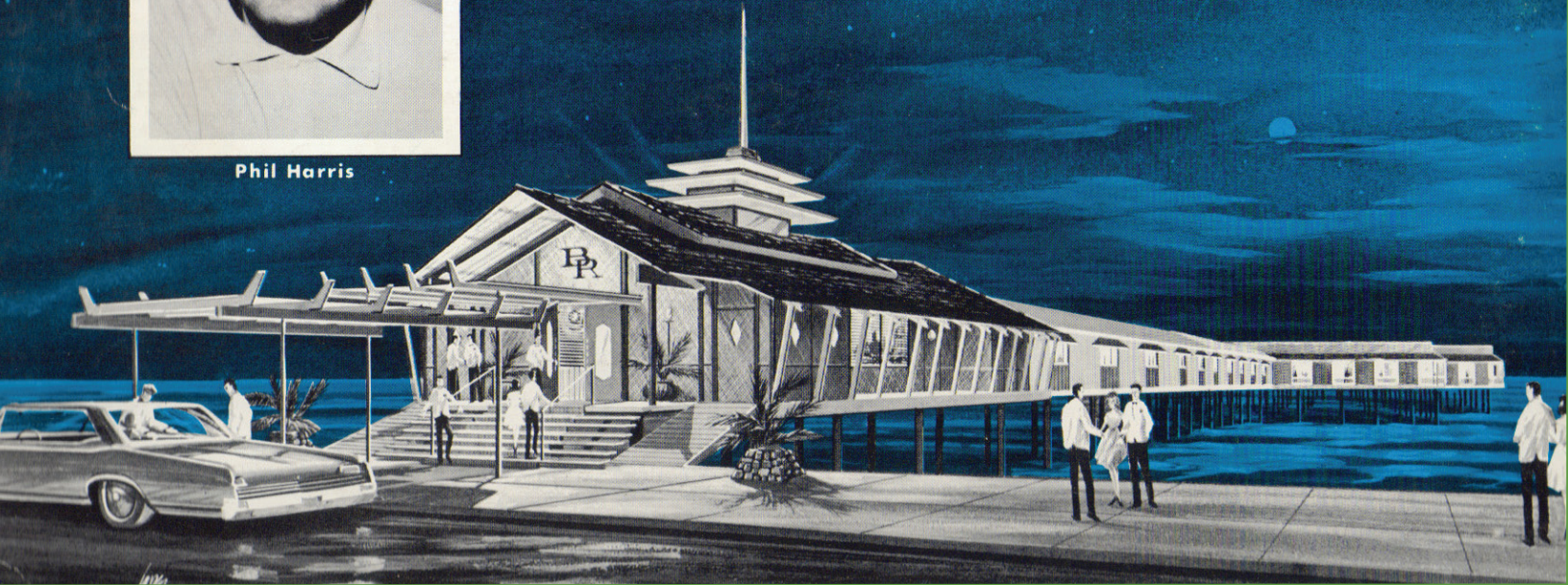




Phil Harris



The Balinese Room

The Destruction of a Galveston, Texas Landmark

by Ed Hertel

On September 13, 2008, the residents of Galveston, Texas, woke up and emerged from their wind battered homes to find an island of devastation. Hurricane Ike had made landfall and brought all the fury of a Category 4 storm unto the island. Across the country, stories and images of the weather beaten community flashed across televisions. News reporters stood by piles of rubble, water and complete chaos trying to convey the utter devastation and loss of the city. As the disaster toll rose, a better picture emerged as to what was lost; including hundreds of homes, businesses, hotels and one very important historical landmark.



Almost as an after thought, the news reported on the destruction of the Balinese Room. It was described as a nightclub, a Prohibition gambling joint, and a local “curiosity”. None of these reports fully explained the significance of this structure in the history of Galveston or its influence on gambling.

The story of the Balinese Room is so intertwined with Galveston gambling history it is impossible to mention one subject without talking about them both.

The history of organized illegal gambling in Galveston has its genesis in a familiar event – Prohibition. No other event has had such an influence on

rim with cases would anchor outside of federal limits and be unloaded by smaller, faster boats which raced the Coast Guard in a game of cat and mouse. Once these boats made it to the beach, they were unloaded onto trucks and distributed throughout the dry country.

Two very enterprising Sicilian immigrant brothers named Salvatore “Sam” and Rosario “Rose” Maceo ran what was known as the Beach Gang. Their jobs were to coordinate these beach landings and make sure the product

reached its intended destination. Through years of tough control, these two brothers gained the respect and fear of the Galveston underworld.

