



The status of Kiel Ranch:

The city of North Las Vegas has killed but not yet buried the oldest historic site in the state

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

Although Kiel Ranch as had several names since Conrad Kiel took over the 240 acre property in 1884 (Park Ranch, Taylor Ranch, Losee and Boulderado Ranch), Kiel is what stuck. Perhaps the notoriety of murder and mystery is what kept the Kiel name remembered. Archibald Stewart was murdered there in 1884, maybe nearby the adobe house where he was known to gamble with the Kiels. Even after a century of speculation, no one knows for sure why or who pulled the trigger; likewise with the brothers, Edwin and William Kiel. In 1900 they were found shot to death and for decades the crime was purported to be a murder suicide. But by 2005 neither the lure of folk tales nor true history is going to keep the Kiel Ranch from disintegrating entirely. Only the City Council has the power to do that.

Flash back to 1976. The North Las Vegas Bicentennial Committee received \$27,000 in federal money from the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration and North Las Vegas added matching funds of another \$27,000 to purchase 27 acres of Kiel Ranch, located on Carey Street between Commerce and Losee. On July 4th the committee turned the property over to the city with a big dedication program to celebrate. A time capsule was buried. Big plans were made to develop the area into a historic park. The John S. Park Mansion, the William Park home, and several outbuildings from the Boulderado Dude Ranch era were still standing, and of course, that old adobe structure that is believed to be the oldest building in Nevada. It was built during the Mormon Settlement era c. 1856 and later used by the Kiels as a general store. Also on the site was a historic cemetery. The known burials were Conrad and his two

sons, Mary Latimer and an unidentified infant. It was also likely that several Paiutes employed at the ranch were buried there as well (Brooks 1984).

By 1978 the City Council appointed a subcommittee, the Advisory Board to Kiel Ranch, which was charged with the responsibility for implementing a restoration/preservation and use plan.



Paiute worker and adobe, Kiel Ranch, c.1895
UNLV Special Collections

Flash forward to 2005. Gone is the sign “Kiel Ranch: your Bicentennial dollars at work.” Gone are 22 acres of the 27 acre-purchase. The only structures remaining are the old adobe and a playhouse, called the dollhouse, built by the Park family for their children. The cemetery is also gone. The site is not open to the public and weeds and the overgrowth of thick brush have taken over. What has happened to Kiel Ranch and its burials in the last 30 years?



Edwin Kiel in front of adobe, c. 1899 UNLV Special Collections

At the start, the city valued Kiel stating, “the site was purchased by the committee for restoration to historically preserve one of the areas first major ranch areas which had a vital role in the settlement of Las Vegas Valley” (North Las Vegas Bicentennial Committee 1976). But barely seven months went by after the creation of the Advisory Board for Kiel Ranch that Councilwomen Brenda Price and Mary Kincaid proposed to the City Council that Kiel Ranch should be sold in order to procure funds to build Walker Pool. Price and Kincaid were major advocates and participants in the acquisition of the ranch but then became the primary movers to sell it off claiming there was a lack of interest to preserve Kiel (Broderick 1979, Green 2003). Funding to build Walker Pool ultimately came from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and was indeed built in 1982-3 (Dabney 2005).

Although Kiel Ranch was spared for awhile, Price and Kincaid’s proposal opened the flood gates for the city to consider Kiel Ranch as a cash cow rather than a valued historic site in spite of strong protest from the community. By 1988, 22 acres were sold to Ray Vega of Vegas Foods, who built the Kiel Ranch Industrial Park. The city decided they needed to sell most of Kiel in order to have funds to develop the remaining five acres which included the adobe, the Park Mansion and the dollhouse. The \$1.2 million acquired from this sale

went into a special fund earmarked for preserving the ranch and its buildings. But nothing happened, and in 1992 the focal point of the ranch, the Park Mansion, was destroyed in a suspect fire. Although Earnest and Betty Becker donated two more acres adjacent to the ranch in 1997, creating a seven acre park, the ranch continued to remain static.

