by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The history of the word “gaming” in Nevada as applied to “gambling”—games of chance, mechanical and electronic betting devices—is a ball of confusion. Former mayor of Las Vegas, Jan Jones, now an executive for Harrah’s Entertainment, in a March 2006 Associated Press (AP) story “said ‘gambling’ became ‘gaming’ as that city’s famous Strip transformed into an entertainment mecca, complete with shopping and stage shows.” UNLV Professor Bill Thompson, who studies the gambling industry, said in the same story that “‘gaming’ went virtually unused until the late 1980s. The legislators say ‘Oh no, no, we don’t have gambling. We just have gaming. We’re just playing games’.” But the term “gaming” has been around for a lot longer than these folks believe.

In fact, Nevada created regulatory panels called the Gaming Control Board and the Gaming Commission in the 1950s. “I don’t use ‘gaming’,” long-time AP Carson City Bureau Chief Brendan Riley was recently quoted as saying. “No, only if it’s the title of the Gaming Control Board or the Gaming Commission. And I don’t use it because it’s a soft word.”

The casino industry has adopted the much broader term “gaming” over “gambling” some suggest because of the perceived stigma associated with the word “gambling.” The words are clearly not synonyms. However, is the use of the word “gaming” interchangeably with the word “gambling” something that just happened in the last fifty years?

The first Nevada Territorial Legislature passed “An Act to Prohibit Gambling” on November 25, 1861. Betting games were illegal in Nevada for eight years. Then, in 1869, the State Legislature overrode Governor Henry Blasdel’s veto and passed “An Act to restrict gaming”. Two years earlier in a legislative effort to legalize gambling, Governor Blasdel had told the legislators that “Gaming is an intolerable and inexcusable vice.”

“An Act to prevent gaming,” approved in the first state legislative session in 1865 was repealed four years later. Essentially licensed and regulated games of chance enumerated in the gaming law were legal.

The newspapers of the day refer to gaming tables, gaming licenses, and gaming revenue. Sometimes gaming and gambling were used interchangeably. For example, Reno’s *Weekly Nevada State Journal*
for February 24, 1877 noted that a bill being considered in the State Legislature proposed “restricting gaming to the upper stories of all gambling houses in towns containing more than 1,500 inhabitants.”

Slot machines introduced in the 1890s were not originally taxed using the term gaming in Nevada but given their own tax category. State law referred to them as a mechanical device, machine for money or a gambling device, while Federal revenue acts in the twentieth-century would define slot machines as gaming devices.

Gambling/gaming, exclusive of lotteries, was legal in Nevada until October 1, 1910. A law passed by the 1909 Legislature was entitled “An Act prohibiting gambling.” Slot machines, games or devices are mentioned in the statute, but not gaming.

“An Act concerning slot machines, gambling games, and gambling devices” was passed on March 19, 1931, again legalizing the gambling business in Nevada. The term gaming was not used in the law.

Just the same, post cards and photos depicting casinos in Nevada from this era show signs advertising “Gaming.” Moreover, newspaper accounts used the term gaming frequently when referencing gambling. According to a United Press story in the January 18, 1950 edition of the *Nevada State Journal*

, “The [Nevada Supreme] court said that despite legalization of gambling in the state at various times in its history and despite the fact that the state taxes gaming, nothing in all the statutes would permit court action to collect gambling debts.”

In spite of claims that gaming as applied to the casino gambling industry is a relatively new term, the historical record makes it clear that gambling and gaming have been used interchangeably in Nevada from its earliest days.

Photo credit:  post card of a late 1940s view looking north on Virginia Street, sometimes called Casino Row, in Reno.  Under the vertical Nevada Club sign the marquee reads "GAMING." Post card courtesy of Guy Rocha.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal,* the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley; the
*Humboldt Sun*
; and the
*Battle Mountain Bugle*
.