

Pico, Frankie and The Meadows

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John Cahlan, who was news editor of the *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* when it happened, told the story of The Meadows again and again. He recorded it for the last time in a 1986 oral history, when he was 84 years old and had a year to live. That last time he finally gave the public what it wanted.

People wanted to hear that the notorious Tony Cornero built The Meadows hotel and casino. The 1931 Las Vegas resort, named for the English translation of the town's Spanish name, set the pattern and the standard for Las Vegas hotels to come. When construction began, Prohibition was still in force, and most gambling games were illegal in Nevada, which enabled the builders of The Meadows to cut a deal with the politicians of Las Vegas for a monopoly in gambling, liquor and prostitution. But the politicians could not deliver. Then, just 32 days before The Meadows' casino opened, an unexpected political tide made "wide open gambling" legal.

In a town full of tiny gambling clubs that used sawdust on their floors to trap dust, The Meadows became more than Las Vegas's first carpet joint. It brought the vision of men who knew the big city into a little town. Its architect designed the building for style and elegance, and its grand opening became the first in Las Vegas to require formal dress for guests and staff. It used beautiful women as part of its decor and atmosphere. It presented the first Las Vegas floor show. It set in place all the elements that would define Las Vegas. People felt The Meadows should have been built by fabulous,

outrageous Tony Cornero, who, stylish in his trademark white Stetson, thumbed his nose at the state of California, the federal government, and everyone who tried to stop him. A legendary gambler, he bet the Tango, his first gambling boat, on one roll of the dice. He lost with grace and walked away without regret.¹

After five decades of resistance, Cahlan finally gave in. He told his interviewer, “In the late 1930s the Meadows was built by Tony Cornero and his 2 brothers, Frankie and Louie.”² The badly wrong date signaled Cahlan’s thinking had lost its edge. He told the story he had told before and tossed in Tony for seasoning. Though his new story could not be true, it was received as gospel and enshrined the histories of Las Vegas.

In one way Cahlan’s final telling was an improvement on his earlier versions: He revealed more about the deal that Tony’s brothers, Louis and Frank Cornero, made as they planned The Meadows. In early 1931 the federal government pressed Las Vegas to honor its agreement to move the brothels out of infamous Block 16 and out of downtown in return for a new federal office building and post office. Cahlan said, “It was about the time that the city commission and the city were about to turn loose the prostitutes and run them out of town. Cornero promised that if he came up here and built the hotel, he would see that it was run correctly and everything, but he would have to have control of the prostitution, the gambling and the liquor. And there was a leading legal firm here in Las Vegas, which I will not name, who made a promise to him, but the firm could not come through with their promise....

“Almost overnight, one of the members of the law firm disappeared. Nobody knew what happened until he popped out as a district judge in another county of the state of Nevada.... This attorney who disappeared was the front man for the other attorneys.

When they couldn't pull a deal off, why, they just said, 'You'd better leave town. And we'll see that you're taken care of where you go....'"³

This new information is enough to identify the firm. Thomas Jefferson Durham Salter could credibly promise Block 16 would be closed, because his law partner was District Attorney Harley A. Harmon,⁴ and Salter had earlier been assistant D.A. When the deal with the Corneros fell through, Salter left town for Winnemucca, whence he came. Salter became a district court judge in 1942.⁵ Today an elementary school in Las Vegas is named for Harley A. Harmon. His son, Harley E. Harmon, spent years as an extremely powerful Clark County commissioner. Even after Harley A. had been dead for nearly forty years, Cahlan did not want to offend the Harmon family by connecting their patriarch's law firm with a scheme to create a monopoly in liquor, gambling and prostitution.

