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Updated: Tuesday, Oct. 3, 2000 at 15:29 CDT

Gala recalling notorious past of River Oaks, Sansom Park to celebrate the bad old days

By Dana Suhaus
Special to the Star-Telegram

RIVER OAKS -- As a teen-ager learning to drive in the 1940s, Johnie LeMaster was forbidden to travel on Jacksboro Highway.

It wasn't traffic that worried her parents, but the gangsters who frequented the businesses along the thoroughfare, and their penchant for picking inopportune times to fill some foe full of lead.

"It was strictly off limits for us," LeMaster said.

Illegal -- and deadly -- gambling activity abounded in the 1940s and 1950s. Local newspapers were filled with the latest arrests and releases, deaths and near-misses, and raids for racketeering, gambling, prostitution, illegal hound racing and bribery of public officials.

Almost 20 gangster-related shooting and bombing deaths occurred on the roadway during that time.

It might have been a frightening period 50 or 60 years ago, but it is a distant enough era to generate a bit of nostalgia for the bad old days.

From 7 p.m. to midnight Saturday, the River Oaks/Sansom Park Chamber of Commerce will sponsor a Gangster's and Gambler's Gala at St. Paul's Catholic Church, 5508 Black Oak Lane.

Tickets are \$20 per person in advance and \$25 at the door. Proceeds will be used to renovate the community centers in each city.

Participants are encouraged to dress the part, pulling out clothing from the era. Prizes will be awarded for the best costumes.

The event, which is the first of its kind for the area, will feature auctions, local entertainment and a casino with funny money.

Professional dealers will staff 26 to 28 tables for games including blackjack, craps, roulette and poker. Slot machines will also be available.

Each ticket buyer will get \$2,500 in funny money, which can be used to play games and bid on prizes, including a weekend trip to an island near Port Arthur and a suite of rooms at the Horse Shoe

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Casino at Bossier City, La.

Entertainment will include gangster and musical skits by Castleberry High School students; the Midnight Special Band, which will play period music; and the Francis Lea Dance Company.

Guests may also sample food and refreshments from several area restaurants.

Some surprise guests and visitors are planned, but the star of the show might be the original car used in the 1967 film Bonnie and Clyde. Other Bonnie and Clyde memorabilia will also be shown.

Shirley Bloomfield, a chamber member who helped organize the event, said she's not afraid that digging up the area's bad-guy past will blemish Sansom Park and River Oaks.

"Some people said, 'You're going to get bad publicity from this, you're going to get a bad reputation,'" Bloomfield said. "We laughed and said, 'Well, we don't have a reputation at all, so what's it going to hurt?'"

She added, "It's not like we're going to glorify gangsters. They were here, they were a part of our history, and we can't hide that."

And it's all for a good cause, she said.

LeMaster, who lives just outside Sansom Park, said she wants to attend and get a taste of what was forbidden almost 60 years ago.

"I think it'll be very interesting," she said. "It'll probably refresh a lot of the things I'd forgotten."

For information, call (817) 626-7073.

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