

FACT: HOWARD HUGHES STAYED AT THE DESERT INN SO LONG, THE OWNERS ASKED HIM TO LEAVE. HE OFFERED TO BUY THE HOTEL AND THE OWNERS SOLD, THUS BEGINNING HIS CASINO BUYING SPREE. HE IS OFTEN CREDITED WITH BRINGING CORPORATE LEGITIMACY TO GAMING INTERESTS.

VEGAS HISTORY

By Amy Westervelt

Mormons, Gangsters, and Howard Hughes: The History of Las Vegas.

Las Vegas is emblematic of all that Americans love and hate about themselves. Big, brash, overeating, stereotypically male, uncouth, flashy, beautiful in a way, but still sort of cheap. As a city, it's the image that the rest of the world has given us and, in a way, it's the image we've chosen to portray to the rest of the world. Now don't get me wrong, I love Vegas, but it's also a guy's guy sort of city; the so-called sins of Vegas, its temptations, are all marketed to males. Rarely are there half-naked men serving cocktails, or stripping, or dancing exotically. Makes sense, I suppose. After all, Vegas is a city built on the backs of a century's worth of alpha-males.

First there was Rafael Rivera, a young Mexican traveling on the Spanish Trail with a group of 60 towards Los Angeles. Rafael cut across the desert away from the group and found an oasis that was later named, you guessed it, Las Vegas (roughly, "The Meadows" in Spanish). This shortened the trip to Los Angeles, and gave traders a welcome rest spot along the trail. Rafael is a hero.

For years to come only Native Americans living in the region and Spanish traders passing through knew of the valley. Then famed explorer Captain John Fremont literally put Las Vegas on the map in 1841, and it quickly became a popular rest stop for all sorts of traders. Fremont is now immortalized by Vegas; his name is on more than one street, and is often used in the names of social clubs, museums and schools.

And then there was Brigham Young. Ten years after Rafael struck water, Brigham Young sent a group of Mormon settlers to convert the Las Vegas natives. They built the cleverly named Mormon Fort, a 150 sq ft adobe brick fort that still stands today, and were promptly ignored by the natives (apart from various raids on their fort) and driven out of town by heat exhaustion. Their fort, on the other hand, withstood the harshness of the desert and is now a historical monument and the oldest building in Las Vegas.

Like many cities before it, Vegas really became a town when the mining industry took hold, and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad was completed. Let's face it, gold-crazed pioneers and railroad tycoons make better trailblazers than devout Mormons. The railroad men forged the way, bought water rights and surveyed a town site for their servicing and repair facilities. In 1905, the railroad held an auction and sold 700 lots. Vegas hit puberty and discovered liquor and women. The town became a small watering hole

PULL QUOTES:

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with a few hotels, stores, a saloon and a few thousand residents. Gold-rushers and immigrants set up shop, as did outlaws... Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday and Jesse James all called Vegas home at various points in their lives.

After the arrival of the gold rush and the railroad, Las Vegas quietly grew for several decades. In March of 1931, gambling was legalized in the state; one month later, the city of Las Vegas issued gambling licenses. Also in that year, construction began on the Hoover Dam, and divorce laws were loosened up, allowing people to get a divorce in six weeks. The city that would eventually be known for quickie weddings started out as the place to go for a speedy divorce. Unhappy couples would stay in Vegas’ dude ranches, the precursors to today’s Strip hotels, and leave on separate flights.

The 1940s brought World War II, which in turn brought the defense industry to Las Vegas. Isolated as it was, with low energy costs and a plentiful water supply, the desert outside Vegas was ideal for this industry, and it continues to thrive there today. With a new industry came well-paid federal employees and young military men looking to spend their pay on leave-weekends full of strippers and booze.