Las Vegas Age editor Charles "Pop" Squires was first to write about The Meadows and its hoped-for monopolies. He had been concerned for some time that the city might not close Block 16 and could thereby damage relations with the federal government, which was preparing to build the biggest and most expensive dam in the history of the world just 30 miles away. Squires wanted nothing as minor as prostitution to divert from his city the expected river of money. On December 30, 1930, he sounded an alarm: "The Age is informed upon what seems to be good authority that parties are preparing under the guise of a hotel project to locate the red light district on a tract east of Vegas not far from the city limits and close to the main highway to Boulder Dam."⁶ Squires insisted the project be stopped and railed against it for the next week, warning that if prostitution were allowed to relocate there, "it will flaunt itself in the face of every visitor

to Boulder Dam.”⁷ Then the businessmen of Block 16 exerted their power, and on January 10 Squires, relieved, made clear that the deal with the Corneros had collapsed.⁸

In his first oral history in 1968, Cahlan’s story hewed closer to the truth. He recalled that “the Cornero brothers” built The Meadows, adding, “Tony Cornero, at that time, was serving time in the federal penitentiary in Washington,” meaning the State of Washington. He said, “When they had the opening night, Tony wasn’t here. He was still in Washington.”⁹ In 1968 Cahlan recounted the monopoly deal this way: “...the then powers that be in the city of Las Vegas promised them that if they would come up and build the nightclub here in Las Vegas, that they could have exclusive rights to the prostitution. The city of Las Vegas would close down prostitution on Block Sixteen, move it up to their hotel, and that [sic] they could set up gambling out there. At that time, gambling was not legal. But they could set up gambling out there and run gambling, liquor, and prostitution exclusively in this area. So they...started construction, and the city commissioners backed off from closing off Block Sixteen and closing all the bootlegging joints downtown.”¹⁰ The brothel owners proved powerful enough to run their whorehouses in downtown Las Vegas for another decade.

Though Cahlan stuck to the facts in 1968, Tony Cornero’s fame had already begun to seduce the newsman. Cornero had earned national notoriety in 1939, holding off the law with fire hoses for nine days from his new gambling ship, the Rex, in Santa Monica Bay.¹¹ Cary Grant portrayed him in RKO Pictures’ second-biggest hit of 1943, *Mr. Lucky*,¹² which later became a television series. In Las Vegas Tony built the Stardust, the world’s biggest hotel and casino, though he died before it opened. While admitting Tony was far from The Meadows during its construction and debut, in 1968 Cahlan still could

not resist insinuating such a romantic figure into his tale. He said, "... Frankie and Louis, his two brothers, were up here in charge of construction,"¹³ implying they were Tony's agents, when he knew they were not.

In 1955 Tony's death by heart attack in the casino of the Desert Inn Hotel made him a Las Vegas icon.¹⁴ The next day The Meadows myth appeared for the first time. So eager was a *Review-Journal* writer, covering the death, to connect Tony to The Meadows that he and his editor let his story refute itself: "He and his brothers, Frank and Louis, constructed the establishment on East Charleston...", and two sentences later: "During the time of the construction of the Meadows, he was in McNeil's [sic] Island federal penitentiary serving a term for rum running and, after his release, came to Las Vegas to aid his brothers in the operation of the Meadows."¹⁵

The zeal to make Tony the father of The Meadows may be gauged by the fact that such a respected historian as Russell R. Elliott conflated the contradictory sentences of this poorly-written article into his 1973 *History of Nevada*: "The Meadows was built and operated by Tony Cornero and his brothers Frankie and Louie."¹⁶ After reading Professor Elliott, Cahlan may have questioned his own memory. But not only did Tony Cornero's incarceration in the far Northwest make his participation in creating The Meadows impossible; other factors limited his ability and his desire to even assist with the completed hotel.

Frank Cornero and his younger brother Tony began bootlegging Canadian liquor into San Francisco in 1921 near the beginning of Prohibition, then moved to Los Angeles, where they did so well that several family members followed them south: their mother, Madeline Cornero Stralla; one of their older sisters, Katherine; their younger,

Esther; and the youngest brother, Louis. The family came from Italy, a few miles from France, with two exceptions: Because his father, the incorrigible gambler Luigi Cornero, was drawn to Monaco's Monte Carlo gambling zone, and because his mother had family in Nice, France, eight miles down the coast, Frank Joseph (Francesco Giuseppe), was born in the French principality of Monaco,¹⁷ the gambling capital of the world. Esther was born in Los Gatos, California,¹⁸ after her father's gambling drove the family from their Italian farm to the Golden State. After Luigi died in an accident in Los Gatos in 1911 and Madeline remarried, the children took the name of her second husband, Giacomo Stralla,¹⁹ and used it to varying degrees.