Responding to preservationists’ push to do something with Kiel including a threat of a lawsuit for breach of contract (McCall 1996), the city has had several jump starts to plan something. But for the most part, during the last thirty years, city administrators grappled with what to do with and how to fund Kiel. Current city staffers are saying it’s a bad location for a park. The obvious irony is when the park was acquired there was so much open space, the potential was limitless. The city made it an industrial area and its administrators are now saying it is a bad location. Forgotten is the city’s initial enthusiasm and commitment in 1976; forgotten is the pledge to put up a plaque acknowledging Kiel’s many, many donors whose names are enshrined only in an obscure file at the North Las Vegas Library. And that’s not the only thing filed and forgotten.

The graves were located at the corner of Carey and Commerce which was not part of the acreage sold to the city for the preservation of Kiel Ranch. The city of North Las Vegas approached UNLV anthropologists Drs. Richard and Sheilagh Brooks in 1975 to exhume the historic burials because the city’s initial intent was to move them to the city-owned part of the park, closer to the Park Mansion with appropriate head stones (Dearing 1975, LV Sun 1979, Brooks 1984). The Brooks’ already had experience exhuming the pioneer Stewart burials at the request of the descendents (Brooks 1984). Because the deaths of Edwin and George Kiel were shrouded in mystery and Sheilagh Brooks was an accomplished forensic anthropologist, the distant relative who gave permission to exhume the bodies also allowed the remains of all five individuals to be taken to UNLV for forensic study. Dr. Brooks determined that the deaths of the Kiel brothers were the result of a double murder finally putting closure to the notion that Edwin Kiel was a murderer. But as history shows, plans for Kiel Ranch never materialized, the reburial never happened and to this day the remains of Conrad, Edwin, William, Mary Latimer and the infant lay filed away at UNLV’s forensic lab.

After thirty years that section of Kiel Ranch where the graves were situated still sits undeveloped. According to one newspaper, the city kept the boots that the brothers were buried in and were to “decide whether to rebury them with the bodies or keep them for display purposes” (Dearing 1975).



Photo by Corinne Escobar
Mormon Adobe, Kiel Ranch, October 2005

The question now is not whether Kiel Ranch should be saved. With the long passage of time that included neglect and apathy from every city council since 1979, the question is *can* Kiel be saved. The adobe is the only significant structure left that dates to the time of the Old Fort and is indeed linked to it culturally. The same Mormon Mission that established the Fort also built the adobe which shows distinctive architectural features demonstrating early Mormon construction techniques. The adobe however has lost its entire north wall and is being supported by braces throughout. To restore it will take significant commitment and resources. But the current mayor and city council seem to have inherited the same negative attitude. Presently there is \$448,000 in the Kiel account but the City Council has directed Parks and Recreation not to spend time, energy or money on Kiel save for the clean up that is scheduled this fall to remove much of the overgrowth and invasive Russian Knapweed. An accounting of how the money from the 22 acre sale was spent is not yet available.

Lack of funding is not the issue. NLV used \$67,000 from a SHPO grant to stabilize the structure in 1998. The city currently has access to a \$2.4 million dollar BLM Land Sales grant for Kiel. But according to the City Manager, Gregory Rose, the City Council wants to spend the money moving the adobe off the ranch property. The Las Vegas Springs Preserve and the Clark County Museum have each been approached as to the feasibility of one of them taking the 150 year old structure. Mayor Michael Montandon stated "he was inclined to give the money up rather than spend it on Kiel Ranch" and that "it would be much better spent moving the buildings to a more desirable location" (Special City Council 2003). Councilwoman Smith stated "the community would be better served to move the buildings to a location that could preserve the historical integrity of the remains of the building" (Special City Council 2003).

Instead the city will focus BLM grant money on other parks such as \$7 million for the Las Vegas Wash Trail;

\$9 million for the Upper Las Vegas Wash Trail; \$20 million to improve Craig Ranch Golf Course and turn it into a regional park; \$3 million for urban park renovations and \$5 million for Valley View Park.

