

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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Nevada hotel mogul Charles W. Mapes, Jr., who died on May 13, 1999, was credited for "building the first hotel in the world after World War II," according to a column in the *Reno Gazette-Journal*.

Opened on December 17, 1947, the twelve-story Mapes Hotel, poised on the Truckee River overlooking downtown Reno, was Nevada's first true high-rise building. The tallest buildings prior to the Mapes were Reno's six-story Riverside Hotel (1927), Ely's six-story Hotel Nevada (1929) and Reno's seven-story El Cortez Hotel (1931). Historic preservation advocates were unsuccessful in saving the high-rise, art-deco building that changed Reno's skyline and ushered in an era when Reno thrived as America's gambling mecca; the building was imploded on January 30, 2000. But was the Mapes, with its Sky Room casino, really the first hotel built in the world after World War II?

Not quite. War restrictions on building prevented the erection of new hotels. With war's end in August 1945, much of the world, and particularly Europe, had to rebuild. Building materials were in short supply. Industrial plants, civilian housing, and public works were first priorities, not hotels. Existing hotels in the US, virtually filled to capacity during the war, by 1947 were deluged with tourists. After so many years of war, people were excited about traveling again.

Charles Mapes clearly saw the opportunity for a resort hotel/casino in post-war Reno, however so had William "Billy" Wilkerson in southern Nevada. The Flamingo Hotel on the LA highway, now the world-famous "Strip," was Wilkerson's vision. It was only after his getting into financial difficulties during the construction of the lavish hotel, that mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, of "Murder, Incorporated" fame, coerced Wilkerson, Los Angeles restaurateur and publisher of the "Hollywood Reporter," to give up his interest in the venture. Siegel, with his mob money and political connections, opened the Flamingo Hotel & Casino on December 26, 1946. Cost overruns and the mafia bosses' belief that he and his girlfriend, Virginia Hill, were pocketing some of the money ultimately cost "Bugsy" his life. On June 23, 1947, Siegel was gunned down at Hill's house in Beverly Hills.

"Bugsy" Siegel beat Charles Mapes to the punch. In all probability, the Flamingo Hotel, and not the Mapes, was the first hotel constructed in the world after World War II, although its tallest building was only four stories.

A review of the *New York Times* index and post-war publications make no mention of any new hotels prior to the Flamingo in Las Vegas. According to *Business Week* (July 5, 1947), Houston's eighteen-story Shamrock Hotel was "one of [the] few hotels in the nation under construction," however the high-rise building opened on March 17, 1949 more than a year after the Mapes. A hotel/casino began operations in the summer of 1947 in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic, and the Thunderbird Hotel opened on the Las Vegas Strip on September 2, 1948 (the building was imploded on October 3, 2000). Neither operation included any high-rise structures.

In the end, it appears that the Mapes Hotel was the first high-rise hotel completed in the world after World War II and Nevada's tallest building until the fifteen-story Fremont Hotel and Casino opened in Las Vegas in 1956. And while not the first post-war resort hotel/casino, the Mapes Sky Room casino on the twelfth floor was unique in its day.

Charles Mapes deserves to be remembered as a pioneer in the hotel industry, albeit a controversial one.

Photo: Nevada Historical Society, Reno

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