the El Cortez Hotel in downtown Reno, NV in *El Cortez* (2006) (screenshot of film).

One day a resident of the hotel, a paraplegic named Popcorn whom everyone calls “Pop,” confides in Manny about a goldmine he owns in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He tells Manny to not let the secret out, as he doesn't want anyone to steal the mine out from under him. The same day a new guest arrives named Jack Clay. He's rude and definitely up to no good. His girlfriend Theda, who is most likely a prostitute, is much nicer and seems to like Manny. Theda runs into Manny the next morning at

the diner next door, and the two somewhat hit it off. Manny, wanting to impress Theda, tells her about Pop's goldmine, but instantly regrets doing so and asks her to not tell anyone. A little later, a police officer named Arnie, who obviously knows Manny from a past crime, comes into the hotel looking for Jack Clay. Manny is hesitant to give up one of his guests but acquiesces; promising to let Arnie know the next time Jack comes in.

As Manny gets to like Theda more he stops taking his medication and becomes increasingly protective and violent towards anyone he perceives as a threat to her. At the same time, Pop convinces Manny to become his partner in the mine as he needs someone else to verify the mine is legitimate to convince a wealthy man to invest in the operation.

To make a very complicated story short, Theda tells Jack about the mine, who then steals the map. Pop gets Manny to confront Jack about the map, all while Arnie is pressuring him to give Jack up. Manny discovers that Arnie is a crooked cop who only wants Jack so he can steal his drugs to feed his addiction. Mad at being used, Manny kills them both, making it look like Arnie killed Jack and then overdosed on the drugs. Pop, Manny, and Theda then head off to the goldmine with the rich investor. The Investor attempts a double-cross and is killed in the mine by Pop. In the end the Mine turns out to be fake, invented by Pop to lure in investors so he can steal their money. The final scene is of Pop, Theda, and Manny convincing a new investor to come see the mine.

Every character in *El Cortez* is hiding a secret. Manny hides that he has killed before and if he doesn't take his medication will kill again. Jack is hiding his being a drug dealer. Theda is hiding the fact she's a prostitute. Pop is hiding that his goldmine is a fake. Arnie is hiding that he's addicted to drugs. Even the investor is hiding his intentions to kill Manny and Pop and keep the goldmine for himself. *El Cortez* shows Reno as a city where everyone is working some sort of angle, and no one is ever telling the full truth. Drugs, violence, and prostitution are just part of the daily life of Reno, and anyone would be lucky to make it out of the city alive.

Reno Becomes the Butt of the Joke

In the mid-1990s, Reno began to be seen as a nearly farcical shadow of its former self. Many of the old casinos were demolished or were boarded up by this time, including Harolds Club and the legendary Mapes, which would be imploded in 2000, despite its place on the National Register of Historic Places. Purported private “revitalization” and public redevelopment projects were in the works, but many doubted that they would do much to turn the tide of a declining industry (barber 2008).

Even though the legalization of Indian Gaming in neighboring California could in theory be legal at any time, many of Reno’s casinos seemed to operate as though there was no change in gaming laws at all. The 1990s saw another large commercial building boom in the region. Many of the big casinos that were built in the 1970s were becoming too small for peak demand, so expansion projects commenced. Harrah’s added a new tower and Circus Circus, Cal Neva, and Fitzgerald’s all renovated their hotels and parking structures. The Silver Legacy was built during this time and several non-gaming buildings were built adjacent to the casinos, including the National Bowling Stadium (Barber 2008). The construction projects were not cheap, and many required there to be long term increases in gaming revenue for the casinos to remain solvent (Gearty 2012).

Unfortunately for Reno, the West Coast gaming monopoly of Nevada was not to last much longer. With the passing of the IGRA, Califor-

nia's Indian tribes' economic advantages of bingo seemed pale in comparison to Class III gaming operations (Plotz 2000). As stated earlier, Class III gaming, or Las Vegas style gaming, is only permissible when expressly allowed by the state. In 1998, ten years after the IGRA went in effect, California voters passed proposition 5, allowing Class III Indian gaming. Immediately, California's Indian tribes began building casinos on their lands (Kennedy 2004). When the first casinos were built in California, the novelty of Indian casinos, along with their relative closeness compared to the casinos in Nevada, allowed business to flourish. As more and more Indian casinos began to be built, the need to travel to Nevada diminished further and further (Kennedy 2004).

With the loss of many Northern Californians to the Indian casinos, gaming revenue in Reno has declined every year since 1998. In 2010, Washoe County made almost 250 million dollars less from gaming than they did twelve years prior, not accounting for inflation (Nevada Gaming Control Board 1998-2011). These figures are solely based on gaming revenue due to its being the most reliable and available data. The total economic loss of the region is much harder to calculate, but it is easy to understand that a decline in gaming revenue has a direct impact on other sectors on Reno's economy including hotels, restaurants, bars and clubs, and other service and entertainment related industries. With this decline in revenue, casino closures have been the result.

