

Bye Bye Barbary Coast

by Tyrus Mulkey

Back in the 1970's, the Flamingo Hilton was enjoying the status of being located at the most famous intersection in the world, Flamingo and the Strip. Their neighbors were Caesars Palace, MGM Grand, and the Dunes. Technically, though, the Flamingo was about a half block away from the intersection. There was a tiny piece of land between the Flamingo casino and hotel and Flamingo Road. But there was no need to spend money buying it. After all, it was too small of a property for anyone to build a casino on it. Or was it?

Michael Gaughan was raised in the casino business. His dad, Jackie, was a Las Vegas gaming pioneer that had held interest in at least eight Las Vegas casinos. Michael himself already had experience in several casinos, but had yet to land the flagship property that would put him on the map.

Michael bought that tiny piece of property next to the Flamingo Hilton, and on March 2, 1979, the Barbary Coast opened. Principal owners were Michael Gaughan, Kenny Epstein, Tito Tiberti, and Frank Toti. It was the unique design of the building that made it possible. The first floor was the 30,000 square foot casino and restaurants. Floors two through four were the parking garage and floors five and above were the hotel rooms.



For the next 26 years, the Barbary became a pain in the side of the Flamingo and an amazing piece of Las Vegas history that proves how powerful a great location really is.

Immediately, the Barbary became well known for Michael's steakhouse. Before Wolfgang, Emeril, and a host of other celebrity chefs turned Las Vegas into a gourmet destination, Michael's quietly impressed those that were willing to shell out big bucks for a great steak. It was a class restaurant that was old Vegas and built to impress. Michael's was one of the best gourmet rooms in the city.

On November 21, 1980, the Barbary Coast casino was shut down and turned into a triage area for victims of the MGM fire. The location was as close as any to the MGM, but it was far enough away that it was safe.

In two paragraphs, I've been able to describe everything good about the Barbary! Now, I could write a book on everything bad about the Barbary, but there isn't enough space so I'll just pass on some random bits of information.



The security tower for the employee parking area off of Flamingo. I always got a kick out of the way it resembled a prison guard tower.

When I moved to Las Vegas in 1987 to break into the casino business, I immediately started hearing about the “Barbaric Coast”. It was known as Barbaric because of the way management treated the dealers. Nobody wanted to work there! I certainly didn’t. In a nutshell, management expected every player that walked through the door to lose every penny in their pocket. If they didn’t, then it was the dealer’s fault!

Gaughan, Tiberti, and Epstein were more or less silent owners when it came to the day to day operations of the casino. Frank Toti handled all of the details. Toti was brutal. He probably remains one of the most hated casino bosses in Las Vegas history.

In 1989, I had been working at Palace Station for about a year and a half when my father passed away. I needed to go home to Texas to help my mom sell the house and clear up Dad’s business interest. Although Palace Station offered me a leave of absence, I knew that it would be time to make a career move once I returned to town. The Mirage was under construction and would open in November and I had already applied. So I quit Palace Station and went to Texas. Two months later, I returned to Las Vegas in August and needed a job fast! I knew that it would be a temporary job and I didn’t want to burn any bridges. At that time, Las Vegas was still a small town. Where could I go and get a job in a day and then not mind quitting in two months? BINGO! The Barbary Coast.

I walked in, filled out an application, and drove home. I lived two miles away. By the time I got home, there was a message on my machine from Frank Toti, asking me to come in for an interview. I did, and was hired that day. I went to work with an attempted open mind to see what this place was really all about.



As seen from Bally's. The close proximity to the MGM is why it was used as a triage center the day of the fire.

I was put on a dice crew with a schedule of work five days and two off, then work six days and have one off. There was one crew that was scheduled five days at nine hours a day. By the way, there was no overtime pay! There was also no holiday pay, sick pay, or vacation pay. I was informed by several dealers that I would probably be fired after 89 days. Most of the dealers were. Insurance benefits kicked in at 90 days! No problem for me, I wouldn’t be there that long anyway.

Okay, enough of the history and on to the fun stuff! As I said, everyone that played was supposed to lose! The casino bosses had many tricks up their sleeves to insure this. You will probably laugh at some of these stories, but they are true. Even scarier, the bosses believed in them!

