

Lecture notes of  
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from the *Henderson Speaks!* panel discussion:

*The Economic Impact of Henderson Industrial Plants on  
Southern Nevada and Race Relations at the World War II-  
era BMI Plants*

hosted by the Henderson Historical Society

at the College of Southern Nevada

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By way of introduction, this event is a homecoming as such.

In the summer of 1974, I worked for Henderson Parks & Recreation managing the Basic HS gym for Dundee Jones and the late Willie Davison. In those days, there was only one high school in Henderson and it had recently moved to a new campus on Palo Verde Drive. Dundee and I connected after almost 40 years at Willie's celebration of life in Sparks last month.

While my love of NV history dates back to my elementary school days at John S. Park in LV (by the way, Dick and I are fellow alumni, but he attended the school after it first opened), I certainly didn't foresee that I would become a NV historian and State Archivist for 28 years.

So this evening I want to introduce you to the complex labor and race-relations issues at BMI, Henderson and Las Vegas that surrounded the 1944 Democratic primary election for United State Senator of NV. Incumbent Patrick McCarran experienced his toughest political race since his initial election in 1932. The battle with Lt. Gov. Vail Pittman badly split an already divided Democratic Party. But more important in the annals of NV history, the large BMI work force numbering in the thousands, especially African-American employees living in Henderson and Las Vegas' Westside, essentially dictated the outcome of the U.S. Senate election on Sept. 5.

At the time of the 1944 senate contest, Joe was 9 years old and living in Mounds, Louisiana and Dick was 7 living in Las Vegas. Lou LaPorta moved to Henderson in 1945. I suspect he heard about the contentious political battle. Does anyone here today remember that divisive race that pitted the American Federation of Labor (AFL) against the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Henderson?

Let me profile the two U.S. Senate candidates before I provide the context for the 1944 contest.

Pat McCarran was born in Reno in 1876. He was elected to the State Assembly in 1902 representing Washoe Co. In 1903, McCarran voted for laws establishing an official NV Labor Day holiday and an eight-hour day in mines, mills and smelters. From that session forward in his political career he aligned himself with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and supported the Western Federation of Miners (WFM).

McCarran was admitted to the NV Bar in 1905, moved to Tonopah and was elected Nye Co. district attorney in 1906. During the labor troubles in Goldfield and Tonopah in 1907-08, which included Governor Sparks' call for federal troops, he supported the AFL and WFM, but was adamantly opposed to the radical Industrial Workers of the World; commonly known as the "Wobblies". McCarran's exposure to the IWW would later color his view of the CIO, after its creation in 1935, and its Communist faction.

He returned to Reno to practice law and was elected a NV Supreme Court justice in 1912, but was not reelected in 1918.

McCarran was unsuccessful in U.S. Senate bids in 1916 and 1926. He was considered a maverick politician and an outsider in the Democratic Party.

He was among the best defense attorneys in Nevada, and received national notoriety as the divorce attorney for silent-screen actress Mary Pickford in her controversial Minden divorce in 1920.

In 1932, McCarran upset incumbent Republican Tasker Oddie in the U.S. Senate race, the workers at Hoover Dam overwhelmingly supporting Franklin Roosevelt's presidential candidacy and swinging the U.S. Senate election for McCarran.

McCarran, a Catholic and ultra-conservative, was Nevada's version of a Dixiecrat. He rarely supported FDR and his New Deal. He was also at odds with FDR-supporter senior U.S. Sen. Key Pittman from Tonopah. He had run against incumbent Pittman in 1916 for the U.S. Senate seat. The Pittman faction of the Democratic party did not support McCarran's political ambition, but mounted no challenge to McCarran in 1932 believing he couldn't beat Tasker Oddie. McCarran was openly an isolationist before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States' entrance into World War II. His political rivals questioned his enthusiasm in supporting the war effort.

However, McCarran was also a shrewd pragmatist and opportunistic with the onset of the war in 1941.

Arguably, Sen. McCarran could be considered the father of Henderson for his efforts that resulted in Basic Magnesium, Inc. (BMI).