Clearly Kiel Ranch does not fit the City Council's agenda. The city does not want to be in the business of preservation. According to Mark Ryzdyski, director of the Clark County Museum, the challenges of moving the adobe are so problematic that in order to insure its survival, "it should not be moved." He further pointed out that the adobe is made from the land upon which it sits and it is this connection that gives the adobe its intrinsic historic value. Greg Seymour of the Springs Preserve is of the same opinion and stated he would like "to see the park developed and the adobe stay in place." Moving the adobe is not the answer; *that* would be an extremely costly endeavor and completely strip the structure of its historic integrity.

Perhaps it is time that the city of North Las Vegas stops viewing Kiel Ranch as a bad location for barbecues and ball playing and start looking at it as an ideal extension of its Civic Center. It is minutes away from City Hall and its close proximity to I-15 make it accessible from anywhere in the Valley. There is a spectacular view of Sunrise and Frenchman Mts. The industrial park is not some sort of sleazy business, and there are established homes adjacent to the ranch. It is a good location.

This site should be preserved and developed as a cultural events center. The Park Mansion could still be recreated and used as a meeting/hospitality/gallery space for city functions. Mike Henly, Director of Parks and Recreation stated the community wants more cultural arts events. Kiel *is* the opportunity to be a place for this type of recreation. People like having functions in public facilities with a unique character which is why museums and galleries rent their space at substantial rates to produce revenue. Developed properly, Kiel could be rented out for private functions which could create a money-making avenue to help pay for itself. The acreage which *still* has a pond fed by a natural spring, could be landscaped in such a way as to obscure the industrial park next door. Kiel could still be a historic showcase for the city of North Las Vegas where residents, visitors and city employees could learn about the history of North Las Vegas and the settling of Las Vegas Valley. It doesn't even have to be accessible 24 hours a day. Limited public access as a cultural events area is better than no access which is the current status of Kiel Ranch.

North Las Vegas was founded on maverick ideas by Tom Williams in 1919. This independent spirit should be carried on in behalf of Kiel not against it. As sad as our loss is, North Las Vegas could still stand up and say,

“So what if it is so impacted it has lost all integrity as a historic ranch. So what if it could be de-listed from the National Register. So what if it is next door to an industrial park. What is left of the site, namely the adobe, is still a unique monument to all the spirited people, good or bad, who lived on that site and played a role in the early history of North Las Vegas.”

The mayor and city council can hardly be blamed for what happened to Kiel Ranch but unless they stop this strategy of neglect and abuse, they too become players in a city government who has in the past violated the public trust by their shameful misuse of the people’s money, property and even human burials.

To contact city administrators regarding concerns about the status of Kiel Ranch, go to the mayor and council page at www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com for the following: Mayor Michael Montandon; Councilman William Robinson; Councilman Robert Eliason; Councilwoman Stephanie Smith and Councilwoman Shari Buck. They may also be contacted by calling 633-1007 or write to: City of North Las Vegas, 2200 Civic Center Drive, North Las Vegas, NV 89030. If you would like to see the park, contact Tony Taylor at 633-1175.

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Letters to the editor may be sent to: PACC, PO Box 96686 Las Vegas, NV 89193, or to CorinneEscobar@pacc.info. Letters must be signed and are subject to editing due to space limitations.

