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Gambling Comes to Nevada

Lead: Mired in the Great Depression, to create jobs the state of Nevada legalized gambling.

Tag: "A Moment In Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: Nevada was the last area of the continental United States to be explored by Europeans. In the early 1800s British and American fur traders crossed the territory and then returned to trap along the Humboldt River the late 1820s. After gold was discovered in California in 1848, thousands of people crossed Nevada on their way to the Pacific Coast.

Acquired from Mexico by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Nevada became a separate territory after a dazzling silver strike, the Comstock Lode, near Virginia City. The discovery brought thousands seeking a bonanza some of whom stayed and helped make Nevada a state in 1864.

The decline of the mining industry after the silver and gold played out left the state with a shrinking economic base and in 1931 Nevada passed two laws to arrest its decline. First it reduced the residency requirement for divorce to six weeks and in the same year the state legalized gambling.

In 1936 Raymond Smith and son Harold opened a small casino on Main

Street in Reno. They made two wildly successful innovations. In addition to wheel roulette and the usual games, they developed mouse roulette in which the patrons would bet on what color or number a mouse would select after being released. They also began a national advertising campaign. All over the country, billboards, without mentioning the word gambling, portrayed a Conestoga Wagon covered with the words, "Harold's Club or Bust." It became Nevada's most popular tourist attraction.

In 1942, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel began to build the first luxury casino in Las Vegas. Siegel, one of the underworld's most efficient hit men, did not live to enjoy his creation, the

Flamingo Hotel with its landscaped grounds and world class entertainment. He was killed by his associate Lucky Luciano.

Until the 1950s gambling in Nevada for the most part was dominated by organized crime, but when laws were altered making it easier for legitimate corporations to enter the business, gambling, Nevada's main source of taxes, gradually improved its reputation.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Russell R. Elliot. *History of Nevada*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1973.

Robert Laxalt. *Nevada: A Bicentennial History*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1977.

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