The casinos that remained open are seeing but a fraction of the business they once had, and in the winter months operate at a loss due to the hazardous road conditions traveling across the Sierra Nevada, which impedes the travel of those still inclined to make the drive from northern California or the San Francisco Bay Area (Gearty 2012).

Like the decline of the divorce industry, gaming's acceptance into society at large has greatly affected the economy of Reno. Unlike the decline of the divorce industry, Reno doesn't have another vice to exploit now that gaming is available in other areas of the United States, most notably California. The only legal vice left in Nevada is prostitution, and there just isn't a large enough market for it to provide even a sizable fraction of the base needed for the city's economy (Gearty 2012).

Losing its last lucrative vice has had a dramatic impact on how Reno is perceived in film and television. Reno is a city that gambled on its future and lost, and is viewed as being a washed up has-been resort city. Reno is now seen as a place that was, instead of a place that is. The idea of losing everything but still trying to act as though things are fine is used for comic purposes in the city's current portrayal in film and television.

Kingpin (1996)

Kingpin is a movie that flips the idea that Reno is a city of desperation on its head for comic effect. In *Kingpin*, Woody Harrelson plays Roy Munson,

a washed up professional bowler. In 1979 Roy Munson was the hottest rising star the professional bowling circuit had ever seen. His career was cut short after he was caught hustling some people out of a few hundred dollars betting on bowling in a seedy bowling alley in a nameless town. In retaliation for being swindled, the disgruntled bowlers grab him and stick his bowling hand down the ball return and maim him so badly that his hand must be amputated.

Seventeen years after the incident, Roy is living in Scranton, Pennsylvania barely scraping by, and seemingly waiting for death. One day he goes to the local bowling alley and runs into an Amish man named Ishmael who sneaks into town to bowl in his spare time. He is a natural bowler, and Roy finds purpose in life by taking Ishmael under his wing and introduces him to the world of professional bowling. Roy begins to live vicariously through Ishmael and decides that Ishmael will work his way to Reno, Nevada, to compete in the world bowling championship and win the one million dollar first place prize, which will of course be split fifty-fifty.

Upon arrival in Reno, Ishmael injures his hand, and Roy enters the tournament himself, refusing to be defeated. When Roy and Ishmael show up to the tournament at the bowling stadium in Reno, they are in awe of the overweight, middle-aged "athletes." The film seems to say that only the uneducated and unathletic athletes of professional bowling would ever choose Reno as the setting for their championship tourna-

ment, and conversely, only Reno could ever celebrate such an unglamorous professional sport.

The announcer starts the competition, but first says, “Remember, the Silver Legacy is still the talk of the strip with our twenty-two topping potato bar.” Minutes earlier, that potato bar was seen as Roy and Ishmael were eating lunch, and it’s no larger than the salad bar at an average neighborhood pizza parlor. If the Silver Legacy’s potato bar is really the talk of the strip, then the strip, and in turn Reno, must have almost nothing to offer.



Figure 27: Roy Munson goes head to head against his arch rival Ernie McCracken in the world championship bowling match in *Kingpin* (1996) (screenshot of film)

Needless to say, Roy moves his way up the brackets despite bowling with a rubber prosthetic hand. He makes it to the final round and

has enough points to win unless his archrival, the equally washed up, yet still celebrated in the world of bowling, Ernie McCracken, bowls three strikes in his final frame. McCracken does the impossible, and the hero of the film loses his final match. The idea that Reno can be a place for redemption and renewal is part of the comedy in the film, but the ending proves that even when it's a joke, one cannot succeed in Reno.

Waking Up in Reno (2002)

Waking Up in Reno is a film that is constantly laughing at Reno's expense. The story follows two white-trash couples, Lonnie Earl and Darlene Dodd and Roy and Candy Kirkendall, who are from a small fictional town in rural Arkansas called Millsburg (the same town featured in the film *Sling Blade*). The Dodds and Kirkendalls are going on their "dream vacation" to Reno, NV to see a monster truck show.

Millsburg seems to be full of the most uneducated and simple people that can exist in the heartland of rural America. Everyone they meet is excited for the gang and jealous that they get to go to Reno and see the "Monster Truck Jam." To further illustrate how backward Millsburg is, when the group is leaving town they are stopped by the local police for running a stop sign. Lonnie Earl has an open beer in his hand when he is pulled over, but is able to get out of a ticket by giving the cop a case of Pabst he has in the back of the car.