I never dealt 21 there, but I knew several 21 dealers that were kicked in the legs by bosses when a player was winning. The boss would kick them in the legs and then whisper obscenities in their ear about why they had better start winning.

The dice pit had an entire different set of rituals. Yea, we still had the obscenities whispered in our ear and we were kicked on occasion. But, in dice, the dealer responsible for the table is the stickman. So the bosses couldn’t really go out of the pit and kick him within view of a player.

Instead, the stickman would, at the direction of the bosses, either slow the game way down or speed it up very fast. Many times I would give the shooter the dice before the dealer had paid everyone on his end of the table. Often times, the dealer was two rolls behind! In other words, the roll is 5 and before the dealer has paid everyone for the five, the shooter has already rolled an 8. Now the dice are already in the shooter’s hands before the dealer has finished paying everyone for the 5!! Forget about the 8! Total chaos!

One day, a new dealer had given the dice to the shooter and someone threw in a prop bet. The dealer, who was very tall, bent over to set up the bet and the shooter threw the dice over his head to the other end of the table. The dealer stood back up and looked at the shooter. “Sir, please throw the dice.” The shooter opened up his hand to reveal it empty and the stickman nearly fainted before being told that the call was nine! There was a definite panic, which was common at the Barbary because of the constant chaos.

Then, we would stop the dice. They would just sit there in the middle of the table and everyone would look around. The shooter would be banging his hand on the layout begging for the dice and we would just stand there. All

the players would start to yell and we would just stand there, staring straight ahead, like statues. Finally, we'd give the player the dice. He would shoot them and then we would just stand there again for about a minute.

The most common type of "interference" during a good craps roll was kicking around the dice. In the old days, crossroaders would bring in their own dice and would switch them with the casino's dice so they could cheat, then they would switch them back before they left. Several guards were invented to detect this move. For instance, the tops and bottoms of a die should always add up to seven. The ace is on the opposite side of the six, the five across from the deuce, and the three and four are across from each other. If something doesn't add up, then the dice are either tops or bottoms, meaning one or more numbers is on there twice, preventing a seven from being rolled. The quickest and easiest way to detect this is to "roll the dice". The stickman would roll the dice over so that the boss can view all sides and verify that the dice are correct. This very simple means of detecting cheaters became a bastardized tool by the Barbary to interfere with a roll. You see, sometimes when the dice are rolled by the stickman then the next number thrown by the shooter is seven. So, often times, we would roll the dice just to try and get the seven to show up! This led to kicking the dice around. Rolling the dice just wasn't working enough. So the stickman would use his stick and kick the dice from side to side, causing them to tumble each time and interfere with the roll. If that didn't work, then we would first kick one die and then the other on the following roll! I was a base dealer one day when a player was shooting up a good hand. After the boss directed the stickman to roll, then kick, then alternately kick the dice, he instructed the stickman to turn one die over twice. Obviously, this was the move that would bring up the seven and the boss was confident. What he hadn't realized is that the player had shot a hard ten on the previous roll. So the dice were 5-5. By turning one die twice, they were now 5-2. It is VERY unlucky for the stickman to give the dice to a shooter on the number 7. It is even considered offensive. The stickman deadpanned a look at the boss and asked, "Is this how you want me to send them?" The boss looked down, became startled, and yelled "Just kick them around!" while motioning his hand in a circular motion. You see, while the bosses hated the players and expected them to lose; they couldn't let the players know this. It was all part of the game.

Pencils and pens were cheap. I can't tell you how many of them were snapped in the pit during a good roll. Another trick was the salt shaker!! The bosses kept a salt shaker in the podium of the dice pit. Sometimes, during a

hot roll, the boss would very inconspicuously get the salt shaker out and walk right up next to the shooter. He would then spill salt around the feet of the shooter in order to bring him bad luck. In a dire emergency, they would call 911. I don't know how old the dice were, but there was a stick of dice kept in the podium with the serial number of 911 engraved on them. If a table was losing money, the boss would "call 911" and bring in the 911 dice. No, they weren't loaded or shaved – just lucky for the house!!

