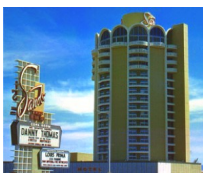


I first passed through Las Vegas in 1946 on my way home from World War II. Our troop train stopped there for about an hour, and with several other sailors, I wandered up Fremont Street, past sleazy bars, one hotel and three or four small casinos. Not very impressive.

The next time I visited Las Vegas was just seven years later. As a Reservist, I had been recalled for Navy active duty in 1951 and served for two years. A college friend was the public relations director of the Sands Hotel, which had opened just a year before, and he offered me a free week when I returned from the Pacific. When I arrived in Las Vegas, this time by TWA, I was amazed by the dramatic change in the town, especially with new high-rise luxury resorts going up on the famed Strip at the time.



Anyone who has seen the 1991 movie, “Bugsy”, knows how the mega-resort era all began as a New York and Chicago mob enterprise. They put together their money and union funds to build the first real, completely-new high-rise hotel on the Strip, The Flamingo. Bugsy Siegel, a small-time hood and enforcer, took over the task of overseeing the construction and early operation of the Flamingo.

Siegel, concerned about running out of building funds, actually rushed the grand opening date from an original schedule for mid-1947 to the day after Christmas 1946. While celebrities and local VIPs strolled the new property, construction was still continuing all around them, and everything went downhill for Bugsy from there. Cost over-runs continued, casino employees stole money, and worse, attendance and income at the hotel were dismal.

Rumors also got back to the mob financiers that Siegel himself was pocketing some unauthorized money. Therefore, just six months after the not-so-grand opening of the Flamingo, hotel manager Bugsy was dismissed from his job with a bullet in the back of his head.

During the 1950s, along with the Sands, the Flamingo was joined along the Strip by the Sahara, the Tropicana, the Showboat, the Riviera, and several other casino resorts.

Ownership of the Flamingo has changed hands at least a dozen times over the years, and the hotel building has added wings to include more sleeping rooms and other facilities. It remains the only mega-resort hotel on the Strip from the early building boom of the 1940s and 1950s, except for the now-bankrupt Tropicana, to retain its original name. The Sands Hotel, where I had my free post-Korean War week in 1953, was torn down in 1996 to make way for the Italian-themed mega-mega-resort, The Venetian.

The 1960s to 1990s saw a boom of mega-resorts rising skyward on the Strip: Caesars Palace in

1966, the Mirage in 1989, then in the 1990s, MGM Grand, Monte Carlo, Treasure Island, Excalibur, Luxor, Paris, Bellagio, Mandalay Bay and New York New York all made their debut. The design plans for each were to outdo every other hotel on the Strip with mega-themes, including Venice canals, fake Eiffel Tower, Egyptian pyramid, fake ocean surf, erupting volcano, King Arthur atmosphere and many others.

In the 2000s, the Wynn Resort and Palazzo were the only mega-resorts to open on the strip. When the world and American economy began to slip in 2008 and continues in 2009, there's one glaring example that the mega-resort era in Las Vegas may be ending.

CityCenter, was planned as a wildly-ambitious 4000-room mega-resort, casino, with nearly 3,000 condo units, two upscale boutique hotels, and half a million square feet of retail units, all right in the middle of the Strip. The project covering five of the most expensive blocks in town has been under construction for the past four years, and its future is uncertain.

CityCenter was supposed to open in mid-2008, now postponed to debut in late 2009. Additionally, with financing problems, many plans for the original complex have been scaled back. Another new hotel project, the Fountainbleu, is also having construction delays and funding problems.

Since the days of Bugsy Siegel in the late 1940s, the Las Vegas mega-resort era has had many ups and downs, reflecting the same trends as the American economy. As with everyone else in America, Las Vegas planners are hoping the economy will once again recover. Las Vegas always finds ways to weather the bad days and emerge brighter than ever into a new building boom. You can bet it will happen again.