By 1926, federal Prohibition agents were pursuing Tony Cornero as "King of the Los Angeles Bootleggers."²⁰ After a federal grand jury indicted him that year, he disappeared into the Los Angeles underground.²¹ Then Los Angeles policemen mistakenly arrested him in an unrelated case. Unaware of his federal warrant, they quickly released him, but federal agents were alerted.

Cornero hopped a train north with agents pursuing him so hotly that he was forced to jump from the moving cars in Northern California. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, he then caught an airplane and re-boarded the same train farther north, then had to leap from it again in Washington.²² He made his way into Canada, then Europe and South America before returning to Los Angeles to surrender.²³ He pled guilty and was sentenced to two years at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Puget Sound, Washington. He arrived at the prison on December 7, 1929,²⁴ a year before his brothers traveled to Las Vegas to negotiate with Tom Salter for favorable treatment of their planned hotel.

Frank and Louis surely kept in touch with their brother during his incarceration, and Tony may have invested in their plan, as their mother and sister Katherine likely did. But Tony could be no help in building The Meadows. He went underground December 22, 1926,²⁵ and fled the country at the end of April 1927.²⁶ He surrendered to federal authorities in October 1929, was sentenced November 12, and remained in prison until after The Meadows opened. When Frank and Louis began negotiations with Tom Salter, Tony had been either out of the country or in prison for four and a half years, while Frank ran the Cornero bootlegging operations in California and Nevada. Frank and Louis knew Las Vegas well enough to negotiate for favored treatment, but Tony was a thousand miles away and years out of touch.

The deal Frank and Louis made with Salter and—presumably—Harmon failed in January 1931.²⁷ The grand opening of The Meadows casino and its first 25 rooms attracted large crowds May 2 as the *Las Vegas Age* announced that the casino was, “designed and built by Paul Warner for Louis D. and Frank J. Cornero....”²⁸ The start of work on the 100-room Meadows hotel and bungalow addition was delayed through June and finally began²⁹ around the day Tony was released from McNeil Island, July 1, 1931.³⁰

When he arrived in Las Vegas that July, Tony’s mind was not on The Meadows. He was eager to get back to his California smuggling operation. He seems to have stayed at The Meadows for two months at most before returning to California.

In 1948 when Tony answered a knock at his Beverly Hills front door and stopped a bullet that nearly killed him, the *R-J* ran a story reviewing his Las Vegas connections. John Cahlan clearly wrote it; he described details of The Meadows just as he did later. In 1948, Cahlan’s memories of The Meadows were only 17 years old, and as in 1968 he gave

Tony no role in creating The Meadows. Cahlan explained how Frank and Louis negotiated with politicians, then built and opened the resort. Tony appears in the article only after The Meadows was filled with patrons: “During the climactic days of its operation, Frankie and Louie were the hosts supreme. Frankie was the front man and, dressed in his tuxedo, greeted all of the customers. Louie was the inside man, who took care of the guests after they entered the establishment, while Tony was more or less of a silent partner.”³¹

Tony Cornero, one of the flashiest hoods in the country, was not prone to silence. If The Meadows had been even partly his project, everyone would have known. By the time Tony arrived, the Meadows was designed, built and filled with guests, with its hotel addition underway. It would stand or fall as Frank and Louis created it.

