

THE MOB MUSEUM

National Museum of Organized Crime & Law Enforcement

# The Kefauver Hearings



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THAT EXPOSED ORGANIZED CRIME IN AMERICA**

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## The Kefauver Hearings



In 1950 and '51, the U.S. Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce launched a series of public hearings that changed the way Americans thought about the Mob. They came to be known as the Kefauver Hearings after the committee's chairman, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee.

The committee conducted 27 hearings in 14 cities. On November 15, 1950, the

committee met in Las Vegas — in the courtroom on the second floor of the historic building that houses The Mob Museum today. Well-known Las Vegas residents who testified included Moe Sedway, manager of the Flamingo Hotel; Wilbur Clark, front man for the Desert Inn; and Clifford Jones, Nevada's then lieutenant governor.

The public was entranced by the hearings. They followed their revelations in newspapers and magazines, in the popular newsreels of the time, on the radio and,

most of all, through the new technology of television. Some movie theaters installed televisions to bring the hearings to the public live.

Gangsters, politicians and others testified about their involvement with or knowledge of criminal organizations. Some of them — perhaps with good reason — “pleaded the Fifth,” citing their constitutional right not to incriminate themselves. Others exhibited very poor memories.

The first hearing was broadcast on television on

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**ON THE COVER:** Senator Estes Kefauver, D-Tennessee, standing, chairman of the Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce, opens a one-day hearing November 15, 1950, in the federal courthouse in Las Vegas. The first witness, William J. Moore, executive director of the Last Frontier Hotel, is at right foreground. The courthouse where the hearing was held is now The Mob Museum. (Associated Press)

## Who Was Estes Kefauver?

January 25, 1951, in New Orleans, and proved to be a huge draw. People had never seen anything like it in the young new medium. In Detroit in February, people reacted the same way: "Dishes went dirty and Detroit went wild," one observer noted. By the time the hearings arrived in New York City, the national networks were eager to bring them to an even bigger audience. One researcher reported that daytime viewership grew 20 times higher in New York during the hearings — "that twice as many viewers watched the hearings as watched the 1950 World Series."

The star witnesses who appeared before the committee included Frank Costello of New York, Tony Accardo of Chicago and Mickey Cohen of Los Angeles. One of the most entertaining witnesses was Virginia Hill, girlfriend of the late Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, whose feisty testimony revealed little except her ability to make the straight-laced committee members blush.

The Kefauver Hearings revealed extensive evidence of organized crime's infiltration of American business and politics and inspired an array of law enforcement initiatives to bring down the Mob.

U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee rose to fame in the 1950s through the combination of national hearings on organized crime and the advent of a new medium, television, which brought those hearings into the homes of more than 20 million Americans.

Kefauver was, particularly to his political opponents, a politically naïve, moralistic Boy Scout. A five-term congressman in 1948, he challenged the political machine led by a Memphis political boss who



accused Kefauver of working for "pinkos and communists" with the stealth of a raccoon. Mocking the charges, Kefauver adopted a coonskin cap as his political trademark.

By chairing the Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950-51, Kefauver elevated his name nationally. The hearings were the first time many Americans had

heard the word "Mafia," and they led to crackdowns on Mob activities.

Boosted by the hearings, Kefauver was a Democratic candidate for president in 1952 and won 12 of 15 state primaries. In those days, however, party bosses controlled the nomination, and they chose Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, who was soundly beaten by General Dwight D. Eisenhower in the general election.

In 1956, Kefauver ran for president again, and again did well in the primaries. But the Democrats handed the nomination to Stevenson once more. This time they added Kefauver as the vice presidential candidate. The voters re-elected Eisenhower in another landslide.

**“All due respect to the Senate, for which I have an awful lot of respect for, I’m not going to answer another question, because I’m not under arrest and I’m going to walk out.”**

— **Frank Costello**, New York Mob boss. Costello’s refusal to answer further questions earned him an 18-month jail sentence for contempt.

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“The men I was around that gave me things were not gangsters or racketeers. The only time I ever got anything from them was going out and having fun and maybe a few presents.”

— **Virginia Hill**, girlfriend of slain Mob boss Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. Indicted for tax evasion, Hill fled to Europe three years after her testimony.



**“I have not murdered anybody; all the shooting has been done at me. What do you mean, I am surrounded by violence, because people are shooting at me, that is the way it is. What do you want me to do about it?”**

— **Mickey Cohen**, Los Angeles Mob figure, in reply to whether he had surrounded himself with acts of violence.

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“They are in everything. However, of course they are always going to concentrate in those activities which are lucrative. That is the field that attracts the criminal element — easy money, in other words.”

**Virgil Peterson**, ex-FBI agent and leader of the anti-Mob organization called the Chicago Crime Commission.