Kiel Ranch timeline

- 1856 - “Indian Farm” established by the LDS Church
- 1884 - Conrad Kiel files original land patent
- 1901 - Sold by Kiel heirs to the railroad
- 1911 - John S. Park purchases and builds mansion
- 1924 - Park sells to industrialist, Edward Taylor
- 1926 - 1956 Taylor Ranch leased out
- 1939 - Edwin Losee leases for Boulderado Dude Ranch
- 1953 - James Losee purchases and continues ranch
- 1961 - Losee sells to developer
- 1974 - Purchased by the North Las Vegas Bicentennial Committee
- 1975 - Listed in the National Register of Historic Places
- 1976 - Donated to the City of North Las Vegas

Historic Preservation Commission City announces launch of new HPC website

The city of Las Vegas Planning and Development Department has improved the Historic Preservation Commission web page at www.lasvegasnevada.com. The revised web page is one component of a larger program outlined in the city of Las Vegas Historic Preservation Plan to increase public awareness of the history of Las Vegas. To give a sense of identity and orientation to its residents, the Las Vegas City Council recognized that the historic and cultural foundations of the city must be preserved as a living part of its community life and development. The city provides the public with information on cultural and historic heritage and the city’s programs and initiatives that protect these valuable resources.

The Historic Preservation Web site provides information about historic sites in Las Vegas and related links to county, state, federal and non-profit resources, as well as libraries and international preservation organizations. The site provides information regarding the city’s historic preservation ordinance, the Historic Preservation Commission members, information regarding how to list historic properties on the local, state and national registers of historic places, financial incentives for listing, walking tours, events and the Historic Preservation Commission’s quarterly newsletter, *The Historic Connection*.

For more information, contact Courtney Mooney, historic preservation officer at (702) 229-5260.



The Gilcrease Orchard Foundation takes a controversial turn

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

What do the Stewarts, the Smokes, the Craigs, the Williams', the Goumonds, and the Gilcreases, just to name a *few*, have in common? These are a sampling of the early Las Vegas families who settled this desert valley and through sheer tenaciousness had each operated productive farms or ranches. What don't they have in common? Only the Gilcrease legacy still survives into the 21st century. All evidence of agricultural activity in the Las Vegas Valley has given way to growth, progress and development save for that of Bill Gilcrease, who still has more than just a street bearing his family name. For some of the others, Craig Road and Smoke Ranch Road is all that is left to remember these pioneering families' agricultural heritage. With the recent sale of 40 acres of the Gilcrease Orchard, many fear this may one day be the fate for the Gilcrease Family legacy as well.

Leonard and Elda Gilcrease arrived in 1920. Their original homestead comprised of 1,500 acres (Thomson 2004) that included water rights. Bill and Ted Gilcrease were very young when their parents brought them to Las Vegas. They never married and had no children. Ted, who passed away December 2003, operated the Gilcrease Orchard. Bill just turned 86 last June and still lives at the Gilcrease Nature Sanctuary—a home for displaced exotic birds.

Over the past 85 years, the Gilcreases sold or traded their property in bits and pieces until their vast acreage was whittled down to 100 acres of orchard, 10 acres of bird sanctuary and 40 acres of the original homestead plus an assortment of other real estate holdings. Although Bill

Gilcrease's net worth is probably in the millions, he lives in excessively humble circumstances—a three room shack without central heating or air conditioning on the bird sanctuary property.

Prior to his death, Ted Gilcrease established a foundation funded by his family trust to keep the orchard running in perpetuity. For decades he has maintained the orchard much to the delight of neighbors and locals who enjoyed picking fresh produce at substantially less prices than in the grocery stores. But in just less than two years after his death the trustees of the Gilcrease Orchard Foundation have determined that they lose approximately \$250,000 per year running the orchard. Flooding and other woes have caused damage that the foundation cannot afford to fix. Their solution is to sell 40 acres to a developer for \$15 million and use this money to maintain the remaining 67 orchard acres, refurbish the bird sanctuary and possibly create a museum out of the home Bill Gilcrease grew up in. At least that is what was represented to the County Commission on September 7, 2005 by Chris Keampher, the hired consultant who represented the developer in their application for the zone variance needed to reclassify the 40 acres from residential agriculture to suburban estates residential and to also request higher density than stipulated in the master plan for the area.