Quoting McCarran biographer, the late Michael J. Ybarra, in *Washington Gone Crazy Senator Pat McCarran and the Great Communist Hunt*:

*Two summers before the townsite was nothing but a two-lane road cutting through the sagebrush . . . Pat McCarran wrote a letter to Franklin Roosevelt. The Office of Production Management, McCarran pointed out, has recommended increasing magnesium production, and Nevada just happened to have one of the largest deposits of ore in the country. The president replied Nevada would get a plant. In July 1942 the government's Defense Plant Corporation signed a contract with a new company called Basic Magnesium. The government would fund construction of the plant and own the operation, while BMI would manage the \$150 million project. "The biggest thing given to any state," Edwin Watson, Roosevelt's secretary assured McCarran.*

*McCarran wanted to transform Nevada. The state's economy was nothing but extractive: It took things—rocks from the earth, money from the pockets of gamblers, lawyers' fees from divorcees—but never made anything. . . . McCarran wanted to change all that. He had a dream of a new Nevada, a place that made things besides fortunes for absentee mine owners and sold things besides sin and attracted residents for longer than six weeks.*

Vail Pittman was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1883. Managing the family's plantation in Louisiana in 1903, he first visited Tonopah where brothers William and Key were practicing law and promoting mining stock during Nevada's second great mining boom. In 1904, he relocated to the silver-mining town, established the Pittman Coal Company in 1905, and was joined by his brother Frank who would also practice law in Tonopah. Through his connections, he was appointed Nye Co. undersheriff in 1907 and served in that capacity for four years; the first two years while Pat McCarran was district attorney.

Vail campaigned for brother Key when he made his first unsuccessful try for the U.S. Senate in 1910, and again in 1912, when Key was elected to the Senate.

In the meantime, he became the business manager of a mining journal call the *Tonopah Miner* in 1912 and began his long career as a newspaperman. Vail used the *Miner* to promote Democratic politicians and particularly his brother Key. In 1914, Vail supported the women's suffrage resolution on the ballot which Nevada's male voters supported by a substantial margin, giving women 21 and over the right to vote and hold public office in the Silver State. In 1916, he supported Key over Pat McCarran at the state Democratic nominating convention.

In 1920, Vail moved to Ely to publish the *Ely Daily Times*, a Democratic newspaper. He supported Key in his 1922, 1928, 1934 and 1940 campaigns.

Vail was elected a White Pine County State Senator in 1924, but chose not to run again in 1928 because he did not want to be on the same ticket with Key. Instead, Vail openly campaigned in the *Ely Daily Times* for Key's reelection as U.S. Senator.

In 1936, Vail lost a three-way race for White Pine County State Senator and seemingly lost interest in politics.

However, the death of brother Key shortly after his winning reelection to a sixth term in 1940 stimulated Vail to ask Democratic Gov. "Ted" Carville to appoint him U.S. Senator in his brother's place. He felt that the office was rightfully his as Key's brother and long-time supporter.

Pat McCarran, now senior U.S. Senator from NV, worked against Vail's appointment. According to Vail's biographer Eric Moody, McCarran "was adamantly opposed to any appointment for

the young brother of his deceased rival.” McCarran also wanted a southern Nevadan appointed to the vacant seat.

Gov. Carville appointed Assembly Speaker Berkeley Bunker of Las Vegas to finish Key’s final year of his fifth term, and again appointed Bunker to serve two years as Nevada’s junior senator until the next election in 1942.

Undaunted, Vail Pittman decided he would run for the Democratic nomination for Lt. Gov. in 1942, winning the six-way race in a landslide. He defeated the Republican candidate in the general election by an even larger margin.

By 1944, Vail was considering running for U.S. Senate against his brother Key’s long-time rival. Vail declared his candidacy on July 29 during the state Democratic convention proclaiming:

*The rank and file of the people in this state, I am convinced, believe that Senator Pat McCarran, in his opposition to [the] President and the war effort as a whole, must be replaced with a Nevada citizen who is sympathetic to the course of [the] war and the specific effort to bring peace about as soon as possible.*

The stage was set for Vail’s whirlwind five-week campaign to unseat Nevada’s senior senator and vanquish the powerful and ruthless McCarran political machine.

