The Old Vegas
Anna Anderson

There are still people out there who remember the old Las Vegas. The one that was a little dirtier. The one that was built and still stands at the other end of the Las Vegas Strip. The one that is being resurrected to have the glamour of the big casinos and still retain the charm and interesting history of their founding. The “Old Vegas” now resides on a little street called Fremont. The closer feeling and old atmosphere bring people from the mega casinos on the “New Strip” to this different Las Vegas experience.

During the morning couples are out in abundance on Fremont Street. The city officially closed the street to motor vehicles on September 7, 1994, mostly older couples and families are out. The older couples return for their second, third and more visits. They are still amazed at the venue that covers a street that most of them remember very differently. Jim Verdone came from the Detroit, Mich. area to Las Vegas for years with his wife Ida. “I remember it when it was just a stop off for GIs. We’d come down in November, December, January, February and stay at a friend’s place. I’d gamble a little bit. Ida’d play the nickels (slots) and was the happiest person.” This year Jim is here with his daughter. Ida died recently, but Jim, at the request of Ida, still continues to come out to Fremont Street where they had so many happy memories. Verdone and his wife had gone up to the big casinos, but they both preferred the more intimate feeling of Fremont Street. “She was from an old Italian family. Ever heard of the third degree. I got the 33rd degree. They asked me everything. We stayed with her family for three years
after were married.” Jim and Ida had the offer to come out to Vegas when land was cheap.

“I had the opportunity when a friend said that we should homestead out here. You’d get 40 acres and had to build on it in two years. They did it just to get people out here.” Like Verdone, people from all over the world come to Fremont just to say they were here.

Rayola Kinney and her partner Irvin Hutter came from the Buffalo, N.Y., area to see Fremont Street again. They have been all over the world including Nice, France, the New Orleans French Quarter and Florida. Yet they return here for the Fremont Street Experience. Hutter is back with the idea of experience, “I didn’t take it all in last time.” While Kinney sees the sights as a change: “You don’t see this in Paris. It’s something different.”

Finding a way to get people out to Las Vegas is not a problem. The city has the same problems of any major city that grows fast; crime, garbage, and where to put people. Hippo, a homeless man – electrician by trade – offered his opinion: “They open the border and all the illegals become temporary legal, and it’s the illegals versus the Americans. The Salvation Army, down the street, were built by Mexicans instead of the people it houses building it.” The danger on the street that people in Hippo’s situation face is not something that most people would choose to face. “Just last night a guy got clubbed for food stamps. You can’t even use them without the code.” Panhandlers, like Hippo, sit, run, plead and beg for handouts during the day and night. They are just one of the many of the aspects of Las Vegas.

If a person looks for a little something to remember Fremont Street, the many
booths that line this little street will accommodate. They sell everything for the Las Vegas traveler and tourist. T-shirts, decks of card from the casinos and Elvis trinkets are the normal, almost everyday, souvenirs. Other, more interesting options might include a hand-rolled cigar, personalized rice jewelry or a glass cube with a 3-D picture etched inside. In a city that thrives on luck, a person could even pick up a four-leaf clover charm. Usually encased in key chains, this stand also places the charms into earrings, watches and fake press on nails.

If a person seeks an experience, air might meet that requirement. The O2 bar is the place to go for air, and there you will meet Siri Taylor, one of the workers at the oxygen bar. During her sales pitch she lists off an amazing array of choices: “The basic is 15 minutes and a massage for $12. But I recommend the 20-minute with the massage. That one includes the hot or cold pack. It’s really relaxing.” After listing all the options, including one that offers an energy water and massage oil, getting to choose the air might be more complicated than choosing how much. Each machine has a combination of three to four “flavors” to elicit response. Of the eight different stations Taylor explains some, “This one’s for focus. The wisteria helps with that one. This one’s for relaxation and it has peppermint. This one’s for energy. It’s got the fruit flavors. And this one with eucalyptus is for if you’re hung over or just have a stuffed up nose.” After choosing the effect desired, getting hooked up is easy. A breathing apparatus, similar to what hospitals use to deliver oxygen, gets inserted into the nostrils. Taylor turns the dial, and immediately the flavors are delivered. “Breath in through your nose, out through your
mouth. And the knobs on the front control each flavor intensity.” After about 10 minutes of oxygen bliss, Taylor comes around to each person and gives a head massage with a device that looks like a metal spider and follows with a back massage. After the time runs out and all the massages finished, the experience and effects of the oxygen bar stay for about two to three hours. The souvenir is the nosepiece that delivered the oxygen and a story to tell.

A day of fun and laughter is just about done. The darkness comes on and the Fremont Street party is about to begin. People come down to this quaint and ever-changing street, but the fact is that it is not the street that is ever changing. It is the ceiling of the street that changes. 180 high-intensity strobe lights, 64 variable color lighting fixtures that can produce 300 colors and eight robotic mirrors per block to reflect light covers Fremont Street. This canopy covering the length of the pedestrian only street is the reason the revitalization of the Old Strip is occurring. The smaller crowds during the day transform into the pulsing masses that signify a busy tourist destination. The only thing that stops the masses on Fremont is the light show. On the hour, starting at 8 o’clock, the simple covering of this street explodes with a show that could rival any of the mega resort’s light shows. Night is held at bay by the colorful canopy. Tourists snap pictures of the light show and each other. They pose with show people from the various casinos. Loose slots, 99-cent margaritas and $6.99 buffets hearken people to step inside the casino world. Every casino has a gimmick to get them in to play. Some offer free pulls with a chance to win a car or cash. The casinos know what draws people in. Most of the
Fremont Street casinos have been around in some form or another since the ‘20s and ‘30s. The street itself was the first paved street in Las Vegas in 1925, the first street to have a traffic light in Las Vegas and it is the site of the Fremont Hotel, the first high-rise in Las Vegas. Binion’s Horseshoe Casino was the first to install carpet. Today Binion’s is known as the place where World Series of Poker Tournament started.

All of this entertainment and showmanship for people who want to have some fun. None rival the luxury afforded to the people that visit Las Vegas. Fremont is only one part of a massive complex of lights, attractions and games, yet it has still survived. Every year hundreds of thousands of people make the trek to see Las Vegas. The city that never sleeps and the fun that never ends.