

# RUNNING THE OLD VEGAS: NEWPORT GANGSTER TOURS

*A Cincinnati Based Tour That Has Uncovered The City's Dark Past And Uses It To Educate Others And Bring Newport More Tourism*



Gangsters, casinos, gambling, crime... That's the seedy, dark past the mayor of Newport, Kentucky has tried to cover up over the years. But [American Legacy Tours](#) has dug right into that history and brought it to the forefront with their [Newport Gangster Tour](#). The Cincinnati, [Ohio](#)-based business have not only uncovered the city's dark past, but used it to bring Newport hope (and a ton of tourism).

“Newport was the gambling capital of America. It was Vegas before Vegas,” said Craig Maness, Director of Business Operations and one of the tour guides. “This was the first time you could walk through the doors of a building right onto a gambling floor. It wasn't hidden in the back.”

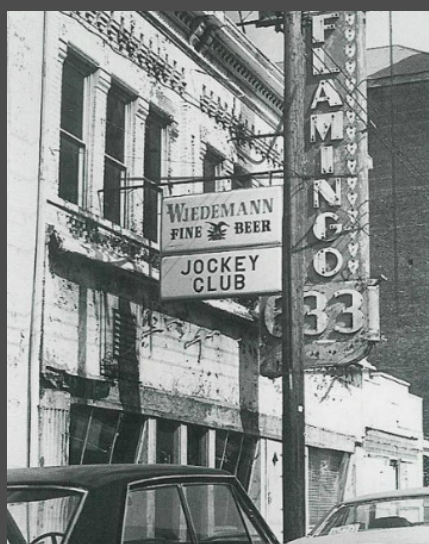
The gambling culture of Newport caught the attention of the Cleveland Mob, which was run by Moe Dalitz – later known as Mr. Las Vegas - at the time. Other mobsters began to flock to Newport, including Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, who invested in local casinos like The Jockey Club and 633 Flamingo (which later moved to the Las Vegas strip).

Of course, gambling was illegal at the time. But that didn't stop it from growing in

Newport in the 1900s. Gambling, bootlegging, prostitution... Newport had it all and then some. And they didn't even seem to be attempting to hide it. So how did this seemingly normal town become the gambling center of America? It's stories like these that excite Maness and other guides, who can't wait to animatedly tell guests all about their research.

“This was near the onset of the Prohibition,” he explained. “There had been a pretty violent strike at a place called Newport Steel. It was so violent that it made the front pages of the New York Times in the 1920s. Newport contacted the governor's office, asking for help to end the strike.”

In response, the office sent in Colonel Denhardt, a World War I soldier who had founded tank warfare. He came into the city with five live tanks and rolled down the streets with a few machine gun crews. Colonel Denhardt had heard about all of the illegal drinking going on and rounded up everyone's personal distillery tanks, put them on the streets and ran them over in the tank. To some, he was a hero. To others, a villain. Either way, the people of Newport didn't trust the government anymore.



Instead, residents – and many town officials – turned to bootleggers and mobsters, including King of the Bootleggers George Remus (who the Great Gatsby was based on). Taking advantage of Newport's lack of laws, Remus was able to make \$40 million in just three years. And when the Prohibition ended, all of the people working under Remus began opening casinos as a way to make money. The feds would come in and shut down a casino, but the casino operator would pay everyone off and the whole case would go away, leaving the casino open again a few days later.

The Newport Gangster Tour begins in the last casino operated in Newport, which is now called the Gangster Stolen Piano Bar. It's at this location that the tour starts with a 30 minute PowerPoint, so people can get an idea of what the people and buildings looked like back then, since the city tore down most of it. People can get a drink at the bar before walking around the city, seeing old strip clubs and brothels, buildings

that were once used for gambling... And all the while there are stories. Countless stories.

One of Maness' favorite stories is about Remus, during the aftermath of his lucrative career in Newport. In 1925, Remus was indicted for thousands of violations of the Volstead Act. He was given a two-year federal prison sentence. While he was in prison, Remus' wife had control over his money. She sold one of his distilleries, giving her imprisoned husband only \$100 of the multimillion-dollar empire he had started.

Then she divorced Remus in late 1927. But on the way to court, Remus had his driver chase the cab carrying his soon-to-be-ex wife through Eden Park in Cincinnati, forcing her car off the road. Remus fatally shot her in front of a park full of onlookers in broad daylight.

Remus pleaded temporary insanity and the jury deliberated only 19 minutes before acquitting him. This was the first time, said Maness, that temporary insanity was used successfully as a defense. He got off on all charges.

And there are so many more stories to tell.

“I just love storytelling,” said Maness. “I find that telling stories and sharing the history of the city is just so much fun. I really enjoy it. It also helps that he tour starts and ends at a bar or brewery, which is fun, too!”

When people hear the word “gangster” they are automatically drawn to it. It's a buzzword, said Maness, like The Sopranos, Lucky Luciano and Las Vegas. People love hearing about how the small town of Newport was once such a crime-riddled place. It's a past that really intrigues people.



But a tale that's almost as interesting is the true story of how American Legacy Tours began. Once just a handful of school teachers, American Legacy Tours now have over 30 tour guides and offer a dozen different tours in the area, including the Queen City Underground Tour, which over 25,000 had taken last year.

“This all started as a high school fundraiser,” said Maness. “A couple of the original owners, including Gerry Gels, were school teachers at the time. They would send their classes on field trips to South America every year. A bake sale, a car wash... You only make so much money. They thought of all the rich gangster history and felt it would

be cool to research that and put on a walking tour. They interviewed a lot of people. They got a lot of personal information and put this whole thing together.”

But then, when the teachers approached the mayor of Newport and asked if they needed a permit to put on a walking tour through the city they got a surprising answer: No, but don't do it.

The town had spent a lot of time covering up their seedy past and they didn't want it brought forward. But “in typical gangster fashion,” said Maness, “we did it anyway!”

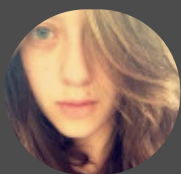
The first weekend of the tour, the teachers had attracted over 1,200 people. They raised so much money for the field trip that they realized they should take it even further. And the mayor felt the same way.

Said Maness: “He called us up that following Monday and said, “Can you do me a favor and keep doing it?’ Businesses had called in and said it was the busiest they had been in a while. From then on they went from a non-profit to a business.”

That was back in 2009. They added the Queen City Underground tour in 2010 and it's grown from there.

Maness has been doing the tours since March of 2013. He had found out about the company and felt it was something he'd love to do. He's the only tour guide who is employed full time.

Haunted tours, artisan tours, Christmas tours, a brew bus... American Legacy Tours has become an exciting and welcomed addition to the area and people can't get enough of Cincinnati and Newport's rich whirlwind of a history. For a unique look at the area's history (while having a few drinks) don't hesitate to sign up for an American Legacy tour. There's stories everywhere.



### **Olivia Richman**

A graduate of East Connecticut State University in Journalism, Olivia has written for Stonebridge Press & Antiques Market place among others. She enjoys writing, running and video games.



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