

# As Vegas Pioneer: Frontier's days end

Jul. 16, 2007 – Amid tears and hugs, the New Frontier closed its doors for good at 12:01 a.m. today.

„I hate to say bye but I must say bye,“ said Helen Madison, a casino porter for 34 years, with tears in her eyes.

The hotel estimated that 3,000 people were on the property at 11 p.m. Sunday, an hour before it was to close.

Approximately 1,000 continued to mingle at 12:01 a.m. today, when an alarm sounded signaling the end of the Frontier.

Earlier, longtime employees and customers, mixed with curious onlookers, shared the final minutes as another old Strip property shut its doors to make way for another multibillion-dollar development.

Strip lounge legend Norman Kaye stopped by to take a final look at a property he first played at in 1947.

„I thought I'd come and say goodbye,“ said Kaye, who was a vocalist and bassist in the Mary Kaye Trio.

Kaye sang two songs with the Dry Martini Orchestra in front of a crowd of about 1,000 people. He said it was his first Las Vegas performance since 1966.

Playing with such notables as Ronald Reagan and Judy Garland, Kaye said the Mary Kaye Trio was a mainstay on the Strip.

„We started the whole damn thing here,“ said Kaye, who was named Nevada's poet laureate emeritus in April. „We would start at midnight and play until 6 a.m. taking 15-minute breaks every hour.“

Kaye said the trio, which included sister Mary Kaye (who died in February) and Frank Ross (who died in 1995), was the first true lounge act on the Strip.

The 105-room Hotel Last Frontier opened in 1942, the second hotel-casino on the now famous Strip.

The property grew under various ownerships, most notably Howard Hughes who bought it in 1967 for USD 14 million.

The latest owner, Kansas-based businessman Phil Ruffin, sold the 34.5-acre property in May for USD 1.2 billion to New York-based El-Ad Group.

The development group, which is controlled by Israeli billionaire Yitzhak Tshuva, plans to spend USD 5 billion to construct a mixed-use development modeled after New York's Plaza Hotel.

Co-workers Neil Bush and Ed Phelan helped close the sports book at 6 p.m. by serenading the four customers and various passers-by with karaoke renditions of Frank Sinatra and Joe Cocker.

„We were out last night ,til the sun came up,“ said Bush, dressed in a tuxedo with cocktail in hand, explaining Phelan's off-key interpretation of Cocker's classic cover „With a Little Help From My Friends.“

„We're a little hoarse today,“ Bush said.

Sandy West, a regular customer since 1966, said she has so many friends at the hotel-casino that her house was used to host Frontier Christmas parties over the years.

„There is a lot of good people here,“ said West, who counts 20 current employees as good friends. „It's the last place, if you think about it, where families could afford to stay on the Strip.“

She said seeing Siegfried & Roy eight times during their seven-year run at the New Frontier is among her fondest memories.

„I preferred them here,“ said West, who saw them only once at The Mirage. „They got too mechanical. It wasn't as good (at The Mirage).“

Jill Crees, a cocktail waitress at the hotel-casino for 21 years, said the closing is more than losing a longtime job.

„I have a lot of friends and a lot of customers who are more like a family,“ Crees said. „A lot of customers like it here because it is like a family. It's been like my home.“

She said she plans to take a three-month vacation, but is worried she is too old to find another cocktail waitress job on the Strip.

Ruffin was absent for the final night, scheduled to return to Las Vegas on Wednesday, according to general manager Najam Khan.

He paid \$ 167 million for the property in October 1997 ending a six-year worker's strike four months later.

Khan and his team have until Aug. 7 to clean out the property before handing over the keys to El-Ad.

An on-site auction scheduled for July 26 is being handled by the Great American Group.

Jimmie Johnson, a security guard for 21 1/2 years, said the hardest part is severing the relationships formed during the years.

„We might see them from time to time in passing,“ said Johnson, who has an orientation Wednesday to start a similar position at the MGM Grand. „It's not like I know you're going to be here so I'm going to see you and that's the sad part.“

Johnson said he was scheduled to work until 2:30 a.m., making sure everyone gets out of the hotel.