McCarran biographer Michael J. Ibarra wrote that in 1942 with the opening of the BMI plant “a two-year brawl between the conservative AFL and one of the Communist-dominated CIO unions [the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers—the old Western Federation of Miners] would escalate into a national fight threatening McCarran’s political survival as never before. It was one of the last—and least known—of the great [labor] clashes of the New Deal.”

If Frank Case, Anaconda Copper Corporation official and manager at BMI had had his way, the magnesium plant would have been an open shop with no unions.

However, the CIO’s International Union of Mines, Mill and Smelter Works had beaten him to the punch. IUMMSW organizers were able to get forty-nine signatures from BMI workers and Local 629 was chartered in Oct. 1942.

Anaconda had warred with the IUMMSW, and its predecessor the WFM, for decades at the copper mines of Butte, Montana and elsewhere. The declining industrial union was rejuvenated in 1934 after winning a five-month strike against Anaconda in Butte. It was among the first unions to join the newly-formed CIO in 1935.

When BMI Manager Case was approached by IUMMSW organizers about passing out flyers at the front gate, he adamantly refused. Case wanted nothing to do with a labor union that had among its leadership and rank-and-file card carrying members of the Communist Party. He said as much in a meeting with an IUMMSW organizer in Nov.

Reluctantly Case turned to the AFL who he had earlier told to take a hike. On December 16, 1942, he signed a contract with the AFL recognizing it as the bargaining unit for the BMI workers. Sen. McCarran would have no problems with that arrangement given his long-time support of the AFL.

Despite beatings at the hands of BMI workers enrolled in the AFL, IUMMSW organizers convinced more BMI employees to join the CIO union. Many of these workers were African-Americans. The IUMMSW convinced the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)—created after the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935—to order an election on May 7, 1943. The CIO beat the AFL 1,422 voters to 683. Initial efforts to contest the election by the AFL were unsuccessful.

The regional NLRB office in San Francisco following an investigation upheld the results of the election and recommended to Washington the board certify the winner. After some foot-dragging, the NLRB on July 15 certified IUMMSW Local No. 629 as the victor in the election.

The battle had just begun and the last thing Sen. McCarran wanted was the CIO to represent the BMI workers. At the same time, BMI Manager Frank Case refused to recognize the IUMMSW local as the bargaining unit for the plant workers. He claimed the AFL contract was still in force and argued that it would take a U.S. Supreme Court ruling to change his mind. McCarran had met and communicated with Case numerous times. The senator's shadow loomed large over the bitter labor dispute. One female IUMMSW organizer charged that "McCarran was behind our difficulties, as of yore." (Note some of the BMI workers were women).

On Aug. 19, 1943, U. S. Senators Harry Truman of Missouri and Mon Walgren of Washington held hearings at the downtown Las Vegas federal building focusing on defense waste and profiteering at BMI.

The CIO took their labor jurisdictional case to the Truman Committee (officially the Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program). The IUMMSW's lead organizer testified that the plant was discriminating against blacks, paying them less money than whites for the same work. Doctors and nurses at the BMI hospital were being fired if they didn't return sick workers to the production line, food poisoning plagued the cafeteria, exorbitant rent was charged for shoddy housing. "Morale is bad," charged the organizer known as a Communist, "I know hundreds of cases of workers, both white and colored, who have left that plant feeling that their lives are being endangered."

No one from the AFL testified, but Ragnald Fayhen, the top AFL official in Nevada, countered in a written rebuttal "There can be no greater act of sabotage to industry, production, and a coordination of effort than to create strife, suspicion and distrust among people."

The Truman Committee refused to get involved in the labor dispute between the AFL and CIO. However, its final report on BMI was damning.

"This was one of the most unjustified contracts which was proposed in conjunction with the war program," the report charged, "and represented a wholly unwarranted advance of government funds to a newly organized corporation which had no financial resources and only the most meager experience and talent."

In 1944, Sen. Truman would run for Vice-President of the United States on the ticket with FDR. The following year he was sworn as President with the death of Roosevelt.

The lead IUMMSW organizer found his way to Washington, DC in late Sept. 1943 to meet with Sen. McCarran and plead his case. His pleas fell on deaf ears.

