





PHOTOS COURTESY of The Press of Atlantic City

ATLANTIC CITY SURVIVES

By Michael J. Carroll

“**W**ell, you should have seen the Atlantic Ocean in those days,” is a line from the film “Atlantic City,” delivered by Burt Lancaster playing an aging, small-time gangster who remembered himself bigger and better than he ever was. Walking and reminiscing on the Boardwalk about how everything was better back in his day, he said it to a young punk who was not fated to make it to the end of the movie. Coming from a lesser actor, it could have been laughable. From Lancaster it captured something about dreams and memories in general and Atlantic City fantasies in particular. Everything was better in the past – including the ocean.

On my first visit to Atlantic City I shared a room with my parents and two sisters in the Anchor Motel in the mainland town of Pleasantville. That was the summer of 1964, the year the Democrats nominated Lyndon Johnson for president in Atlantic City at a convention that saw the Freedom Democrats fight for a seat at the all-white table of the Mississippi delegation – and lose. It was the same summer that civil rights workers Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner, were found murdered in Philadelphia – Philadelphia, Miss. –

after an excruciating search followed by the whole country.

After the convention, Atlantic City fell into one of its cyclical slides. Whatever stories the conventioners carried home must not have been all that great. This was also the time that affordable air travel to resorts here and abroad was becoming more available to tourists who might have once vacationed in Atlantic City. In those years the proverbial visitor from another planet arriving the day after Labor Day might have concluded that some weapon

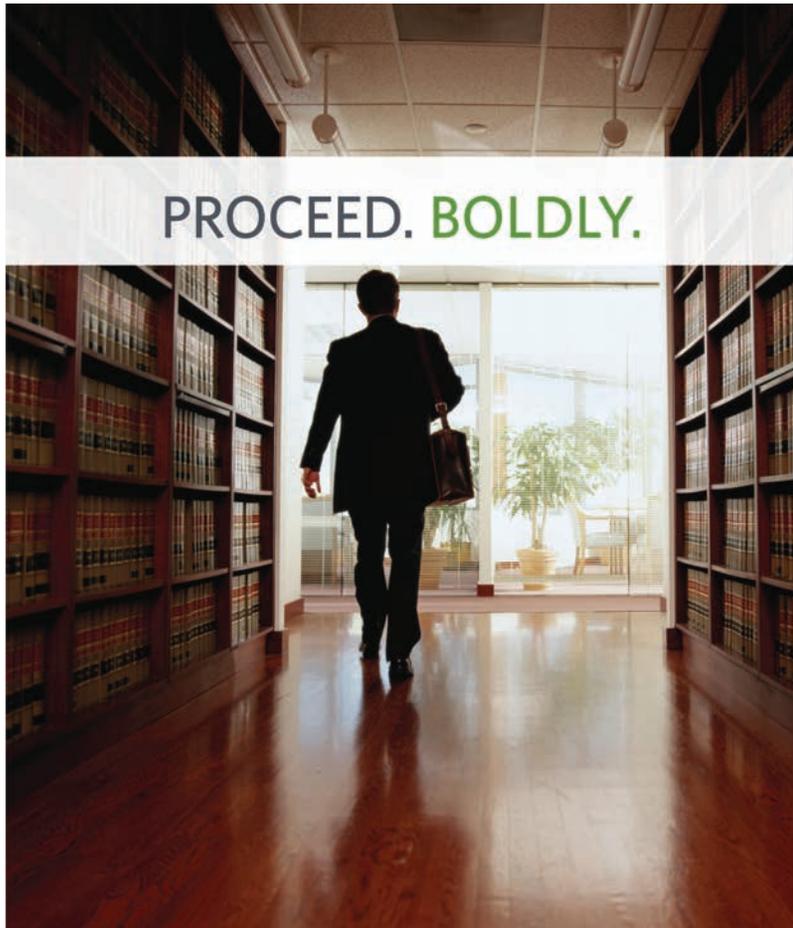


or plague had decimated the area, leaving objects intact but most inhabitants gone. The only remaining human exceptions would seem to be tan wrinkled beings wearing ship captains caps and slowly waving metal wands across the sand, pausing occasionally to dig and retrieve pieces of metal.

