Los Angeles Times

'Vegas' drama unfolds at Santa Clarita Studios

By Richard Verrier

August 1, 2012 (posted online July 31, 2011)

www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-onlocation-20120731,0,2202982.story

Wearing a cowboy hat and leather jacket, a Las Vegas sheriff steps out of a diner and strolls down the street in front of the Golden Nugget casino, with its giant pineapple-shaped nugget encircled in neon lights.

He stops to greet his partner, who is clutching a copy of the Las Vegas Sun when suddenly he notices some suspicious activity. The lawman grabs a broom handle and crosses the street to apprehend a gangster attempting to rob a jewelry store. But, what happens in Las Vegas doesn't always stay in Vegas.

The scene, which will appear in the first episode of the new fall CBS drama "Vegas," is not being filmed in Nevada's Sin City but some 225 miles away at Santa Clarita Studios in northern Los Angeles County. There, workers built a replica of the original 1960s Vegas strip, including a full-size casino, jail and sheriff's station, for a cost of about \$1.8 million. The set is unusually elaborate, especially for a network TV show.

The series, which stars Dennis Quaid as Sheriff Ralph Lamb — a fourth-generation rancher charged with bringing order to Las Vegas in the 1960s — also stands out because it is one of only a handful of new network dramas filming in L.A. this season. Most are filming in Canada, New York, Georgia and other locales that offer stronger tax incentives to producers than what is available in California.

"The trend in the last five years has been to take all of these shows out of town, so it's a big deal to bring a high-profile show back to Los Angeles," said Carey Meyer, production designer for "Vegas," which debuts Sept. 25.

L.A. was no ace in the hole, however. The pilot for "Vegas" was shot in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and another Las Vegas — in New Mexico — to take advantage of that state's tax credit.

And "Vegas" was not eligible to receive a 20% California film tax break because the credits target basic cable shows or prime-time series relocated from elsewhere.

Nonetheless, producers opted to film in Los Angeles County to take advantage of strong crews here and because it was the preference of the stars, Quaid and Michael Chiklis, who plays Vincent Savino, a ruthless Chicago mobster and casino owner who wants to take over Las Vegas.

Quaid, the veteran actor who stars in such movies as "Soul Surfer," "The Day After Tomorrow" and "The Rookie," said he was happy to stay close to his home on the Westside of Los Angeles so he could see his twin children at night.

"I like sleeping in my own bed," Quaid said during a break in filming this week.

Quaid, who owns a ranch in Montana, said he was instantly drawn to Lamb's character and the concept behind "Vegas."

"It's like cowboys versus gangsters," he said. "How often do you get to see that?"

This is not the first time Santa Clarita Studios has played Vegas. The long-running "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" is set in Vegas but also was filmed at Santa Clarita Studios before moving to its current shoot location at Universal Studios.

But re-creating the original Vegas strip along Fremont Street for the new series was a more daunting task. Filming in Vegas itself wasn't an option because the original Fremont Street has been mostly redeveloped.

Location scouts looked all over Los Angeles County, but only Santa Clarita Studios had enough outdoor space adjacent to a studio to build a block of vintage Vegas, producers said.

"This was the only physical space that we could find that had a stage that could connect with 200 feet of street," said Greg Walker, a writer and executive producer for 'Vegas' who is working with "Goodfellas" and "Casino" writer Nick Pileggi on the series. "Another reason we liked being out here was the proximity to all the ranch land."

The show, which costs \$3 million to \$3.5 million an episode to produce, employs 150 crew members. In addition, 75 carpenters, painters and electricians were hired to erect the sets, which were constructed over a seven week period.

Meyer had just four days to design the sets, which feature a 170-foot-long-block facade of Fremont Street as it appeared in 1960, with an assortment of Western-style casinos, a pawn shop and bingo hall. Electricians installed 500 transformers to power all the neon lights.

His team also built a 15,000-square-foot fictional casino called The Savoy, equipped with vintage slot machines, Sputnik chandeliers, period roulette tables and a large awning that opens up to the Fremont Street set.

To make the street as authentic as possible, Meyer relied on old photographs of casinos such as the Golden Nugget and watched clips from famous Vegas movies including "Bugsy," starring Warren Beatty, the 1960 film "Ocean's Eleven" starring Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, and the James Bond picture "Diamonds are Forever," which shot a car chase scene on Fremont.

The 12-foot-tall buildings were designed so that visual effects technicians could create digital extensions, making them appear taller than the actual sets. Similarly, giant green screens are installed at each end of the street, digitally extending them for a longer view.

It takes eight days to shoot a single episode, and about half those days will be filmed on the Fremont Street set.

"I can't believe it," said Pileggi, sitting at the bar inside The Savoy set and marveling at the 1960s-era decor. "It's brilliant."



Vegas set in Santa Clarita

(Kirk McKoy, Los Angeles Times)

The series, based on the exploits of a fourth-generation rancher charged with bringing order to Las Vegas in the 1960s, is not being filmed in Nevada, but in northern Los Angeles County at the Santa Clarita Studios.



Golden Nugget

(Kirk McKoy, Los Angeles Times)

Dennis Quaid waits in front of the Golden Nugget. To make the street as authentic as possible, set designers relied on old photographs of casinos like the Golden Nugget and watched clips from famous Vegas movies.



The Savoy Casino floor

(Kirk McKoy, Los Angeles Times)

Crew members have built a replica of the original 1960s Vegas strip, including a full-sized casino, jail and sheriff's station, for a cost of about \$1.8 million.



Replica slots

(Kirk McKoy, Los Angeles Times)

Production designer Carey Meyer shows slot machines on the casino floor.