The organizer called on War Labor Board Chairman to intervene. The answer was no unless a strike vote was called by the IUMMSW local and there was potential for disrupting production at BMI.

In late Oct. 200 black workers walked off the job at BMI rather than accept segregated dressing rooms. IUMMSW organizers met with angry protestors at a Westside church in Las Vegas. The challenge for the organizers was to sustain the no strike proclamation of the CIO's national leadership during the war, yet still get the IUMMSW local at BMI officially recognized. Instead, the local CIO organizers supported the workers in a call for a strike.

However, the strike vote failed, the War Department refused to get involved and then BMI fired all the workers that walked off the job. IUMMSW Local No. 629 collapsed after only one year of existence and the AFL celebrated their victory over the CIO union.

Just the same, McCarran's support of the AFL at BMI had made an enemy of the CIO. More than a year before the Sept 1944 primary election, the CIO had created a Political Action Committee and on its hit list was Pat McCarran, the AFL's best political friend in Nevada.

The battle lines were clearly drawn between the warring labor unions in the 1944 Nevada U.S. Senate race.

McCarran had vowed to drive the CIO, particularly the IUMMSW locals in Ely, Henderson and elsewhere, out of Nevada. In turn, the CIO vowed to drive McCarran from office.

A showdown in Reno at the state democratic convention in late June 1944 between the McCarran faction of the party and those opposed to his heavy-handed control set the stage for Lt. Governor Vail Pittman's CIO-backed U.S. Senate candidacy.

While Pittman was present at the convention, McCarran did not attend, choosing to headquarter across the street from the State Building at the Riverside Hotel.

McCarran complained that it looked like he would have serious opposition in the primary. "The CIO has set out to find a candidate to run against me, and they are flirting with the Lt. Gov. Pittman; so I may have to put on my sword and buckle . . . It doesn't seem to make a continental bit of difference how hard I work, or how much I accomplish; when it comes to getting something for myself, I have to take on the battle—But I approach it without fear with a hellish determination."

The VP of the IUMMSW wrote a letter while at a CIO PAC meeting in Ely which made it clear where the industrial union stood. "The record speaks for itself. It is a record that even a most reactionary Republican would have caused to be ashamed of . . . McCarran must be eliminated in the primary . . . Labor cannot afford to allow McCarran to return to the Senate."

The letter was leaked to McCarran who then shared it with his political ally Al Cahlan, editor of the Las Vegas Review Journal. The RJ editorialized: "Who's running the Democratic Party—the Democrats or the CIO? In this state it is common knowledge the CIO committee has consulted with several leading Democrats trying to persuade them to make the race against McCarran." Among those leaders was Nevada's lone member of the U.S. House, Berkley Bunker, and Vail Pittman.

Pittman announced his candidacy on July 29 at the state AFL convention in Ely. He directly responded to charges by the RJ that the CIO was financing his campaign to the tune of \$10,000.

"I take this occasion to brand that statement as completely false and without a semblance of fact or truth. No one in the CIO has offered me a dime and I am under no obligation to the CIO than I am to the AF of L. . .

While that was true, the McCarran forces knew that the CIO was working hard to support Pittman and characterized Pittman as the CIO's man. At the same time, AFL President William Green made it clear he supported McCarran's reelection. Pittman's newspaper, the Ely Daily Times, shot back "It doesn't mean anything. Green is a great labor leader, but he should learn from this experience, at least, that he can't run the West from the East." Despite significant opposition, the AFL convention voted to support McCarran.



A battle royal ensued! McCarran practically labeled Pittman a Communist and Pittman virtually called McCarran a fascist. The AFL and CIO funneled money and personnel to support the respective candidates. The McCarran forces clearly had the upper hand when it came to campaign resources. And unsolicited support from the Communist-tainted CIO dogged the Pittman campaign. Just the same, Vail Pittman enjoyed the support of Nevadans who had long-supported his older brother Key as U.S. Senator and wanted to see a Pittman returned to Washington, D.C.

The principal focus of the fractious Senate campaign was Clark Co. and on the uncertain vote of the BMI workers, many of them black, and most of them residing in Las Vegas' Westside and Henderson's Carver Park. On Aug. 25, the Carson Chronicle observed that "Indications still are that the southern county will decide the contest."