Neighbors and orchard preservationists, who are still smarting over the loss of 40 acres of orchard sold to the school district for the Arbor View High School (Thomson 2004), are now questioning the legitimacy of

the trustees' claim that the orchard finances are such that they had to sell 40 more acres in order to produce enough revenue to maintain the remaining 67. As one neighbor stated, "How is it that Ted could keep the orchard running all these years and not even two years after his death the Trustees are saying they are out of money?" Public sentiment against the selling of the 40 acres was so strong, nearly 2000 neighboring residents signed a petition opposing the sale. About forty people showed up at the Lone Mt. Citizen's Advisory meeting, the first of the zoning meetings, to also voice their protest of the sale as well as the higher density of three homes per acre that the developer wanted to propose. Although no one was able to stop the sale, there was sufficient protest, including from the City of Las Vegas, on the higher density. By the time the zone variance application went before the County Commission on September 7th, the proposal for density was reduced to 2.5 homes per acre which the County Commission voted to approve unanimously.

Bill finds himself unwittingly in the midst of the controversy (Illia 2005, Kiraly 2005, Racel 2005). Until as recently as this past summer, Bill had little to do with the orchard and thought he had no administrative power and had in fact focused all his energy in the bird sanctuary (Gilcrease Jul 2005). It was during the process of selling the 40 acres that the Foundation's realtor, Deidre Felgar, told him that he is still a named trustee for the Orchard Foundation. Based on the information provided to him by the other trustees, Mary Ellen Racel, her son Frank and daughter Susan Weber, Bill concurred publicly that the selling of the 40 acres was the best solution to keep the remaining 67 acres functioning.



Bill Gilcrease with "Tweedy," a hand-raised Gambel Quail Jul 2005

Bill Gilcrease has expressed to PACC board members that it is his desire that the historic legacy of his family's contributions to the development of the Las Vegas Valley not be forgotten. Although the county officially opened a park named The Gilcrease Brother's Park located at Grand Teton and Hualapai, on September 15, 2005, this type of memorializing is not what Bill had in mind. It is his desire that his childhood home and its surrounding acreage remain intact, and that the orchard and bird sanctuary continue long after he is gone (Gilcrease Sep 2005).

For the record, PACC has neither opposed nor supported the sale of the 40 acres of orchard land. We recognize being a private foundation, the orchard trustees can make whatever decisions needed according to the conditions Ted set up. We can only wait and watch and hope Mary Ellen Racel will make good the promises she made to the County Commission and the general public to protect and preserve the Gilcrease Family legacy. After all that is said and done, this is what Ted and Bill always wanted.

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- Thomson, Joe Best kept secret. Newsletter for the Preservation Association of Clark County. January 2004 4:1

The Gilcrease Orchard

Call ahead, the orchard is open seasonally.
 Contact: 645-1126
 Address: 7800 Tenaya
 Hours: Tues – Sun 7:00 to 12:00 pm
 Directions: 95 North, exit right on Ann Rd, left on Tenaya.
 To schedule a tour call 732-8676.

The Gilcrease Nature Sanctuary

Contact: 645-4224
 Address: 8103 Racel
 Hours: Wed – Sun 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
 Fee: Adults \$4:00
 Children under 13 \$1:00
 Directions: 95 North, exit right on Durango, right on Racel.

The Old Fort: a new beginning

By CHRIS MACEK



Photo by Chris Macek

July 4, 1855 flag ceremony reenactment

After nearly six years of planning, on June 11, 2005, the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park started a new era with the grand opening of the 4500 sq ft. Visitor Center and a celebration commemorating Las Vegas' first 150 years. More than 3000 visitors were present for the program which included presentations by Congresswoman Shelly Berkeley; City Councilman Gary Reese; County Commissioner Chip Maxfield; State Parks Director David Morrow; Mormon Historic Sites Foundation member Jonathon Bullen; and Ace Robinson, LDS Church Area Spokesman, as well as music presentations by the Las Vegas Mormon Youth Symphony and Las Vegas Mormon Youth Chorus.