In 1948, Cahlan remembered The Meadows as Frank’s achievement, apparently because he knew Frank better than Louis. Cahlan recalled the Rex, the gambling club Tony opened in 1944 inside the Apache Hotel in memory of his seagoing Rex, as Tony’s contribution to Las Vegas.³²

In early September 1931, when The Meadows was four months old, a fire was discovered in the attic of its new and (luckily) separate hotel building. The Las Vegas Fire Department refused to respond to the Corneros’ repeated calls for help, because the hotel sat outside the city limits—by less than half a mile. After the \$31,000 building burned to the ground with its state-of-the-art kitchen, Louis spoke bitterly to the press.³³ Frank lost his watch fighting the fire.³⁴ No account mentions Tony. Apparently, he already had left for Los Angeles, where he quickly regained his place in California bootlegging; in December Los Angeles police confiscated 620 cases of his smuggled

bourbon.³⁵ Tony was demonstrating to his brothers that as Prohibition drew to a close, they were missing a lucrative opportunity.

Though their casino and original rooms survived, Frank and Louis got the point. Without a hotel filled with captive gamblers or prostitutes, The Meadows' income did not compare to the profits of smuggled alcohol. In February the brothers leased the club to three of their employees for \$5,000 a year and left town.³⁶ An *R-J* reporter wrote, "Louis Cornero, proprietor of the Meadows, popular local resort, is giving up his Las Vegas connections, and with his brother, Frank, who has also been a resident of this city for several months past, is returning to Los Angeles to make his home...."³⁷ The *Age* reported that "Frank and Louis Cornero, the brothers who built the casino, and the hotel...plan to return to Los Angeles immediately."³⁸ No one referred to Tony Cornero as the creator or builder of The Meadows.

Some inventive writers claim that Frank and Louis were front men for Tony in The Meadows because of their clean police records. Actually, Louis was the front man for Frank.

Louis Donald (Luigi Donato) Cornero grew up fast. At 23 in 1926, he was known in Los Angeles bootlegging and police circles as "Pico" Cornero. A federal complaint charged him under that name with violating the Volstead Act, which banned the sale of alcohol.³⁹ He vanished. Two weeks later federal officials decided "Pico" must have fled to Mexico.⁴⁰ For the next two years the news was filled with Tony, Frank, Katherine, Esther and her husband, but nothing from "Pico," and police stopped looking for him.

After four years lying low, he could appear in Las Vegas as Louis Cornero without a conviction on his record and could act as the front man for The Meadows. John Cahlan

said that Frank “...was a real nice little Italian guy. He was about five feet seven inches tall [that would be two inches taller than Tony], and had a very dashing mustache, which he waxed.”⁴¹ But Frank apparently had killed people. He had certainly pistol-whipped a Los Angeles neighbor bloody with a .45 in an argument over a puppy.⁴²

When Frank Cornero arrived in Las Vegas at 33 to build The Meadows, he was a convicted felon, free on a \$20,000 appeal bond. Like Tony, he had been sentenced to two years at McNeil Island, in Frank’s case for his operations in Orange County, where he had bribed public officials for “protection” while smuggling in millions of dollars worth of booze.⁴³

In early February, as The Meadows was being built, Frank—called “Frankie” in the Los Angeles newspapers—left Louis to oversee construction, while he returned to Los Angeles to stand trial with their sister, Esther, on charges of smuggling liquor into San Diego. Despite strong evidence, Esther’s charges were dropped,⁴⁴ and Frank was acquitted. Esther’s husband was convicted.⁴⁵

The next month, Frankie Cornero again left Las Vegas, this time for San Francisco to appeal his two-year prison sentence. In his original trial prosecution witnesses were missing, and the Los Angeles District Attorney asked that the jury be dismissed; a second jury convicted Frank. In San Francisco, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that two juries constituted double jeopardy.⁴⁶ Frank’s conviction was reversed 40 days before the grand opening of The Meadows. Frank’s absences from the construction site threw responsibility onto the shoulders of 28-year-old Louis, but the younger man handled the job, and construction finished on schedule.

