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**LINK TO AL CAPONE REVIVES DUSTY MOOSE JAW**

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Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan – This tiny Canadian prairie city has found an unlikely savior for its economic woes: Al Capone. Even in Canada, remote Moose Jaw, population 35,000, is off the radar. Located in rural Saskatchewan on Canada's wide-open prairies, this dusty city about 1,400 miles from Chicago was for years distinguished by little else than having some of the cheapest housing in Canada.

But now, thanks to one of America's most infamous gangsters, Moose Jaw has something it has never had before: a tourist attraction.

It is hard to imagine, but during the Roaring '20s, this community hemmed by farmland and grain elevators was called the "Red Light District of the Prairies." Bars, brothels and betting parlors lined its main drag.

Around 1925, during the U.S. prohibition on alcohol, gangsters led by Chicago mobster Al Capone moved into town and began using a labyrinth of tunnels beneath Moose Jaw's streets to store liquor and hide out from U.S. authorities.

Situated at a large railway juncture, Moose Jaw has the Soo Line, a railroad that still runs to Minneapolis and Chicago. The Soo Line proved perfect for smuggling liquor from Prohibition-free Canada into the U.S. And Moose Jaw's tunnels, built in the early 1900s to service underground steam boilers that then heated the city, made storing booze and loading it onto U.S.-bound rail cars easy. One tunnels even ran to a storage shed in the city's rail yard.

In the freewheeling Moose Jaw of the 1920s, Mr. Capone's gangsters felt at home. Over the years, Mr. Capone's thugs adapted the tunnels into a comfortable hideout complete with a distillery, gambling hall and brothel. Mr. Capone himself is believed to have hidden out here.

To ensure their bootleg operations worked smoothly, the mobsters bribed local police, politicians, railway workers and customs officers. Even Moose Jaw's chief of police at the time, Walter P. Johnson, was on the take, and tipped off the mob whenever the

Mounties – Canada’s red-suited federal police force – planned to raid the tunnels. Small wonder that by 1930 people were calling this city “Little Chicago.”

But when Prohibition ended in 1933, Mr. Capone’s gangs left Moose Jaw and the abandoned tunnels fell into disuse. Many were bricked over. In ensuing years, local politicians decried Moose Jaw’s shameful past; many residents denied the tunnels existed. Over time, the underground network became the stuff of local folklore. Until 1985, that is, when a gravel truck partially fell through a downtown street and into a tunnel.

The secret was out.

Danny Guillaume, an entrepreneur who grew up here, has since restored a portion of the tunnels and turned them into a popular tourist destination. About 8,000 square feet or 20% of the original maze of tunnels are now part of a historical gangster attraction. Mr. Guillaume’s closely held company, NuJazz Management Ltd., spent two million Canadian dollars (US\$1.27 million) recreating the mobsters’ hideaway. A combination of animatronic robots and local actors dressed as gangsters and flappers educate tourists about Moose Jaw’s tunnels and their shady past.

Since “The Tunnels of Moose Jaw” opened in June 2000, nearly 300,000 people have visited the attraction, including tourists from every U.S. state and 50 countries. Last year, groups from 700 Canadian and U.S. schools toured the tunnels, which are open year-round. The mayor’s office estimates that people visiting the tunnels inject C\$15 million annually into the small, local economy.

“It’s a big change, says Orrin Cruikshank, a wheat farmer and longtime resident. “Used to be the only out-of-towners here were people who come in for a curling [tournament]. Now we got tour buses parked everywhere.”

The tunnels’ success has turned Moose Jaw “Capone crazy” as people here say.

Downtown has “Capone’s Hideaway Motel” and “Capone’s Pool Parlor and Sharp Shooters Lounge.” Local merchants sell toy Tommy guns and fedora hats, as well as T-shirts and coffee mugs emblazoned with Mr. Capone’s face. There is even a gourmet barbecue sauce with Mr. Capone on the label called, “Boss Sauce – Chicago Style.” The barbecue sauce is stored in recycled beer bottles.

Saskatchewan author Mary Harelkin Bishop has started a series of books for elementary school children called “Moose Jaw Adventures.” The books feature a young girl who travels back in time in the tunnels and has scary adventures with gangsters.

“Al Capone’s part of the community,” says Richard Swallow, owner of Capone’s Pool Parlor. “He may have been a crook, but he’s been good for this town.”

Indeed Moose Jaw Mayor Al Schwinghamer says the tunnels have helped revitalize his town. “Ten years ago, Main Street looked like Beirut without the bullet holes,” he says. “Buildings were boarded up. Most stores were going under. Things have gotten vibrant in the last few years, thanks to the tourists.”

Of course, not everyone supports the tunnels. Many people oppose the attraction, saying it promotes the city’s “sinful” history, glamorizes criminality and may take liberty with the facts.

They stretch it for the tourists, but I suppose they have to make any money,” says Doris Wilcox, a retired secretary who’s lived in Moose Jaw her entire life.

Nobody disputes that bootleggers ran liquor into the U.S. from here during Prohibition, but some question whether Mr. Capone actually spent time in Moose Jaw. There are no documents proving Mr. Capone was here, but anecdotal evidence abounds in newspaper archives. Resident Nancy Gray has written about her late father, Bill Beamish, cutting Mr. Capone’s hair. Local physician Hugh Young, also deceased, wrote of treating Mr. Capone for tonsillitis.

The most compelling evidence that Mr. Capone may have hung his hat here comes from a New York rival gangster Dutch Schultz, who was reported to have sued Mr. Capone in a Saskatchewan court after 60 cases of Canadian whisky he received from Moose Jaw went bad. The suit was later dropped after Mr. Capone refunded Mr. Schultz’s money.

“We don’t actually say on the tour that Mr. Capone was in Moose Jaw, just that he had interests here,” says Jeff Grajczyk, the tunnels’ general manager.

Still the tunnels are popular. Roger Ball, a retired family doctor from Kelowna, British Columbia, stopped to view the tunnels on his way east to Quebec City. “I’m surprised,” he says. “Who would’ve thought such a rich history would exist in a place like Moose Jaw?”

City officials have big plans for future tourism. A mineral spa and adjacent 187-room hotel have opened. A casino is set to open next month. There are plans to build a convention center and a performing arts center, and restore much of downtown to its Roaring '20s heyday. Tourism Moose Jaw Inc. forecasts the city could be attracting 450,000 tourists annually by next year.

“Moose Jaw is the fastest-growing tourist destination on the prairies,” says Mayor Schwinghamer. “Marketing this city’s history is the smartest thing we’ve ever done.”