In 1924, while the bootlegging business was at its height,

the Maceo brothers met up with O. E. “Dutch” Voight, a local wiseguy. They decided to expand their operations into gambling and opened several

small clubs on the island. Their interests in hosting grew until 1926, when the group bought the Hollywood Dinner Club and transformed it into the swankiest club in town.

It was at the Hollywood Dinner Club where the Maceos found their strengths and learned the gambling trade. Vastly different from one another, their trust made the partnership strong and their gambling empire prospered from it.



strengthening organized crime than the “Noble Experiment” of 1919. With its miles of open beaches, Galveston was a perfect distribution point for booze from the Caribbean and Mexico. Skiffs loaded to the



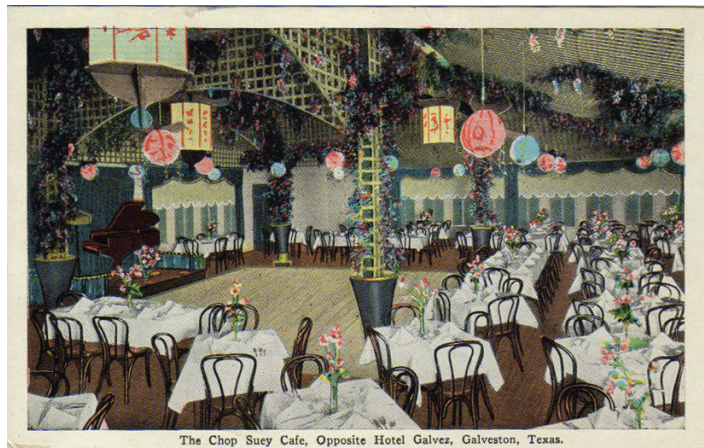
The Balinese Room

Rosario “Papa Rose” Maceo was the dominating force and the financial brains behind the partnership. He was known to be shrewd in negotiations and unforgiving. Notorious for a short temper, he was once acquitted for killing a man during an argument. He was the kind of a man who people did not want to disappoint and would never double cross. This was never better illustrated than in the case where his first wife was mysteriously murdered – along with the man she was having an affair with. Neither murders were ever solved.

Salvatore “Sam” Maceo was just the opposite. He was the front man of the team with a smile and a well mannered demeanor. He was comfortable hobnobbing with the celebrities and took great pride in giving back to the community with charitable benefits.

It was Sam who was the face of the Maceos, and Rose the brawn. Together these two worked their strengths and were able to finesse the locals while at the same time frighten the competition. This image of the friendly godfathers helped them do business without much opposition.

It has never been clear whether the local police merely turned a blind eye to the gambling in Galveston (after all, they brought jobs and prosperity), or whether they were on the take. Either way, the Maceos were allowed to run their gambling empire with little to fear from the law. Their only obstacle to complete impunity was the Texas Rangers, who made it a point to come down to the island on occasion and show their strength by publicly



The Chop Suey Cafe, Opposite Hotel Galvez, Galveston, Texas.

crushing slot machines or grinding up dice tables. Though these raids were little more than occasional nuisances, the negative publicity was an embarrassment and prompted the Maceos to come up with what they believed to be a raid proof club.



A very rare photo of the Maceo's first gambling establishment The Grotto. No chips, matchbooks, ashtrays or any other memorabilia is known.

The Balinese Room was not designed from the ground up, but evolved over time and through many stages. The first was when the Maceos bought a dinner club called the Chop Suey which had the unusual location of standing out on a pier at the end of 21st Street and jutting out over the Gulf of Mexico.

They immediately started renovating it by setting up a dinner club in the front of the building and establishing a small gambling club in the back. With all this in place, they opened in 1929 as the Grotto (sometimes referred to as Maceo's Grotto).

The Grotto was immediately successful, but the brothers were not content. They wanted to make a statement and thus started the second phase of the club's evolution.

In 1932, the club was completely transformed into an Oriental splendor and renamed the Sui Jen Club (pronounced Swee Rin).



It was with the Sui Jen that the Maceos hit their stride. The club brought in the best entertainment in and the biggest gambling stakes. For almost a decade the club was able to attract the big oil money from neighboring Houston and parts all over the world. It was famous and seemingly untouchable until December 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the war was brought home. Knowing that patriotic Texans would not be seen in a place called the Sui Jen, they closed the doors, brainstormed, and went to work remodeling.

When the Balinese Room (named after the Dutch controlled and American ally Bali Island) opened its doors in 1942, the citizens of Galveston knew this club would be the spotlight on their city. Weekly entertainment was nothing short of the biggest Hollywood had to offer – Frank Sinatra, George Burns, Sophie Tucker, Bob Hope, the

list goes on. The gambling in the back was also extended and more and more money poured into the club and the Maceo's pockets.

