

To Las Vegas

LAS VEGAS — (NFS) — When Howard Hughes began buying up large chunks of the local gambling industry a decade ago, most Nevadans hopefully settled back to wait for the millenium to roll in. Now they are hopefully waiting for the Hughes interests to roll out.

The disillusion is complete. Though the world's most eccentric billionaire spent an estimated \$100 million in buying up casinos and any valuable property on which casinos could be built, none of the gaudy prophesies has come true.

Hughes put up no new hotels. He began no new industries and his investments attracted none. He built nothing, he simply acquired.

"All Hughes has created in Vegas is empty lots and dust storms," says a local businessman. "His joints are rundown and threadbare, and he isn't going to spend a dime or build a single thing."

Last Hopes

The last hopes departed, along with Hughes himself, in late 1970 when the 65 year old recluse traded his sealed-off ninth floor lair at the Desert Inn for quarters equally aloof in the Bahamas.

At present the Hughes Tool people are running the casinos — into the ground, according to their many critics. The free-spending, luxurious ways of the past are gone and so are many of the happy practices that have long been considered indispensable to attract both the average gambler and the high roller.

Free drinks are discouraged at the five Hughes casinos nowadays. The "RFB" (free room, food and beverages) list for high rollers is only a memory as, indeed, are many of the high rollers who used to gamble away \$10,000 to \$20,000 at the Hughes crap tables. They have gone to other hotels where RFB is still available.

The quality of the shows at the Hughes casinos is also declining because the new management refused to compete with other Vegas spots for top entertainers. In fact, the Hughes people tried — and failed — recently to persuade the Vegas Hotel and Casino Owners Association to put a \$25,000 top on entertainers' salaries.

Atmosphere

But the most notable change is in the atmosphere of the Hughes casinos. The old never-never-land aura has disappeared and the flossy interiors now have something of the feeling of an understaffed municipal bureau.

Unsmiling former FBI agents and cops now staff the places, along with a joyless group of business types and no nonsense executives. Several of the lounges have had live entertainment taken away or have been closed down entirely.

"There is a certain grimness and sterility about the Hughes places," says Jay Sarno, owner of the Circus Circus Casino. "I mean how much fun is the FBI? Those Rover Boys who are in charge now have a 9 to 5 approach and all you get is blank looks and nothingness."

The greeters are also gone. Natty little Charlie Baron, a reserve brigadier general from Chicago, who used to escort high rollers from the Vegas airport to their complimentary suites to the crap tables, is no longer at the Sands. Nowadays he works for the competition.

"Those new people have

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ruined this town," Baron observes. "They don't understand this business and they don't understand you have to service people."

If the bad times had been

confined to the Hughes places, outsiders wouldn't care. But there has been a spillover. Hughes' real-estate acquisitions gobbled up most of the prime land on the strip and his grandiose plans frigh-