

“What mob?”
Las Vegas myths and fairy tales

Las Vegas Mercury, February 14, 2002

Las Vegas is a town of myths and fairy tales. One myth is that Bugsy Siegel started it all with the Flamingo. Siegel bought and muscled his way into a project already underway, and only as a middle man for others. The Flamingo was not even the first joint on Highway 91, known still today by veterans as “the highway.” The El Rancho Vegas, which opened on April 3, 1941 with 63 rooms, was the first substantial gambling hall until, on June 17, 1960, it burned to the ground that has sat empty across the Strip from the Sahara Hotel ever since. The Last Frontier opened 18 months later on the lot of “Club 91,” and the Flamingo four years after that, with 105 rooms, two fewer than the Last Frontier.

Another fairy tale is that theme hotels are a relatively recent development. Las Vegas Strip casinos were constructed around themes from the beginning. The El Rancho Vegas, the Silver Slipper, the Old Frontier, Caesars Palace, Circus Circus, the Castaways, the Dunes, the Aladdin, and many others, were theme hotels. The Showboat on Boulder Highway was themed all the way through. The Stardust, with its highway sign in the shape of a mushroom cloud (star dust is what you get from nuclear explosions on stars and at the test site), long ago abandoned the theme.

The joints built by the mob from the ground up, such as the Desert Inn, gradually created their own Las Vegas mob-rat-pack aura. These tended to be on the east side of the Strip. The themes have tended to be on the west side. Originally traffic was toward Los Angeles, hence the west side saw the most construction; by the time the mob took hold, the direction changed. The mob built on the east side and infiltrated the west. Old mob money went to the east side; Teamsters’ pension funds and Wynn/Milken junk bonds to the west. Steve Wynn’s contribution is not what he ushered in, but what he ushered out. Wynn ushered in the era of imploding the old Las Vegas charm. He was the pioneer of whacking down the grand theme hotels - Silver Slipper, Old Frontier, Castaways, Dunes - and he recently imploded the last of the original Las Vegas magic - the Desert Inn. The modern hotels that lace the theme of a place real or mythical through architecture - the Excalibur, the Luxor, New York New York, the Paris, Mandalay Bay, the Venetian, and the Bellagio - carry on a tradition begun at the El Rancho Vegas, the Old Frontier, the Silver Slipper, Circus Circus, the Showboat, and Caesars Palace. What has changed are the themes, the sheer scale of what we now call destination resorts and what was once known to the world as Las Vegas. What you see today fronting “the highway” could just as well have been built in New Jersey or Kabul. Even glitter gulch is nowhere to be found, replaced by the “Fremont Street Experience,” another Wynn concoction.

Las Vegas is gone.

We made two big mistakes. We didn’t respect the flow of land and water in this valley. We should have molded the washbeds into a network of parks and built around them. Caesar’s Palace was allowed to be constructed inside the largest flood channel in the valley and we’ve spent hundreds

of millions of public dollars pushing the floodwaters underground ever since for other developers. If you believe the flood control district exists to protect us, you believe in fairy tales.

The second mistake was much like the first and related to it. We've let the whole thing, our economy, our society, our children and three branches of government ride on casino gambling. Like the opportunities lost with the flood channels, it's too late to do anything about it. Las Vegas is a theme city and the idea of civic society here is another myth.

Casino capos control three branches of government. They anoint the governor, make sure that few people get elected and no one ever gets appointed to anything who might not bend over for them, and have their government puppets stuff key agencies with their own, such as the Convention Authority. But it doesn't stop here. In an attempt to bust union power, increase their land mass, and control everything in this town, their government minions even steal the streets and sidewalks for them. The most frequent receiver of this stolen property is MGM/Mirage. They would like to own the Fourth Estate, but don't have to. Local television twinkie news is mush and print circulation is pitiful.

Nevada has lost its gambling monopoly, in no small part because our very own see suckers everywhere and want their money. This sort of thing happens. Detroit is not the only place anymore that makes automobiles. Texas doesn't corner the world in oil wells and Pittsburgh competes in a worldwide steel market. What scares some in Las Vegas is that this town, defined for the moment as the economic and political mass at the base of these mountains, has put all its chips on black 13. Las Vegas Roulette is particularly chancy because gambling doesn't produce anything and is not universally liked. This valley could fry in star dust and the rest of the country would little notice or care. This explains Yucca Mountain. Don't expect to hear this from Harry Reid or on Channel 8.

Steve Wynn, Sheldon Adelson, the MGM/Mirage, Park Place, and Mandalay Resort Group recently competed for the chance to set up shop in Macao, near Hong Kong, called "one of the most violent and corrupt gambling spots in the world." Wynn and Adelson prevailed. No one should think that these guys give a shit about Las Vegas. They run multinational gambling operations. Macau was coveted as an opportunity to divert Asian high rollers away from the competition in Las Vegas. Our fair city is no more to these international gambling warlords than the Alaska Wilderness is to Texaco or Yucca Mountain to the Department of Energy.

It has proven impossible to have an informed and caring population when it doubles every 10 years, mostly uneducated looking for unskilled work in the casinos. By the time a majority care enough to find out what's up here, they're not the majority anymore. Journalistic memory is also short because of the high turnover at our major dailies who don't pay enough to keep good writers.

An example of the lack of memory and a third myth is this talk about redeveloping downtown Las Vegas. There has never been anything there except a few blocks of cheesy gambling dens. In the '50s and '60s I lived at the corner of 8th and Garces, two blocks from my alma mater, Las Vegas High School, a par 5 from Glitter Gulch. There was nothing ever there. What is Mayor Oscar

Goodman thinking – that this railroad and whoring town turned into low-life casino row once sported a concert hall, city park, theater, museums, and institutions of higher learning? The one nice park that we once had downtown, the City of Las Vegas destroyed for the state building. The city’s prior mayor and councilmen even voted to deliver parks money to the casinos and to turn everything else over to them, including other people’s property and the city streets and sidewalks just for the asking. It would be nice to juvenate downtown, but rejuvenate is out of the question, and nothing will ever happen to improve anything around here so long as everybody slobbers all over the hoods who run the casinos.

Once upon a time, to be the mouthpiece of the mob, you went to law school. Today you run for mayor.

“Community redevelopment” was never about redeveloping the community. In 1986 the city declared itself to be blighted so that it could turn property tax collections over to a “redevelopment agency” which has turned almost all of it over to the casinos (Main Street Station and the Fremont Street Experience) and one well-connected law firm. By depriving poor neighborhoods of the public services that the money would otherwise fund, the city perpetuates the blight and gives itself a perpetual excuse to take the money. The well-connected law firm it hired to defend this in court.

Goodman’s lunatic idea of selling us all out by selling the city name and logo to an internet gambling operation doesn’t suggest that he’s in the right frame of mind to redevelop anything. Nor does it suggest that he has any clue about, or respect for, the role of government in a democratic society. This is more than a continuation of the second mistake, although it has the same roots. If we can give away the streets, the parks money, the redevelopment money and even the sidewalks to a bunch of casino hoods, we can give them the rest of our public institutions, down to the very name of our civic society.

“What mob,” Good man once asked. It’s all a myth, he said.