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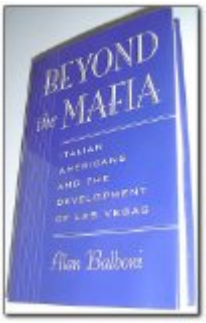
Alan Balboni. *Beyond the Mafia: Italian Americans and the Development of Las Vegas.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996. xix + 168 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87417-243-0.



Reviewed by Joyce Duncan (East Tennessee State University)
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In the wake of such published and filmed blockbusters of modified history as *Bugsy* and Nicholas Pileggi's *Casino* comes *Beyond the Mafia* by Alan Balboni, professor of history and political science at the Community College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas. The world's population has long been fascinated by the romance of Glitter Gulch and The Strip and lured by the promise of quick riches, easily attained, but it has been the mythological marriage of that adult Disneyland to the Mob which has most intrigued those attracted to Nevada lore. Although he acknowledges the historical presence of "The Boys," as he calls those connected to organized crime, Balboni offers an antithesis to popular opinion by proving that many immigrants, particularly those of Italian descent, were instrumental in all areas of the economic development of Las Vegas, without any fraternization with the Mafia.

According to Balboni, the national media's focus on alleged Mob connections to organized gambling and to the unprecedented growth of Las Vegas (from 127,000 people in 1960 to over a million in 1995) has downplayed the diverse and important contributions made by the average entrepreneurial immigrant spirit. Based on interviews with more than 150 Italian American residents of Las Vegas, *Beyond the Mafia* endeavors to dispel the Mafia myth by revealing individual life stories of real people descended from agrarian stock, railroad builders, shopkeepers, politicians, restauranteurs, and public works officials, as well as those employed by the casinos. The author affirms that the fluid nature of Las Vegas allowed thousands of Italian Americans to be assimilated into the population.

Although it is not his thesis, Balboni does not deny the presence of the Italian Mafia in the desert. He covers their involvement in initial casino building and in the money-skimming scandals of the corporate era. Additionally, he discusses the Black Book, the collection of names of Excluded Persons maintained by the state Gaming Commission, which lists many of Italian descent. At the heart of the study, however, are the interviews which demonstrate that the majority of Italians in Nevada are industrious, normal folk with no Mob affiliation, either real or imagined.

For those who expect any work that ties Las Vegas to the Mafia in its title to reveal dastardly deeds and nefarious secrets, *Beyond the Mafia* will be a disappointment–a bit dry and over-academic. But for those impressed by scholarly research diligently done with historical accuracy, the study will be an invaluable reference on a particular population in a peculiar region. The book is liberally illustrated and indexed and offers a generous bibliography.

Beyond the Mafia is an accessible and informative work, the bottom line of which bashes the stereotypes of swarthy men in shiny suits wielding machine guns.

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