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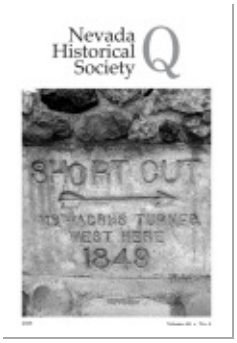
Gambling with Lives: A History of Occupational Health in Greater Las Vegas by Michelle Follette Turk (review)



Larry Gragg

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Book Review

Gambling with Lives: A History of Occupational Health in Greater Las Vegas. By Michelle Follette Turk (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2021), 375 pp.

Michelle Follette Turk has authored an important book, one that will help readers understand the complex relationships among workers, employers, and the government in Nevada from the early twentieth century into the current century. In a revised and expanded edition of an earlier volume, Turk, a historian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, advances a clear argument: "For the most part, Nevada consistently failed to protect its workers throughout the century and continuously suffered large-scale workplace disasters" (p.18).

Turk offers an intriguing and persuasive approach, one that is topical while being comprehensive. She includes chapters dealing with the hazards facing workers on the San Pedro, Los Angeles, & Salt Lake Railroad Company that founded Las Vegas; the construction crews who built the massive Hoover Dam; the thousands of employees who worked in the Basic Magnesium plant outside Las Vegas during World War II; the men and women who worked at the Nevada Test Site beginning in the 1950s; and those thousands who built and toiled in the Strip hotels after World War II.

The most impressive aspect of Turk's book is that she grounded her conclusions upon extensive research. Besides drawing upon a wide range of books and journal articles, she consulted government reports, oral histories, legal cases, newspapers, and manuscript collections. The obvious value of such deep and wide research is that readers can have confidence in her argument.

To be sure, Turk deals with several work-related disasters that highlight challenging working conditions including the deadly fires at the MGM Grand in 1980 and the Las Vegas Hilton in 1981, as well as the horrific mass shooting on the Las Vegas Strip in 2017 that killed and wounded almost 500. The bulk of her findings, however, deal with the daily hazards that workers faced when equipment failed and derailments occurred along the railroad and rockslides during the brutal heat at the Hoover Dam project; the perilous radiation danger at the Nevada Test Site; and poor air quality, exacerbated by secondhand smoke, during long shifts endured by workers in the casinos.

Turk persuasively demonstrates that employers at these work sites were slow to implement comprehensive safety and health programs. They aggressively fought many personal injury lawsuits. Yet, this is not a muckraking diatribe. Turk points out that on the railroad and on the Hoover Dam project, for example, human error was the leading cause of injuries and deaths. Another factor Turk is careful to note is that the lack of good medical facilities was a constant problem for workers in southern Nevada. She makes favorable mention of the struggles of physicians, Halle Hewetson and Roy Martin, to establish an

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adequate hospital in Las Vegas in the early 1900s and later in the century celebrates the establishment of an adequate medical center in southern Nevada associated with the School of Medicine at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

In the end it is difficult to challenge Turk's conclusion that employers, workers, and governments in and around Las Vegas have a poor record when it comes to occupational health: "Unlike most metropolitan areas of its size, the Las Vegas community never developed a culture that valued health during the twentieth century" (p. 324).

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