

The woman who brought Las Vegas to Edmonton

Edmonton – Diana Bennett got the call in 2001.

The woman who built Las Vegas's Luxor and Excalibur resorts with her father, famed Vegas patriarch William G. Bennett, was asked to fly to Edmonton to hear the Enoch Cree's plans for Alberta's first aboriginal casino.

It was January, so Bennett did what befitted any cagey Vegas casino executive: She went to Palm Springs.

She sent her Paragon Gaming partner, Scott Menke, to frigid Alberta.

„Scott stayed up there for two weeks and he called me to say: ‚This is real. This is an opportunity and there's a lot that we could add to this,‘ “ Bennett recently recalled.

Nearly six years later, Paragon's River Cree Casino opened with a CAD 178-million flourish on Edmonton's western edge, and the woman who wanted to be a teacher instead of a cagey Vegas casino executive was at the forefront of Alberta's aboriginal gaming explosion.

Paragon is also building Alberta's second-biggest First Nation casino, the Alexis Nakota Sioux's CAD 63.5-million project near Whitecourt.

Last September – a more pleasant month in Alberta than January, she notes – Bennett stood among a gorgeous stand of tall poplars on the Whitecourt reserve and posed for pictures with Cameron Alexis, the imposing former Mountie who is now the band's chief.

The Whitecourt bush is a long way from Arizona State University, where Bennett pursued an education degree before

finding the pull of Vegas, and her father, too irresistible.

William Bennett has been called the most successful Vegas gaming executive of the 1960s and 1970s, and the man who brought business savvy and a mass-market economic flair to Vegas's elitist old-school scene. From 1965 until his death in December 2002, he either owned or ran more than a dozen huge gambling halls, from Strip institutions such as Circus Circus and the Sahara to lucrative properties in Laughlin, Nev.

„He was without a doubt the smartest man I've ever known, and I don't say that just as his daughter," Bennett said.

„He allowed me to do whatever it was I wanted to do. He was happy as long as I was happy.“

Bennett started her casino career as a receptionist at the Flamingo, worked her way up to catering manager and supervised the slots at several properties before running a public gaming company that manufactured slot machines.

After building the Luxor and Excalibur and running the Sahara, Bennett partnered with the Augustine Band of Cahuilla Indians to open the Augustine Casino in July 2002 on a 500-acre desert tract just outside Palm Springs.

(Though the casino is relatively tiny, and just one of hundreds of American Indian casinos, it's noteworthy for two reasons: The Augustine Band has only one adult member reaping the casino's profits, and she was pilloried for it in a scathing Time magazine piece in December 2002 on American Indian gaming. The band did not return The Journal's calls.)

Paragon's partnership with Augustine put the Vegas company on Enoch's radar, and after years navigating the snail-slow Alberta gaming bureaucracy, Enoch and Paragon opened River Cree in October 2006.

„I will admit to being frustrated by the pace, but I don't think it was anyone's fault, let alone the (Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission)," Bennett said. „We said when we came to

Alberta: „We want to learn how you do it and then set the standard by which then everyone else would do First Nations gaming.’ “

The frustrating pace – and a government-regulated gaming revenue split that funnels just 15 per cent of slot cash back to Paragon – raises a crass question: Isn't there an easier way for a Vegas vet to make a buck?

With the confident mien of one who knows the odds, she admitted there is.

„Certainly, in Alberta, because the government is your partner and a lot goes to the government and charitable organizations, the returns on one's investments are not as strong as they would be perhaps at another venue. However, we do have a 25-year contract (with Enoch),“ Bennett said.

„Here in the States, when you do management contracts with a Native American band, it's a five- to seven-year contract. So (in Alberta) you can get on the back end what you're not getting on the front end.“

And while Paragon's involvement with Alberta First Nations boils down to the opportunity to make money – scads of money – there is a philanthropic bent to Bennett's interest here.

„At Enoch and Alexis, so much of their money will go to their infrastructure and health care and schooling, these things they've not had the opportunity to do,“ she said.

„That's a huge reward to give back, rather than just running a casino owned by a large corporation for the benefit of shareholders.“

After several hot decades in the desert, it seems, Bennett has learned to appreciate the Alberta cold.