

Odds were good that Nicholas Pileggi — the writer of *Goodfellas* and *Casino* — would have a winner with his period drama, *Vegas*.

When the Cowboys Met the Mob

When it comes to digging up a good crime story, Nicholas Pileggi has a nose like a bomb-sniffing dog.

So when he first heard about Ralph Lamb — a legendary cowboy sheriff who ruled Las Vegas during the Mafia's rise to prominence there in the early 1960s, Pileggi knew he'd hit paydirt. Lamb's colorful history presides over CBS's *Vegas*, primetime's latest '60s period drama.

Pileggi, a co-creator and an executive producer of the series, became fascinated with Lamb while living in Vegas in the '90s and researching his book *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas* (which became the 1995 film *Casino*). "I kept hearing from the old gangsters about this sheriff who was terrifying mob guys," he recalls. "They didn't want to go near him. There were stories of him burying people in the desert."

Dennis Quaid makes his network series debut as the horseback-riding Sheriff Lamb, who modernized the Las Vegas police department while standing up to the mob men who controlled the casinos at the time. Lamb's nemesis is fictional Chicago mobster Vincent Savino (*The Shield*'s Michael Chiklis), a man with lofty business ambitions

and the ruthless means to attain them. Also starring is Carrie-Anne Moss (*The Matrix*) as assistant district attorney Katherine O'Connell.

"Lamb was a throwback to a period that we're losing," Pileggi says. "Casinos were taking the land — they were the new force endangering the cattleman-cowboy life. The contrast was so clear between Lamb and the new world. It was cowboy boots versus alligator pumps, fedoras versus cowboy hats."

Convincing Lamb to spill his stories was another matter. It took the intervention of two disparate men: producer Arthur Sarkissian and MGM billionaire mogul Kirk Kirkorian, with whom Lamb has been unlikely friends for more than fifty years. Kirkorian persuaded Lamb to have a sit-down with Pileggi at the Bellagio, and once that happened, Lamb's resistance melted away.

Pileggi envisioned the sheriff's story as a feature film, with Sarkissian on board to produce. But the sprawling narrative — spanning ten years of Vegas history — didn't click as he'd hoped. Things changed when the script found its way to director James Mangold. "His feeling was, 'It's not a movie — it's a TV series,'" Pileggi recalls. "The minute he said that, I realized he was absolutely right."

Mangold got CBS on board, and the network brought in TV veteran Greg Walker to collaborate with Pileggi on the pilot. When CBS snapped up the series, Walker stayed on as an executive producer and showrunner. (Mangold has directed the pilot and is also an exec producer, as are Sarkissian and Cathy Konrad.)

Pileggi considers *Vegas* his true TV debut. Though he'd created one previous show in 1997 — the David Caruso starrer *Michael Hayes* — it was taken over by Paul Haggis and John Romano, while Pileggi remained at his home in New York. For *Vegas*, Pileggi moved out to Los Angeles to work on the series full time and is enjoying the camaraderie of his first TV writers' room.

"I am unbelievably impressed with the quality of the writers," he says. "And I am blown away by what showrunners do. You have to be a really good writer, but you also have to be managerial — I'm just not built for that," he adds with a laugh.

Pileggi is also impressed with the soundstage built in Santa Clarita, north of L.A., to re-create 1960s Vegas, from downtown Fremont Street to

the Savoy, then the swankiest hotel on the emerging Strip. "When I walked onto that set for the first time, I thought I was in a casino."

The Brooklyn-born Pileggi, who turned eighty in February, is a first-generation Italian-American who grew up in Bensonhurst — "the center of the wiseguy world when I was there," he says. But the wiseguys quickly realized Pileggi was not one of them.

"I can't do what these guys do," he explains. "They can smash a man's hand in a car door. I can't." What Pileggi could do was observe with a writer's eye and gain access to a world that was off-limits to most.

He attended Long Island University, then spent three decades reporting on crime for the *Associated Press* as well as *New York* and *Esquire* magazines and other publications. In 1986 he authored the best-selling book *Wiseguy*, about mobster-turned-informant Henry Hill. Producer Irwin Winkler optioned the book and shortly thereafter, Pileggi received a call from a man introducing himself as "Martin Scorsese, film director."

"I've been looking for this book for years," Scorsese said.

To which Pileggi replied: "I've been waiting for this phone call all my life."

The rest, as they say, is history. Scorsese and Pileggi adapted *Wiseguy* into the acclaimed 1990 film *Goodfellas*, which earned six Oscar nominations (including best screenplay) and was hailed by critic Roger Ebert as "the best mob movie ever." They followed that up with *Casino*, the final part of Scorsese's mob trilogy, which began in 1973 with *Mean Streets*, a film Pileggi had long admired.

For twenty-five years, Pileggi was married to screenwriter-director Nora Ephron, until her death in June 2012. Though they worked in different genres, Pileggi and Ephron collaborated on one feature project: *Love Me or Leave Me*, a remake of the 1955 film starring James Cagney as a gangster who falls for singer Doris Day. Ephron was supposed to direct, but casting never came together.

"I can't think of a more blissful period," Pileggi says of the time they spent writing together. "The movie — it would've been great."

—Graham Flashner

When he walked onto the set of *Vegas*, Nicholas Pileggi says, "I thought I was in a casino."



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