The Barbary is the only place that I worked that used skills. When a game was dead, the boxman would come around to the players' side of the table. We would give him a stack of dollars and he would make a line bet and shoot the dice in order to get a game started. When a player walked up, he would give the money back to the dealer and return to his chair behind the table. One day, the female boss was shilling the game and a player put a bet down on the Pass Line right as she was throwing the dice. A bet had been made and was in action. The pit boss told her to just finish out the hand. She kept throwing number after number. Eventually, the table filled up with players. She kept throwing the dice off the table on purpose hoping to bring out the seven. No luck. She asked to switch dice. No luck. She would set the dice on seven before she threw them. No luck. She was throwing all numbers without making the point, where she could have just walked away. Needless to say, she was scared for her job. After a 45 minute hand, she threw the seven. We didn't use skills for a while after that! And, she kept her job.

The Mirage was preparing to open and I didn't get hired there. I did, however, get hired at the Golden Nugget. I gave a two week notice at the Barbary fully expecting to be told to leave at the end of my shift that night. They were hurting so bad for dealers that they kept me on for the full two weeks. Towards the end of my final shift, the pit boss was walking through the pit asking dealers if they could work the next day in my spot. Two weeks and they couldn't get my shift covered.

I'll never forget the night I walked out of the Barbary for the final time. Wow! I thanked God that the nightmare was over and I was happy that I did it. If someone was telling me these stories, I wouldn't believe them. Luckily, I saw them all myself and know that they're true.

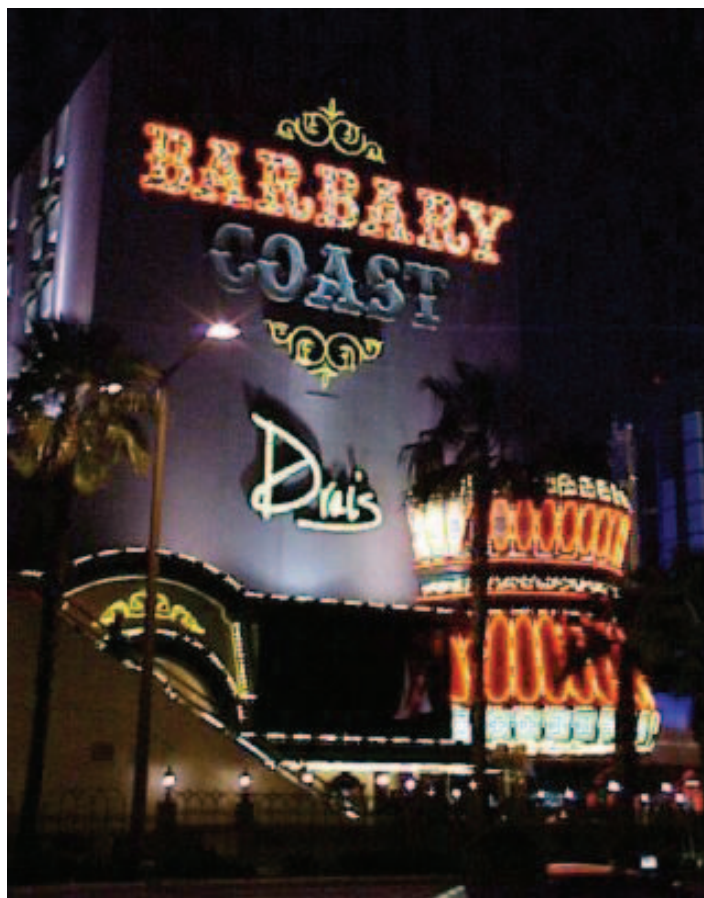
I've remained friends with one of the guys on my crew. He became a boxman, then a floorman, and then a pit boss there. He's still there, in fact. On the night that the Dunes was imploded, he and I went to the fourth floor of the Barbary parking garage and stood in the window closest to the Dunes and watched it light up in fire and come tum-

bling down. We were so close we could feel the heat from the explosions!