Perhaps the man most associated with Vegas, especially in its present state, is Benjamin “Bugsy” Segal, who built the Flamingo Hotel on the Strip with mob money in the late 1940s. Though the Flamingo was not the first casino/hotel in Las Vegas, it became the template after which all subsequent developments were modeled. Blending luxury and big-name performers with the gambling and sex industries, Vegas, in particular The Flamingo, quickly became the favorite watering hole of wealthy punters. This is the decade that saw the Rat Pack – Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford – take Vegas by storm. Unfortunately, Segal paid for the luxury of The Flamingo with his life; when construction on the hotel went well over budget, it was believed that Segal was skimming money from mob funds and so he was killed on the orders of his boss (and childhood friend), Salvatore “Lucky” Luciano in Beverly Hills in 1947.

Decades later, when the Flamingo and its counterparts were showing signs of aging, the mob concocted a scheme for funneling enormous sums of money through the Teamster’s Union regional pension funds. The mob’s system of using squeaky clean front men to pose as the owners of their not entirely legal establishments gave Vegas a gritty layer of corruption that it’s never really managed to shake.

FACT. MORE THAN 3.8 MILLION OF VEGAS' YEARLY 30,000,000 VISITORS ARE CONVENTION DELEGATES.

1966 marked the arrival of yet another bulldozer of a man to the Vegas Strip: Howard Hughes. Hughes moved into the Desert Inn in June. Typically bizarre, Hughes insisted that his penthouse be pure white and kept spotlessly clean. In keeping with his rampant germ phobia, Hughes let hardly anyone into his room (apart from masked, gloved and white clad nurses), living in near total isolation. When the management decided that the novelty of having a paranoid billionaire living upstairs had worn off, they asked him to leave. Hughes' response was to buy the Desert Inn and then start buying up its neighbors. By this point in time the mobsters were getting on in years and were happy to sit by the pool and collect Hughes' millions. And so, for the next several years Hughes ran his empire in the comfort of his germ-free penthouse sick-room on the Strip.

Elvis Presley also made his mark on Vegas in the '60s, staging a musical comeback in 1969 at the International Hotel (now the Las Vegas Hilton). Elvis lived on the 30th floor of the International in a suite now named after him. It was in this suite that Presley saw Robert Goulet singing one of his songs on the television and was so offended he shot the screen. Soon after that episode, Priscilla and Elvis Presley separated in Vegas, a city now covered with Elvis Presley wedding chapels.

Just before Hughes left town in 1974, Nevada laws changed to allow public money in the development of casinos and hotels. Perfect timing, since construction costs were skyrocketing well beyond the means of the mob or even wealthy eccentrics like Howard Hughes. Hotels and casinos were cropping up all over the place with this infusion of new money, and by 1980 the number of Casinos on and near the Strip nearly doubled.

1980 was a rough year for Las Vegas. Gambling was slowly being decriminalized throughout the U.S., starting with Atlantic City, New Jersey – the east coast version of “Sin City.” Indian casinos started cropping up in nearly every state, casino riverboats showed up on the Mississippi, so now, instead of catching a flight and booking a hotel in Vegas, people could drive an hour or two out of town, gamble their savings away and be back in time for dinner.

Vegas’ response to these threats to its economic stability was to take decriminalization one step further and turn gambling into an innocent game. The gambling trade association changed its name to the National Gaming Entertainment Association, and hotels began to sell themselves as entertainment destinations, beginning with the Mirage and its spewing volcano light show. The Vegas spin doctors had the luck of pitching this new image to a nation full of people who just wanted to have fun and believe that their bad habits were no big deal.

With family entertainment came a shift in hotel concepts and layout. Now more attention was paid to things like pool design, stage productions, and something that could pass as culture. Up sprang Circus Circus for the kids and Paris, New York, Venezia, and the Bellagio for adults with “classy” taste.

Which brings us to the present day. Perhaps the best indicator that Vegas is still a lovable degenerate: In an effort to add more culture to Las Vegas someone decided to build a Rem Koolhaas-designed Guggenheim here and it closed within 6 months. Don't kid yourself, Vegas may be a family man now, but he's still a teenage boy at heart.