

For Cubans, a movie title may be a reference to Americans

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HAVANA --

(AP) -- It's not big or famous and it's certainly not close, but Yuma, an Arizona desert town near the borders with California and Mexico, is Cuba's most talked-about American locale.

"La Yuma" is Cuban street lingo for the United States, and "Yumas" can be Americans or foreigners from any non-Spanish speaking country.

Many trace the term to *3:10 to Yuma* the cowboy classic based on an Elmore Leonard short story that arrived here after it hit U.S. theaters in 1957. The slang should get a boost with the release of a remake of *3:10 to Yuma*, starring Russell Crowe and Christian Bale, opening Sept. 7 in the United States.

"A new movie could mean Yuma is used more by young people who know nothing of the original," said Fernando Carr, who writes a column on language for the official magazine *Bohemia*.

Washington's embargo prohibits most U.S.-Cuba trade. But American films are commonly shown on state TV and in crumbling 1950s theaters where tickets cost less than a U.S. nickel. A thriving black market for pirated DVDs and videos also likely will ensure some Cubans see the 2007 version of *3:10 to Yuma*.

Cubans rarely use *gringo*, slang for Americans heard in Mexico and throughout Latin America. While some here refer to Americans as *yanquis* in a derogatory way, "Yuma" generally is not meant to be offensive.

Larry Nelson, mayor of Yuma, Ariz., said it was "hard to imagine Yuma as the entire country."

"At least we're known internationally now," laughed Nelson, whose city of about 90,000 is some 2,400 miles northwest of Havana.

Carr said Cuban teenagers began using "Yuma" for the United States shortly after Fidel Castro took power in 1959. The term became widespread in 1980 when Cubans seeking asylum crashed a minibus through the Peruvian Embassy gates in Havana, and thousands more joined them.

"People said, 'I want to go to La Yuma,' and it became common," Carr said, adding that the term eventually expanded to include all non-Spanish speakers.

Some believe the slang comes from Cubans' heavily accented pronunciation of "United States," roughly "YOOH-nyh-head-STEHZ." Others insist its origin lies not with one, but dozens of popular U.S. westerns filmed in Yuma.

"Hey Yuma!" Rafael, an artist who sells sketches of tourists in Old Havana bellowed, grinning at an American passerby. Like many Cubans, he was happy to chat but wary of letting a "Yuma" reporter publish his full name.

"Where'd it come from? You'd have to call a conference of all Cubans and ask each one what they think," he joked. ``How long would that take?"

Finding Cubans who can find Yuma on a map can also take a while.

"It's an island out there somewhere. Near the United States," said a clerk selling fried ham sandwiches by Havana's coast.

Yomal, a bookseller in the leafy Plaza de Armas, said he didn't know Yuma was a city, either.

"Is it in the United States?" he asked. ``Spain?"

Bridget, a Minnesota native who flew to Havana through Mexico without U.S. government permission, said she visited Yuma as a child.

"It doesn't have much to do with Cuba," said the 20-year-old, asking that her last name not be published to avoid American fines. ``Maybe Miami or somewhere close would be better."