I did not get back to the “City by the Sea” much until the late 1970s, when I took a job at the legal services office. Casinos

were the proposed cure for the economic slide. The “gaming industry” tried to legalize gambling for the entire Garden State. The first referendum lost, so the next one targeted gambling in Atlantic City alone. New Jersey voters served up the town and spared the rest of the state.

One of our missions at the legal services office was to stem the eviction tide fueled by the casino-driven real estate boom



PROCEED. **BOLDLY.**

With over 70 professionals, EisnerAmper Litigation Services has the skills, the expertise and the credentials to help obtain the best outcomes for your clients in all of their financial litigation matters.

We apply the appropriate standards and professional judgment in all our areas of service, helping you to get your desired results.

Let's get down to business.®



Richard J. Gering
Partner-in-Charge, Litigation Services
215.881.8828 | richard.gering@eisneramper.com

EisnerAmper LLP
Accountants & Advisors
Independent Member of PKF International
www.eisneramper.com



that was throwing tenants out of town, disproportionately minorities, the poor, and the old. Our clients were swamped by the tide.

There were so many currents and counter currents. I remember walking against the morning wave of bathing suit-clad beach goers bearing large colorful umbrellas and tubular aluminum chairs to the sea. I pushed against the flow of the pedestrian tide on my way to landlord-tenant court for another day of fighting evictions.

One of those days I received a call from a municipal court judge who was permitted an Atlantic City private law practice so long as it was unrelated to his judicial duties a few miles inland. No conflict. He called because his clients were the owners of a building where I represented the tenants and wanted to warn me that the owners were “Italian guys from South Philly,” and he “did not want to see anyone get hurt.” I responded that I too did not want to see anyone get hurt with more costly litigation. Nothing ever came of it.

I do not mean to say that being a municipal court judge was always easy at the shore. A year or two before I started at legal services an Atlantic City municipal judge was shot dead by a gunman in a ski mask while eating in a restaurant during one of those freak snow storms that dumps a foot or two of snow at the shore – and leaves barely a flake in Philadelphia.

There were several waves that washed over the town and took residents with them. First Latinos in the South Inlet were targeted for removal, then African-Americans in the North Inlet. After that it was whites, some elderly in apartments where they had lived for decades and others in small neighborhood

homes. The old ones are hardest to forget.

The people who ran the small tacky stores on the Boardwalk got their turn under the tidal wave. Their promised business boom never arrived because the tourist money stayed inside the casinos and did not venture outside on the boards. Many of the old-timers were squeezed out. If you owned your shop you might cash in for something.

If you rented for a lifetime the place where you sold the schlocky toy of the season, or even world-class macaroons, you were usually out of luck and out of town.

It was not just residents who were hurt, the seekers who dragged dreams to the city suffered as well. Nurses and teachers fled Philly, North and South Jersey, and New York, to double and triple salaries working in the casinos and to put some excitement in their lives. Too many blew their money on nights of drugs or booze and came away with little more than wrinkles, a stint in rehab, occasionally jail, and maybe a banged-up BMW not paid off.

Maybe AC is a little busier after Labor Day now, but I read in the papers that clouds are gathering again. Clouds from casinos in neighboring states cutting into the gamboling pie and clouds of

sporadic, sometimes bizarre street crime committed against tourists whose luck ran out. Maybe it will not return soon to its glory days, whatever and whenever they were. But my bet is that the City will survive because it is too tough to die – and because the Atlantic Ocean is still really something. ■

If you rented for a lifetime the place where you sold the schlocky toy of the season, or even world-class macaroons, you were usually out of luck and out of town.

Michael J. Carroll is a public interest lawyer and a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.