After an extended road trip, they arrive in Reno and are amazed by all the lights, big buildings, and by how huge the city is. As they drive down the Virginia Street strip they see a sign advertising that Tony Orlando is performing at the Silver Legacy, and the wives are ecstatic at their luck of being in Reno at the same time as the washed-up performer. When they arrive at their hotel, they are brought up to their room and are once again amazed by all they see. The women start dancing to a Shania Twain music video on TV while Roy pretends he's Hugh Hefner because he's in a hotel robe. Meanwhile, Lonnie Earl is quizzing the bellhop about the supposed free prostitutes he's heard about in Nevada.



Figure 28: Roy Kirkendall pretends to be Hugh Hefner in his “cloth of terry” bathrobe in *Waking Up in Reno* (2002) (screenshot of film).

The bright lights, big city atmosphere gets to the group, and some are unfaithful to their spouses. By the end of the film the wronged parties have forgiven the transgressors and everyone's relationships are stronger as the result. As observed by Darlene when news of the affairs has come to light, back home they are a fairly wholesome bunch, but once Reno gets to them, the group becomes just like the characters on the television show *Melrose Place*.

The film uses the group's misconceptions of a big city to make fun of Reno for being a small city that just pretends to be big. Most of the comedy derives from the idea that these people from Arkansas would choose Reno over Las Vegas for their big trip. The whole film conveys that the only people that would find Reno to be alluring are these uneducated hicks from Arkansas.

Arrested Development Season 3:1: Cabin Show (2005)

Arrested Development is a comedy television series that follows the riches to rags story of the Bluth family, owners of a bankrupt housing development corporation headquartered in Orange County California. The patriarch of the family, George, has escaped from prison, where he was serving a sentence for tax fraud and insider trading, and has successfully set up his twin brother Oscar to take his place. Telling the police that they have the wrong twin proves to be futile, as it is apparently a common claim among prisoners, and George is able to disappear.

His son, Michael, finds out that it is Oscar who is in jail, and sets off to find his father. After a slip of the tongue by the family attorney, Michael discovers that his father is in hiding in Reno and flies to the city immediately.

Upon arrival in Reno, the narrator of the series (an uncredited Ron Howard) notifies the viewer that Reno has been attempting to compete with Las Vegas and has begun an ad campaign similar to the successful “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Immediately a cab pulls up and the sign on the roof bears the slogan “Make the biggest little mistake of your life in Reno.”



Figure 29: Reno’s response to the popular “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” advertising campaign in *Arrested Development* (2005) (screenshot of season 3, episode 1: *Cabin Show*).

Michael asks the cab driver to take him to the “seedy underbelly of Reno,” and the driver takes him to a diner that is “a family style restaurant by day and an anything goes pan-sexual bazaar by night.” At the diner Michael runs into his brother in law, Tobias, who weeks earlier had left his wife, Lindsay, to run away to Las Vegas to live his dream as a member of the Blue Man Group. His attempts were unsuccessful so he traveled north to try to get a part in the show in Reno and was once again rejected. Tobias concedes that “Leaving Lindsay was the biggest little mistake I’ve ever made,” and begs Michael to call her on his behalf.

While all of these things are happening, Michael’s brother GOB (an acronym for George Oscar Bluth Jr, and pronounced “jobe”) receives a letter from a group that reunites fathers and sons informing him that he is invited to a father-son reunion at a local park. Not knowing that he has an illegitimate child, GOB assumes that George is trying to contact him and eagerly goes to the meet. When George doesn’t show up, GOB is devastated. He meets his son who is sad because he thinks his father didn’t show up either. The two decide to go on a “son and son” road trip together and GOB suggests Reno, since Michael is currently there. When GOB meets up with Michael, he tells him what has happened and Michael informs him that he is currently on a trip with his illegitimate son. GOB is freaked out and tells Michael that he’s “made a huge, tiny mistake,” a play on his usual catchphrase “I’ve made a huge mistake” and

Reno's "biggest little city" slogan. GOB then abandons his newfound son in Reno and heads back to Orange County.

This episode of *Arrested Development* plays on many of Reno's negative stereotypes. Reno is portrayed as a second-rate alternative to Las Vegas, both in the use of the competing slogan, and in Tobias' failure in Las Vegas leading him to try for a position in the less celebrated Reno production. The city's slogan "The Biggest Little City in the World," known the world over, is played with for comic effect multiple times, showing that the phrase's contradictory nature doesn't make sense when scrutinized. Another aspect of the city that is explored in this episode is that Reno is a good place to either abandon or hide from one's family, if for no other reason than it is not somewhere people would think to look.