About a year after I had quit, I had a couple of friends in town who didn't believe the stories that I was telling them and they wanted to play there. I went with them. We were playing dice and started to win some money. One of the casino bosses looked over at the table and recognized me. He stopped the game and told me that I couldn't play. I asked why and he said that former employees weren't allowed to play. I asked for how long – a year, two years? He said that as long as anyone in the pit recognized me, I wouldn't be allowed to play. Luckily, I was up about \$200 at the time so I pulled all of my money off of the table and stood there and watched my friends play. We didn't stay long.

The Barbary always stood out because of its dark red color of paint. A few years later, I noticed that the building had been painted a cream color that matched – exactly – the color of the Flamingo. I laughed when I saw it. The Barbary was able to stay alive and prosper because of the incredible amount of foot traffic it received from tourists walking between the Flamingo, Bally's (formerly MGM), Caesar's, and the Bellagio (formerly the Dunes). If it was painted to match the Flamingo, tourists may think they were at the Flamingo! About two weeks later, it was painted back to the dark red. I thought the Flamingo must have threatened legal action. An insider told me that the decision to paint wasn't Michael Gaughan's and he was sitting at the red light one day and looked up and noticed that his casino blended in with the Flamingo. He ordered the building to be returned to its original color.

Another Michael Gaughan story is the night he walked into the casino at 7 PM to have dinner at Michael's. His craps pit stood empty. Michael walked over to the pit boss and asked why the pit had no players during swing shift. The boss replied, "Because you're running the worst game on the corner." All of the other casinos had 3-4-5 times odds and the BC still had double odds. The casino manager, Anthony Toti (Frank's son – Frank had moved to the Orleans at this point), refused to put in the new odds because it would lower the casino's advantage. Anthony couldn't understand that holding five percent of \$100,000 is better than holding ten percent of \$10,000! The pit boss explained how the new odds worked and why people would no longer play double odds. About halfway through dinner, Michael came back to the pit, which was still empty, and asked for further explanation on the odds. When the pit manager came into work the next day, the odds had been changed to 3-4-5 times odds and Anthony was furious that someone had gone over his head to Michael!! He never found out who it was.

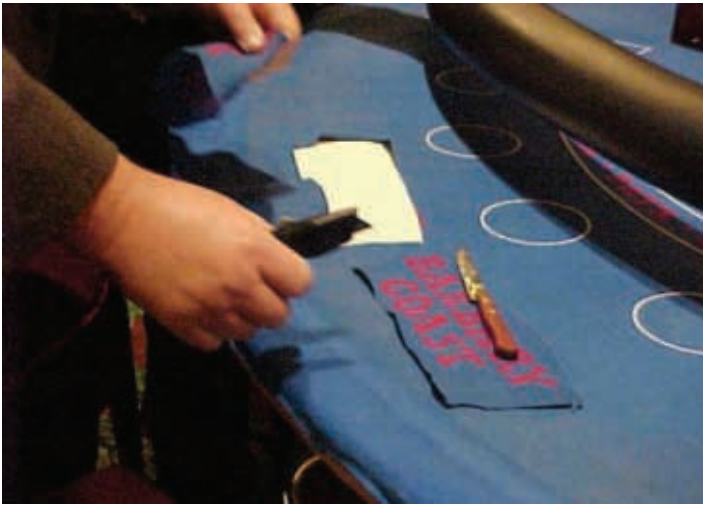


The word "Coast" was blacked out after Harrah's took over the property from Coast Casinos.

It's no wonder that profits shot up \$7 million during the year that Boyd Gaming ran the property! Barbary Coast management did everything they could to run that place into the ground, but the location was so strong that they lived off of first time visitors. Very few people returned. Without a doubt, many people were turned off of gambling and Las Vegas because of an experience they had at the Barbary Coast!

Finally, on the night of February 26, 2007, the Barbary Coast closed. Boyd Gaming had traded the property to Harrah's for some land near the Stardust. Harrah's will probably demolish the building within two years, but the location and the cash flow is too strong to let it sit empty. So, in the meantime, they have opened Bill's Gambler's Hall & Saloon.

