



# ASHTRAYS

by Mark Englebretson and Laurence Miller

At first consideration there might seem to be little in common between casino chips and casino ashtrays, other than that they are found in close proximity to each other in casinos. The casino chip, after all, is the coin of the realm, the monetary medium by which the casino conducts its business. If the chip is king, then the ashtray must be a lowly peasant or serf.

Yet, casino ashtrays are as seriously and devotedly collected as casino chips, and the prices for a number of them are now in four figures. Upon closer examination it becomes apparent that both chips and ashtrays are symbols of gaming. They represent through their design and history a metaphor for the casino itself. In some respects the ashtray is a better representation because it is substantially larger and more information can be displayed on it. In many cases ashtrays depict a picture of the building, the name of the owner, address and phone number and mentions the gaming offered.

Prior to World War II, most of the ashtrays were blank. At the end of the war clever entrepreneurs realized that the ashtray was an excellent economical means by which a business could advertise itself. They cost about 15-20 cents a piece and the more you bought the cheaper they got. The Golden Nugget in Vegas ordered one

style of tray 250,000 at a time and it would seem that the MGM must have ordered millions at a time. Likewise, it was possible to order as few as a quarter gross. Ashtrays ordered in these minute quantities are now the scarcest and costliest pieces. Covering the country from end to end with their display portfolios in hand sales people sold advertising ashtrays to countless thousands of businesses, one of which was casinos in nearly every town in Nevada. The ashtray manufacturers employed gifted commercial artists to design the ashtray's graphic art. They produced ashtrays that were beautiful in shape and which contained stunning and aesthetically beautiful artwork and images.

The "Golden Age" of casino ashtrays was from the end of World War II through the early-mid 1960's. After that the graphic art, as it did in many mediums (for example movie posters) became much less interesting and pedestrian. Eventually, due to the negative publicity surrounding smoking and rising manufacturing costs, most casinos abandoned the advertising ashtray and went back to using blanks. However, during this "Golden Age" many a casino ashtray was "borrowed" by patrons and tourists. Eventually over the years, tiring of them, these "thieves" (to whom ashtray collectors are eternally grateful) got rid of them. The ashtrays eventu-

ally found their way to antique stores, estate sales, and to the latest and best venue, Ebay.

For most of its history, the collecting of casino ashtrays was of interest to a small but devoted number of collectors who toiled in relative obscurity. Then, in the 1990's, two events occurred that thrust casino ashtrays in to the mainstream of casino collectibles. The first event was the publication in 1994 of Art Anderson's self published book, "Casinos and Their Ashtrays." Drawing mainly from the collection of Paul J. Gregory, the book showed pictures and gave descriptions of various ashtrays, from the common to the rare. Anderson also presented pictures of the casinos, interesting and informative histories, and estimated values. Today, only slightly over a decade later, the book, while still interesting and fun to read, is woefully out of date. Many ashtrays have been discovered and continue to be discovered and Anderson's estimated values of the ashtrays are now an amusing artifact. Most of the very rare ashtrays in Anderson's were priced at a maximum of \$35. Today those ashtrays are worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Anderson's labor of love made collectors aware of casino ashtrays and put them on the collectibles map.

The second important milestone was the founding of Ebay. As Ebay caught on more and more casino ashtrays were listed, simultaneously stimulating interest in the hobby and bringing to light many rare ashtrays that had never been seen before. Today Ebay is the main venue for buying and selling casino ashtrays, and because of Ebay the likelihood of finding them at other outlets is much more unlikely. Ashtrays are now found at all casino collectible shows.

Today, collectors may be generalists, collecting ashtrays from everywhere in Nevada. While others specialize in just the rare ones and/or those from small and obscure towns. Others elect to collect from the “Big Three”, Las Vegas, Reno, and Lake Tahoe. There are many great ashtrays to be collected however, the collectors chooses to do so.

Compared to the ashtrays, casino chips have been collected for a longer time and by more people. Chip collecting is better organized and developed, with a formal society and membership, a club magazine, and several collector books. These developments are largely lacking among casino ashtray collectors.

The most significant new development is the founding of a web site by Mark and Lynn Englebretson. It is the Nevada Casino Ashtray Project and can be accessed at: [www.nevadacasinoashtrays.org](http://www.nevadacasinoashtrays.org) This is an ongoing work in progress, whose goal is to eventually and comprehensively present the various aspects of the casino ashtray. The site features pictures of ashtrays and the casinos as well as the casino history. The site is open for any and all contributions from collectors. In fact, the site owes it’s success to all who have contributed. A quick look at the

“About Us” section will reveal many names you will recognize. Contributions, as well as any collecting questions, may be sent to: [mark@communicomm.com](mailto:mark@communicomm.com) The site can be seen as an extension of Anderson’s book. However, it is much larger and conceived on a grander and more elaborate and comprehensive scale.

Although the value of the rarer casino ashtrays has risen very dramatically in a short time, they do not approach the selling prices of the rarer casino chips. However, the enthusiasm of the ashtray collector is just as great and the joys of collecting just as contagious. There is in fact, an increasing crossover of chip collectors into casino ashtrays. The casino chip and casino ashtray can now be thought of as siblings, both an inextricable part of the great hobby of casino collectibles.

## Las Vegas





Las Vegas (continued)





# Small Towns





# Tahoe





# Reno

