



BETTY WHITEHEAD WILLIS (Class of 1941)

Betty Whitehead Willis is the pioneer commercial artist and designer of many of the neon signs in Las Vegas. Her most well-known creation is the “WELCOME TO FABULOUS LAS VEGAS” sign on the South Las Vegas Strip, which was created in 1959.

Betty’s parents were among the first adventurous souls who journeyed to Las Vegas in 1905, arriving in a horse-drawn wagon. Her father, Stephen Whitehead, was employed as Clark County’s first assessor.

Betty was born and raised in Las Vegas. Her family used to travel by train to Los Angeles when she was young and she fell in love with neon signs and their vibrant colors. After studying at the California Art Institute in Pasadena and working in the art department/marketing at the old MGM studios, she returned to Las Vegas and began her career. She originally began drawing showgirls in newspaper advertisements for various Vegas acts but eventually made the transition to designing neon signs. In addition to the “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign, she also designed some of the most iconic signs in Las Vegas, including the Moulin Rouge and Blue Angel, just to name a few.

At the time female commercial artists were few and far between. As Betty told the Chicago Sun Times, “Most people are surprised when they find out a woman designed the sign. It was a man’s business back then. It wasn’t a woman’s field because when you work with neon signs, you have to not only design them, but you have to learn the nuts and bolts of how neon, light and electricity work. You have to learn about pressure points and weight and wattage of lamps. You work with engineers as well as artists. Most women back then weren’t interested in such technical stuff.”

In 1952 Willis was approached by Ted Rogich, a local salesman, who suggested that she design a sign that would welcome visitors to the city. The sign had to reflect the relatively new, flashy neon age and serve as an impressive gateway for the town. Willis embarked on developing a sign that was unique in shape, style and content. The sign is 25 feet tall and does have distinctive features. The diamond shape immediately differentiates it from others. In a nod to Nevada’s nickname “the Silver State”, seven silver dollars back the seven letters of the word “Welcome”.

In 1959, when the sign was completed, Willis and Rogich sold it for \$4000 to Clark County officials, who placed the sign on an island on the southern tip of the Strip, where it remains today.

In hopes that the design would be used freely, Willis never copyrighted her sign's design. Today, clothing, food, various souvenirs, and Nevada license plates are just some of the many items that bear the likeness of Willis' design. It is often seen in Las Vegas TV advertisements. The sign has become so iconic of Las Vegas that it was chosen as the official logo for the Las Vegas Centennial celebration in 2005. It has become one of the most photographed tourist attractions in Las Vegas!

Betty continued to design signs until retiring in 2001. Her daughter, Marjorie Willis Holland, graduated from Las Vegas High School in 1970.

These biographies are based on research and could contain discrepancies.

If there are any excerpts you feel should be changed please feel free to contact me at Dave@lvhsaa.com

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