Woodrow Wilson, a black BMI worker who was the first African-American worker elected to the state legislature in 1967 as a Republican, noted in his oral history "Most of the members [of the workforce] who really went all out for the CIO were minorities . . . . The CIO program was attractive to blacks because the CIO would promise them anything but the moon. The AFL hadn't been active in participating with their membership, in doing some of the things like eliminating segregation that would have reduced the possibility of the CIO taking hold. Segregation: that was the key."

Pittman made a swing through the Westside in August. McCarran didn't take the time. Neither candidate had a good record on civil rights. McCarran had voted against an anti-poll tax in the US Senate and Pittman had voted for a poll tax while serving in the Nevada legislature. Pittman was born a Southerner, still had a Southern accent and was not above casual racism.

The RJ observed, "Several hundred people perhaps as many as a thousand new colored citizens of this county will cast their ballot for the first time in Nevada. Coming from the Deep South most of these men and women have never been allowed to register and vote before. Here, they are not only allowed to register and vote, but are encouraged to do." The CIO thought they could capture most of the Black vote. Multi-millionaire real estate tycoon and McCarran political operative, Norman Biltz of Reno, bemoaned, "We had every reason to believe that we would lose Clark County quite heavily."

However, BMI management supported Sen. McCarran and some of them openly campaigned for his reelection among the workers. Also, it was announced that the plant would close in November and workers were told that perhaps Sen. McCarran could reverse the action through his influence in Washington. The AFL was doing everything it could to get its members at BMI to the polls.

On Sept. 5, 1944, one of the bitterest political campaigns in Nevada history came to a close with the Las Vegas Review-Journal endorsing Pat McCarran and attacking Vail Pittman as a CIO puppet.

Black voters in Clark County expected to overwhelmingly support Pittman surprisingly gave McCarran a majority of their votes. Two Westside precincts and Carver Park went for McCarran by more than two to one, 341 votes to 148 although almost four hundred registered voters didn't vote. McCarran's majority in Clark County was 1,528; in the state only 1,241.

With the help of Norman Biltz' fundraising, McCarran easily out-spent Pittman by about 4 to 1. Much of the campaign money was spent in Clark County. The RJ bombarded its readers with full-page ads attacking Pittman every day.

Pittman believed the McCarran forces had bought votes and particularly the votes of Black voters. "There is no doubt about this," Pittman wrote in a letter to a supporter, "but proving it is another thing." Biltz in his UNR oral history years later obliquely noted, "We found a way to get the Negro vote." Pittman angrily seeking answers to losing the Black vote in southern Nevada wrote, "There are about twenty-five Negro leaders, mostly preachers, who control the 'thinking' of their respective flocks, so you can readily understand how a 'presto' change could come about all of a sudden."

Pittman's biographer Eric Moody perhaps summed up the 1944 U.S. Senate Democratic primary the best:

"There was not then, nor is there now any proof of vote manipulation, but it is a fact that the districts of Clark County where the black and other defense worker votes were concentrated went overwhelmingly in a heavy turnout for McCarran and that something unexpected by the Pittman forces occurred in the closing days of the campaign."

In the end, the newly-created town of Henderson and the BMI work force found its enduring place in Nevada history by playing a critical role in reelecting Patrick McCarran to the U.S. Senate in Sept. 1944. McCarran went on to easily beat Republican George "Molly" Malone in the general election in Nov.

Postscript: Patrick McCarran would be reelected to office in 1950 and suddenly die in Hawthorne during a political rally on Sept. 28, 1954. A statue of McCarran is in Congress' Statuary Hall and arguably he was the most powerful U.S. Senator in NV history until the ascendancy of Harry Reid as the Democratic Senate Majority Leader.

Vail Pittman would be elevated to Lt. and Acting Governor of Nevada in 1945 after junior U.S. Senator James Scrugham died in office and Pittman appointed former Gov. "Ted" Carville U.S.

Senator as his first act in office. Pittman was elected governor in 1946, but lost reelection bids to former Republican U.S. Representative Charles Russell in 1950 and again in 1954. Pittman died in Las Vegas on Jan. 19, 1964.