Proceeds from the food sales will go to the Friends of the Fort and PACC. A documentary on the history of the Fort with a focus on the Mormon period was produced by Kim Webster and Laguna Productions and was shown for the first time. This documentary will soon be available for viewing in the Visitor Center. Also added are two new paintings depicting Fort history.

The Visitor Center opening was the culmination of a master plan for the Old Fort State Park that was created in the early 1990s and is the realization of a dream for PACC of more than 30 years. The success of the event is a testament to the interest and passion for Las Vegas and Old Fort history by local citizens, groups and businesses. The future success of the Fort and its new Visitor Center will continue to depend on the support of local citizens and groups. This has been a truly historic project. Here's to 150 more years in Las Vegas!

Most of the cost of the event was paid for through donations and grants including from PACC.

Clark County Museum

By MARK RYZDYNSKI

An Eagle Scout has taken the painting of the Railroad Cottage as his project. The exterior of the house will be painted now that the house has had a complete mitigation of the old lead based paint that covered the exterior. The interior of the house has been mitigated by the Haz-mat folks for lead paint, asbestos and mold at a cost of over \$50,000.00. Work will continue as funds are available.

The County Museum is now working on two development projects that involve modern construction. A three year old club house used in a local travel trailer park will be moved to the museum this month to soon take over the meeting and program tasks that the Boulder City Depot has been used for and the Depot can be exhibited as the historic structure it is. The Museum Guild has funded this project with over \$550,000.00. We are also starting construction of an office module east of the main Exhibit Center to establish new staff office space and expand existing museum collection curation areas

Tule Springs Volunteer Day Nov 5

By MICKY JAY

The Volunteer Day on Saturday, Sept 24th at Floyd Lamb Park, was a huge success! The day was sponsored by the Tule Springs Preservation Committee.

Parents and children, soldiers, students, scouts and others, came from the neighborhood, Nellis Air Force Base, schools, and churches. All sorts of people wanted to participate in community work and happily painted buildings, picked up trash, swept, cleaned windows and moved cement blocks. Floyd Lamb State Park at Tule Springs never realized it had so many friends!

There were muffins and Danish for breakfast. Councilman Steve Ross, his son (with dogs) & wife Kelly, provided loads of delicious hot dogs, chips and chili for lunch. Starbucks brought in coffee too. There was good conversation and laughter everywhere. We've decided to do it again on November 5th at 8 a.m.

Floyd Lamb State Park at Tule Springs needs our help in keeping the historic buildings in tip-top shape and the grounds clear of debris. It's a passive-use park, lots of mature trees, four lakes for fishing, historic buildings and plenty of lawns; great for hiking and watching the peacocks and birds. Hope to see you there and making new friends. Take 95 north, exit right on Durango, then right on Brent.

From the president's desk...

Visit Kiel Ranch

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

Kiel ranch is not open to the public and is accessible only by special arrangements with the city of North Las Vegas. PACC will sponsor a tour of Kiel Ranch early this winter. I encourage any of you who would like to have a rare opportunity to see the historic adobe built 150 years ago by Mormon settlers at the time they were establishing the Old Fort to please contact me at 255-3912 or CorinneEscobar@pacc.info. A date is not yet set. I need to have an idea how much interest there is in seeing Kiel as well as allow North Las Vegas to do the much needed clean-up of the overgrowth this fall. If there is enough interest, there may be more than one tour, but don't take Kiel for granted. The opportunity to see it may come only once.

A special thanks is extended to Tony Taylor, Parks Planner for the city of North Las Vegas, for his assistance in writing the Kiel article. He graciously allowed me to tour and photograph Kiel and offered invaluable information on its history. Although all city staffers were exceptionally courteous and helpful, Mr. Taylor was the only city employee who was truly knowledgeable on Kiel and its preservation history. All others worked for the city five years or less and lacked a fundamental knowledge of this historic treasure. Once Mr. Taylor retires early next year, NLV will lose yet another valuable resource on the history of Kiel Ranch.

Membership Dues Needed Now!

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P.O. Box 96686 Las Vegas, NV 89193-6686

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