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Mob Museum Hits Vegas, but It's No Sure Bet

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Shirley Griffith. Today we take you to the National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement. The museum opened earlier this year in America's gaming capital – Las Vegas, Nevada. Christopher Cruise went there and has our report.

(MUSIC)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Las Vegas is famous for excitement, entertainment and casinos, businesses where lots of money can be won and lost. The city is not known for its arts or cultural organizations. But Las Vegas now has a world-class museum. It is the National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement. It tells about organized crime and one of the most famous crime groups: The American Mafia, also called the mob.

The Mob Museum is both informative and entertaining. It is filled with well-documented historical displays and interactive exhibits. When I visited, children and adults were enjoying the museum. It is one of the few places in Las Vegas that does not have slot machines or other games of chance -- except in its displays.

The Mob Museum opened this year on February fourteenth -- Valentine's Day, an important day in Mafia history. It was on Valentine's Day eighty-three years ago that the St. Valentine's Day Massacre happened. Seven members of the Bugs Moran gang were shot and killed in Chicago, Illinois.

The killers belonged to a competing group headed by Al Capone. Al Capone was one of the most-feared and best-known criminals of the time. News of the killings appeared in newspapers across the country.

The Mob Museum has the brick wall where the seven men were lined up and murdered. It is used as a screen for a short film about the killings. It is blood-covered and marked with bullet holes.

(MUSIC)

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre took place long ago. But organized crime is still a problem. Last year, federal agents arrested more than one hundred twenty

individuals said to have connections to the Mafia. The charges included murder, drug trafficking and illegal gambling.

The Mob Museum says “there are two sides to every story – and then there’s the truth.” The museum tells the story of the Mafia’s effect on Las Vegas and the nation, and the relationship between the Mafia and law enforcement.

It is not possible to tell the history of Las Vegas without noting the influence of organized crime. The city would not be what it is today if not for the Mafia. The group was important in the creation of modern Las Vegas, helping to build it up from a small town in the desert to an internationally-known city.

Las Vegas is known for destroying old buildings and putting up new ones in their place. Yet the Mob Museum is in an historic, old structure that once held a federal courthouse and a post office.

On November fifteenth, nineteen fifty, a committee of the United States Senate held a hearing in one of the building’s courtrooms. It was the seventh in a series of fourteen hearings about organized crime held nationwide in nineteen fifty and fifty-one. The hearings were called to publicize the workings of the Mafia and help law enforcement bring it under control. As part of repairs to the building, the second-floor courtroom has been made to look exactly as it did sixty years ago.

As a result of the committee hearings, many mobsters moved their operations to Nevada. That is because gambling was permitted in the state, but illegal in other states. The Mafia made a lot of money from gambling, as well as the sex industry and alcohol sales.

The Mob Museum tells how the Mafia grew out of American cities over a century ago. Many immigrants who settled in cities were hard-working and wanted to succeed. But instead of traditional roads to success, some chose a life of crime. Many, however, died because of their decision or were jailed for criminal activity.

Museum displays show the bloody violence of the Mob. They also show how federal agents wire-tapped telephones and listened in on the plotting of mobsters and how they “skimmed,” or stole money from Las Vegas casinos. Museum visitors can fire a machine gun – although it does not use real bullets. They also can sit in a real electric chair. Before sitting down, I made sure the chair was not connected to an electrical outlet.

(MUSIC)

Carolyn G. Goodman is the mayor of Las Vegas. Her husband Oscar formerly held the position. Before Oscar Goodman was elected mayor, he provided legal

representation to suspected members of the Mafia. Lawyers who represent such suspects are known as "mob lawyers."

From the nineteen sixties through the nineteen eighties, Mr. Goodman represented some of the men believed to be top Las Vegas gangsters.

Mr. Goodman says that during his term in office, he began planning for the museum. He told VOA, "It is my vision, my baby, my project." He says he wanted to find a way to bring people and jobs to the city's downtown area.

Most Las Vegas casinos are on what is called the Strip, far from the center of the city. There is not much to do in downtown Las Vegas. However, a tourist attraction called "The Fremont Street Experience" is just a short walk from the museum. About fifteen million people go there every year to gamble, watch musical performers and other activities.

Across the street from Mr. Goodman's mayoral office stood a former courthouse. He negotiated with the federal government to take control of the building. The government sold the building to the museum for one dollar. Mr. Goldman told VOA his city is the best place in the country for a museum about the Mafia.

OSCAR GOODMAN: "You know, Las Vegas is different than any other city because of where we came from. Basically we are a product of the Mob, who moved here from other places. And I said this would be a great place to have a Mob Museum."

Years ago, some Italian-Americans were reported to be heading organized crime groups in the United States. Mr. Goodman admits Italian-Americans did not like the idea of a museum about the Mafia.

OSCAR GOODMAN: "There was an awful lot of resistance in the beginning that we would be glorifying the Mob, or that certain ethnic groups would be targeted and it would be defamatory towards them but, I said 'No, it is going to be an even-handed presentation.'"

But Mr. Goodman says none of the Mafia suspects he represented in court objected to the Mob Museum. In fact, he says, some of them wanted to donate materials to the museum, hoping their story would be told there.

(MUSIC)

The Mob Museum cost forty-two million dollars. Thirty million of that was spent to restore and repair the old building. Nine million dollars in federal, state and local money was used to pay for the project.

But a group called the Taxpayers Protection Alliance has objected to the use of tax money to create the museum. It says the museum is evidence of pork-barrel spending and irresponsible government at a time when many families are struggling. The group is concerned that, if the museum does not have enough paying customers, tax dollars will be used to support its continued operation.

Mr. Goodman told VOA that critics of the museum can, in his words, “go jump in a lake as far as I’m concerned.”

The people who designed the museum also worked on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, and the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC. Both are successful businesses.

At one time Mr. Goodman hoped that as many as eight hundred thousand people would visit the Mob Museum every year. Now, museum officials hope the number is closer to three hundred thousand visitors. Executive Director Jonathan Ullman told VOA the museum will meet or exceed that number. He says it will make a profit as long as there are at least two hundred sixty thousand visitors every year.

The National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement is open seven days a week. Adults must pay eighteen dollars for admission. Children and teachers pay less. So do older adults, police officers, Nevada state residents and members of the military.

A single visit is not long enough to see, read and hear all that the museum has to offer. A visitor could be occupied by the museum for days. There are exhibits on activities of organized crime throughout the world. Another exhibit shows some of the misinformation about the Mafia in the media and movies. Mr. Goodman has said he wanted the museum to be “a real museum with a real connection to history.”

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Christopher Cruise wrote and presented our report. Our producer was Brianna Blake. I’m Shirley Griffith. You can see pictures and videos of the Mob Museum from our visit on our website VOASpecialEnglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.