After Frank and Louis leased out The Meadows and returned to Los Angeles, Louis returned to smuggling and more headlines as “Pico Cornero.” The next year, when Prohibition ended, he moved to Napa Valley with his second wife⁴⁷ and began using his stepfather’s surname. “Louis Stralla” buried Pico Cornero and became a pioneer and eventually a grand old man of the legal California wine industry.⁴⁸ As Napa Valley wine became widely known, Louis was elected mayor of St. Helena, where today his name graces the Louis Stralla Water Treatment Facility.

Leaving Las Vegas, Frank rose again to the top of the list of federal targets. In what the *Los Angeles Times* called “the last major liquor conspiracy case to be tried before the Eighteenth Amendment is repealed,”⁴⁹ Frank and his sister Katherine were each sentenced to two years in prison, but because Prohibition was ending, their prison terms were suspended; they paid fines.⁵⁰

With his legal struggles over, Frankie Cornero was not finished with Las Vegas. By 1938, The Meadows had closed under its new operators. Frank returned to Las Vegas to reopen it as a nightclub on weekends, but it failed again and stayed vacant until 1940, when KENO, Las Vegas’s first successful radio station, rented the building for its studios. The next year KENO moved to the El Rancho Vegas Hotel.⁵¹ Frank was engaged to Gladys Thompson of Elko; they planned to live in Las Vegas. In the hot summer of 1941 he drove there to see what could be done with The Meadows.

Gladys waited in Elko that July as Frank looked for a deal for the building. He took a breather for a few days in a cottage on cool Mt. Charleston, less than 40 miles from town. Then his break was over; his wedding was eight days away. John Cahlan and his wife, Florence Lee Jones Cahlan, drove up to take over the cottage. The three chatted,

then Frank started alone down the twisting mountain road. It was nearly midnight. Partway down the mountain, Frank's right front tire blew. His car plunged down a 15-foot slope, turning trunk over hood; he flew out the door into a pile of limestone, smashing the back of his skull. The pioneer Las Vegas casino owner was only 43.⁵²

Louis sold The Meadows to Las Vegas businessmen Nate Mack and R. J. Kaltenborn,⁵³ and Frank's dream began to blossom—for someone else. Las Vegas attorney J. R. Lewis bought Block 16's landmark Arizona Club, then The Pastime next door, converting the upstairs brothels to hotels.⁵⁴ In early 1941 he complained to the city commission that prostitution on the block was a public nuisance that violated both the city's recently-passed Ordinance 194 and a state law banning brothels within 40 yards of a church. Two churches sat fewer than 40 yards from Block 16.⁵⁵ Neither law mattered until Lewis took the issues to court. His cases moved slowly, but he steadily prevailed.⁵⁶ With downtown prostitution ending, Mack and Kaltenborn leased The Meadows to an experienced pimp named Edward Clippinger,⁵⁷ who renovated and reopened the resort as a brothel.

As the legal noose tightened on Block 16, attorneys for its brothel owners pointed out that the city charter gave Las Vegas power over prostitution within a mile of city limits. They demanded the city exercise that power and close The Meadows, too.⁵⁸ The city commission listened, then passed an ordinance taking control of prostitution within a mile and banning it everywhere—except at The Meadows.⁵⁹ The resort finally had its monopoly. It would last 36 days.

By the time Block 16 was closed, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and the nation was at war. Nothing could be allowed to impede the war effort, and the Army saw

venereal disease as an impediment. The Army was building an air base outside of town and demanded The Meadows be closed.⁶⁰ Patriotism and the threat of declaring Las Vegas off limits were a pair of heavy hammers; two weeks later the city commission repealed its new ordinance and surrendered jurisdiction to Clark County.⁶¹ The Army then turned to the county, pressing until Sheriff Gene Ward closed the brothel in July 1942.⁶²

Clippinger moved his business to Four Mile Springs, sitting just that distance from downtown. There, in a romantic gesture, he named his new establishment after his new wife, Roxie. The Roxie Motel thrived until April 28, 1954, when the FBI closed it in a sensational raid.⁶³

The original Meadows building, which had housed the first Las Vegas club with tuxedo-clad staff and customers, the first Las Vegas floor show, and Judy Garland's Las Vegas debut under her birth name, Frances Gumm, then became a cheap rooming house for single men. In the early hours of February 9, 1943, it burned to the ground. It survived Frankie by a year and a half.⁶⁴

Frank and Louis Cornero had shown Las Vegas what it could be. After 1931 the city and its environs hosted more sleazy sawdust joints than ever, but local gamblers had seen the future: posh decor, formal dress, musicians, singers, showgirls, the works. Frank and Louis had paved the trail to Babylon.