Reno 911! (2003–2009)

Reno 911! is a mockumentary television series that is a spoof on reality police shows like *Cops and Rescue 911*. The show pokes fun at the fictional Reno Sheriff's Department, meant to be a combination of the Reno Police Department and the Washoe County Sheriff's Office. The series is not filmed in Reno, but is instead filmed in San Bernardino County, CA. To keep the viewer believing that it is taking place in Reno, there are constantly fast paced establishing shots between each scene. *Reno 911!* follows the officers of the department as they go about their daily duties.

They talk to the camera as they narrate their actions and answer unheard questions from the camera men, much like the show *Cops*.

As a whole, police officers are portrayed in media as respected citizens of the community and as competent in their responsibility of protecting the public and upholding the law. The officers in *Reno 911!* are exactly the opposite. They have little to no knowledge of the local laws, often get lost in the city, and many have mental or physical disabilities that prevent them from performing their responsibilities. The leader of the group, Lieutenant Dangle, is a flamboyant simpleton who wears short shorts as part of his uniform as opposed to the usual long pants because he claims they increase his mobility. Other characters include Deputy Wiegel, who is severely brain damaged and highly medicated, Deputy Garcia, who is trigger happy (often shooting unarmed individuals) and extremely racist, and Deputy Junior who is cross-eyed. These hapless officers are constantly bumbling around the city causing more trouble than they prevent.

A scene from the first season episode *Help From the FBI* is typical of how the officers of the Reno Sheriff's Department handle a situation. The police are dispatched to a disturbing the peace call, this time at a local strip club. There is an inebriated male customer that has commandeered the stage and is stripping. The strippers are all standing there waiting for the police to do something, but the police can't seem to get the upper hand. They walk up to the man but he refuses to get down.

The man challenges Officer Garcia to be a “real man” and come get him down off of the stage without using his gun, which up to this point has been drawn and aimed at the unarmed man.

Officer Garcia puts down his gun on the edge of the stage and gets up on the stage to subdue the man. Eventually the man gets a hold of the discarded weapon, shoots the officer in the leg and flees. Now instead of having to remove an inebriated nuisance from a strip club, the police have to get control of an armed man in the city streets and deal with an injured officer.



Figure 30: An average scene showing the ineptitude of the Reno Sheriff's Department in Reno 911! (2006) (Screenshot of the opening credits of season 3)

Another instance of ineptitude causing more trouble than there was to begin with can be seen in the episode *Clementine Gets Married*, in the first season. Deputy Junior is in a hotel room with a prostitute as part of a prostitution sting. He keeps trying unsuccessfully to get the prostitute to say how much specific sexual acts cost. After the prostitute relentlessly insists, the deputy shows her his money. She then tells him to close his eyes. When he does so, he is hit over the head with a lamp, and robbed by the prostitute. Now the officers have to treat the wounded deputy and track down a prostitute that has in her possession the city's money.

These two instances are just a drop in a bucket of the things that are constantly happening to these characters. There is no end to the stupidity and ineptitude of these police officers. Over the course of the six seasons the show was on the air, the officers are shot numerous times by citizens, other officers, and even themselves, people under police protection are shot, many animals are accidentally killed, police cars, vans, and even helicopters are stolen, and an innumerable number of people escape the grip of the police.

Reno 911! portrays all citizens of Reno and the surrounding areas as ignorant trailer trash, especially the police force. There are constant jokes about sex, prostitution, drug use, strip clubs, guns, and other things indicative to Northern Nevada. In each situation, the viewer ends up with a chuckle thinking "Only in Reno...."

Conclusions

Reno, Nevada, is a small city that nonetheless has considerably more notoriety than many cities larger than itself. From the beginning days of the “talkies” to the present, Reno has been a subject, or at least a setting, of films and television shows. When seen on screen, Reno, Nevada, is the setting of the sources of its notoriety; divorce, gambling, prostitution, and a refuge for the criminal element, has-beens, never-beens, and the ignorant.

In its history throughout the twentieth century, Reno has never been known for something that was considered proper or desirable by society at large, and has instead existed as a place to engage in undesirable activities. When each of these practices for which the city gained its fame became accepted by society, and was absorbed into the American mainstream, Reno has been left with little other than being known as a place that used to be the home of these other outré things.

Reno is known now by popular culture as being a place for washed-up performers, criminals, and the ignorant because the city itself is viewed as being a washed up criminal, ignorant of the changing world, refusing to adapt to American society as it becomes more accepting of what was once viewed as sinful practices.

It seems as though Reno has been acting like the gamblers that frequent its casinos; not interested in any long-term security, only in what is able to make a quick buck today.

In viewing these films and television shows one can easily see the rising and falling of what has made the city prosperous in the past, and notorious in the present. When reflecting on the dead end reputation that it now receives, if the city itself could think and speak, it may feel inclined to echo the words of GOB Bluth, who said, “I’ve made a huge, tiny mistake.”

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