

When the Gipper played Las Vegas

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WESTWARD



Reagan on stage with the Adorables, the house chorus line at the Last Frontier

PHOTOGRAPH BY LAS VEGAS NEWS BUREAU

Long before Wayne Newton laid claim to the crown of Mr. Las Vegas, a B-movie actor and later-day politician saw his name illuminated in lights on the famous Sin City Strip.

The week the Gipper played Las Vegas did not go down in entertainment lore as a history-making event. Nor did it pack the house or pay big bucks, as some would later claim. But Ronald Reagan showed he was a real trouper who wasn't afraid to work when work he must.

It was February, 1954 when Reagan did his thing on the stage of a local casino. The Las Vegas Sun reported, "Ronald Reagan, of all people, opened last night at the hotel Last Frontier."

What the local newspaper didn't print was that he played Las Vegas because he needed the money.

At about that time, Reagan's show-business career was in a slump. He had made a series of mediocre films, including *Bedtime for Bonzo*. As he told his friend, former Warner Brothers publicist, Barney Oldfield, "They sent me five scripts at \$75,000 a script. And I made them all. I didn't ask any questions. I didn't cause any trouble. But nobody sent me a sixth script."

Reagan didn't work in films for more than a year. It was not an easy time in his life. He confided to Oldfield, "I'm living from guest shot to guest shot on television, and an occasional personal

appearance." He also had a new wife, Nancy, infant daughter Patti, and child support payments of \$500 per month for Maureen and Michael, his children from his marriage to Jane Wyman. The problem was enough money to cover these demands on his life.

In his book, *The Real Reagan*, Frank Van Der Linden cites other financial woes facing Reagan at this time. "He was still burdened with high income taxes overdue from his days of great prosperity," Van Der Linden wrote. "He was paying for his ranch and his home in Pacific Palisades out of current income and carrying three mortgages. He was \$18,000 in debt."

At about this time Oldfield had dinner with Ronald and Nancy at Chasen's Restaurant in Beverly Hills. Oldfield reports that people were coming over to Reagan asking what he had been up to lately, and "other terrible things that Hollywood people say when you've been inactive for awhile."

Oldfield was asking Reagan to narrate a public service film to be made by North American (now North American Rockwell Co.). Reagan told Oldfield, "I would like to do that, but here's my problem. If I do this public service spot, I have to do it for scale — \$240. If the word gets out that Ronald Reagan's only work is at scale, my price would go down, and I couldn't