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¹ Florabel Muir: "Gambling Ship," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 12, 1939, p. 21.

² *John F. Cahlan; Fifty Years in Journalism and Community Development*, an oral history conducted and edited by Jamie Coughtry; Oral History Program, University of Nevada-Reno, 1987, p. 138.

³ Cahlan; *Fifty Years*, pp. 138-139.

⁴ "Professional Cards," *Las Vegas Age*, January 1, 1931, p. 5.

⁵ "Salter Wins Post As District Judge," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, August 4, 1942, p. 7.

⁶ "New Redlight," *Las Vegas Age*, December 30, 1929, p. 2.

⁷ "New Redlight," *Las Vegas Age*, January 8, 1930, p. 2.

⁸ "The Cleaning Up Process," *Las Vegas Age*, January 10, 1930, p. 2.

⁹ *John F. Cahlan; Reminiscences of a Reno and Las Vegas, Nevada Newspaperman, University Regent, and Public-Spirited Citizen*, an oral history conducted by Mary Ellen Glass, Oral History Program, University of Nevada, Reno, 1970, p. 117.

¹⁰ *John F. Cahlan; Reminiscences*, p. 116.

¹¹ Vickey Kalambakal, "The Battle of Santa Monica Bay, *American History*, April 2002, pp. 36-40.

¹² Internet Movie Database: <http://akas.imdb.es/title/tt0036174/trivia>.

¹³ *John F. Cahlan; Reminiscences*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁴ Florence Lee Jones (Cahlan) in her "Las Vegas History, Year—1931," published in a special edition of the *Review-Journal* in February, 1955, wrote that The Meadows was built by "the Cornero brothers" and specifically mentions only Louis; "Transportation Section," p. 12.

¹⁵ "Cornero, Gambler, Succumbs," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 1, 1955, p. 1.

¹⁶ Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada*, Second Edition, Revised, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1971, 1987, p. 284.

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²¹ "Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1929, p. A5.

²² "Cornero Slips Law's Clutch," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1927, p. A2.

²³ "Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," *loc cit.*

²⁴ *Record of Prisoners Received at the United States Penitentiary, McNeil Island, Washington*, p. 49.

²⁵ "Tony Cornero Gives Self Up," *loc cit.*

²⁶ "Cornero Slips Law's Clutch," *loc cit.*

²⁷ "The Cleaning Up Process," *Las Vegas Age*, January 10, 1931, p. 2.

²⁸ "The Meadows; Finest Casino in America," *Las Vegas Age*, May 2, 1931, p. 11.

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³² *Ibid.*

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⁴⁰ "Liquor Plot Suspects Hide," *Los Angles Times*, December 3, 1926, p. A8.

⁴¹ *John F. Cahlan; Reminiscences*, p. 117-118.

⁴² "Dog's Day Costs Owner Ninety," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1926, p. A9.

⁴³ "More Accused in Liquor Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1927, p. A1.

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⁴⁵ "Cornero Freed at Rum Trial," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1931, p. A2.

⁴⁶ "Cornero to Go Free in Rum Case," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1931, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *John F. Cahlan; Fifty Years*, p. 139.

⁴⁸ James Conway, *Napa*; Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1990, pp. 44-431, *passim*.

⁴⁹ "Cornero's Liquor Case Plea Lost," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1933, p. A2.

⁵⁰ "Cornero Pair Found Guilty," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1933, p. A2.

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⁵³ "Meadows Razed Last Night by Big Conflagration," *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal*, February 9, 1943, p. 2.

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