I was there when the casino was closed. There were also three teams of auditors there. Boyd Gaming, Harrah's, and the Gaming Control Board each had a team of representatives there. I was doing a bit of drinking and gambling and reminiscing with employees. As tables would close, the shift manager would take a box-cutter and cut the name Barbary Coast out of each table layout.



Casino Shift Manager Steve Torrell cuts the name out of every layout as soon as the tables were closed on the final night.



The mini-bacc table waiting to have the chips removed.

He was stacking them on the podium in the dice pit – right there where the salt shaker and the 911 dice used to be. I tried to get one but I was told that they all had to be accounted for. Apparently, there is some serious animosity between Bill Boyd, who purchased Coast Casinos through Boyd Gaming, and Michael Gaughan. The word “Coast” had been blacked out of the Barbary Coast sign weeks earlier and all references to Coast had to be destroyed or confiscated that night.

I was able to purchase some chips, including full roulette sets. I also got several other pieces of memorabilia. At one point I went to the bar and put a \$10 bill into the video poker machine and asked for a beer. The bartender said “Okay, but that’s it, I’m closing the register!” So I asked for two beers since he was closing and I would be unable to get a second one. His barback brought me the two beers and asked for \$5. I said, “I’m gambling!” She said that I could only have one beer per buy-in and she proceeded to pour out the second beer. Even after I explained that the reason I asked for two is because the bar was closed and I will be unable to get another one, the barback replied with, “We don’t just give away beer!” My first thought was that Harrah’s has a lot of work ahead to get rid of the Barbary mentality.

As the table games closed and the slot machines were taped off, I took several pictures. At one point, a security guard walked up to me and asked me if I was a guest of the hotel. I replied no and he told me that I would have to leave. He even escorted me out the door. I thought that it was the perfect ending for my relationship with the Barbary.



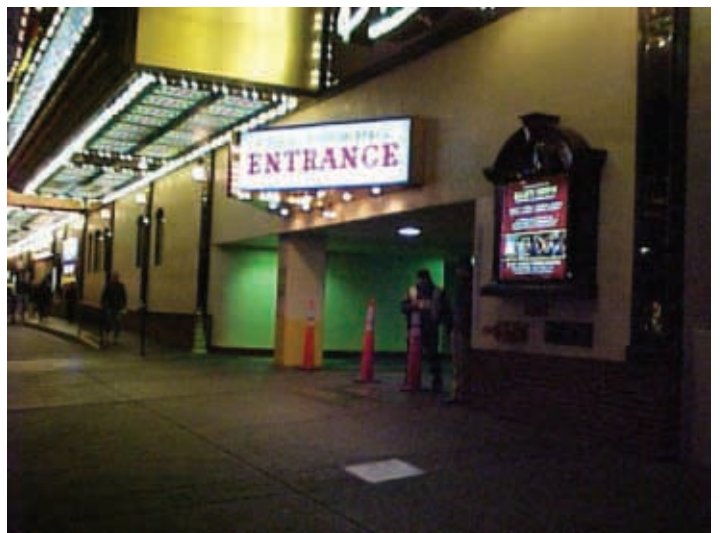


The craps table waiting to have the chips removed.

Although I was both happy and sad to see it close, I feel it didn't receive any respect at closing. Regardless of the absurdities that took place in the casino, the Barbary maintained a significant presence at the four corners for over 26 years. Because of its unique architecture, it is in millions of photographs and memories. It is also a lesson on how powerful a good location can be – and how powerful gaming is. Any other business run by that management team would have closed within months.



All tables are closed.



The garage is closed.

I'm thankful that I had an opportunity to work there. All in all, my only disappointment is that John L. Smith hasn't written a book on the Barbary. Without a doubt, it will be an eye opener to many if he ever writes one. Many former employees would be happy to hear about the way the Toti's and other juiced-in managers were run out by the Boyd's and Harrah's. From what I heard, Frank couldn't box up his personal belongings fast enough to get out of his office once he received the memo that he was being replaced. He, and his old crew, can now be found at the South Point, where they hang out. No one other than Michael Gaughan will tolerate them.

Tyrus is a fifteen year veteran of the casino industry and thankful to have survived two months as a dealer at the Barbary Coast.