During this time of prosperity (both during and after the war), the Maceos expanded their empire. They not only controlled most of the illegal gambling action on the island,

but they also owned the local coin operated business. Every hotel, gas station, laundry mat and grocery store contained Maceo machines. Their control was so strong and complete that nobody dared



compete. Small clubs did exist in Galveston, but only with the permission (and profit cut) of the Maceo brothers.

With business interests all over the island, the Maceos bought a building and established their corporate headquarters there, calling it the Turf Athletic Club. Although it did indeed contain a gym, along with the offices the upper floors consisted of two gambling clubs (the Western Room and the Studio Lounge) and a large off-track betting center.

Even with their interests stretched far and wide, their focus was on the Balinese Room and all the prestige and money it brought it. Although the residents of Galveston enjoyed the prosperity which the Maceos brought, not everyone was happy. The Texas Rangers, with their long standing resentment of Galveston's brazen flaunting of the

The Balinese Room

law, continued their harassment of the clubs.

They swept in from time to time to make a rush on the clubs, but never could they find their way to catch the Balinese Room in the act. With the bulk of the building

were handed down – including the Maceos. Even though these indictments would eventually be dismissed (by judge friends of the Maceos), the writing was on the walls.

Locally, a Texas Attorney General named Price Daniels was gearing up for a 1952 governorship run and made organized crime a key point. This coincided with Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver's run for the White House using the same platform on crime reform. This added heat, along with the nation starting to embrace morality over sin, drove gambling underground in Galveston. It was still rampant, but the operators were seen more and more as criminals instead of celebrities. To make things worse, Las Vegas was drawing in the best talent, both entertainment and employees. The big money patrons flocked to the desert instead of the beach for their gambling needs.

standing over the Gulf and the only entrance being the front door, the club served its purpose well as a raid proof building. In the time it took the Rangers to come through the front door, weave through the patrons, run down the long hallway and break through the back door, all the slot machines and tables were hidden in secret compartments. Even though the gambling was renown in the club, they could never find proof.

As the 1940s faded away, sentiment of the good old days of gambling in Galveston were starting to wane. The openness of the island's vices were becoming a problem for the state officials, resulting in a firmer hand being used. In 1951, for the first time, indictments against gambling

For the Balinese Room, the beginning of the end came when front man Sam Maceo passed away in 1951, followed by the brains Rose Maceo in 1954. The torch was passed to the next generation when the young cousins to the Maceos,



Anthony, Frank and Victor Fertitta, bought the interest in the clubs and took over. They would continue operating for a few years, but finally closed the doors to the Balinese Room in May 1957 and moved to Las Vegas.

The structure of the Balinese Room stood empty and vulnerable to the elements. In 1961, a devastating category 5 hurricane named Carla swept through Galveston and almost brought the building down. She survived, barely. In 1983 a smaller Hurricane Alicia punched Galveston but failed to bring her down.



little the residents could do on that September 2008 evening as the sea swelled and started pounding the Balinese Room. Perhaps it was the confidence gained after surviving so many other attacks from the sea, but it was hard to imagine that with the morning light there would be no more of the grand



Balinese Room.

Today, all that remains are cracked pylons, memories and the countless memorabilia remaining after decades of being one of America's premier gambling clubs.

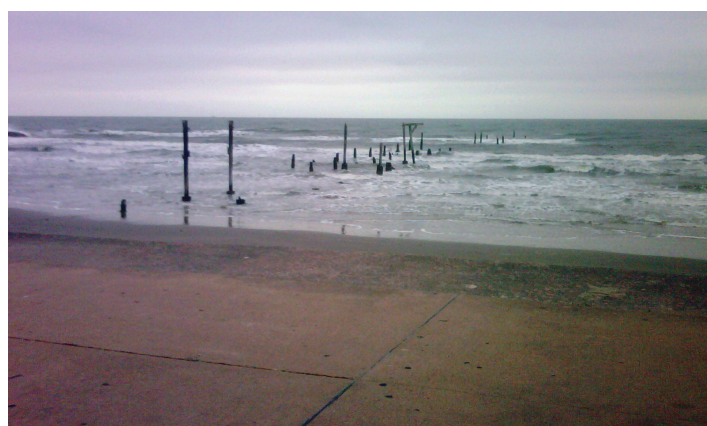


Photo by Greg Galloway



The start of the new millennium had great hopes for the Galveston landmark when a local group bought the building and set about repairing and renovating it. In 2001, the Balinese Room was reopened. Gone were the casino and Frank Sinatra, replaced by salons and retail shops. Perhaps not the days of old, but it was nice to see the club restored to her glory.

Her new life as a tourist stop was short lived however. There was