

Frank Sinatra's Cal-Neva Lodge

by Steve Fischer

Bones Renner was an old time gangster from San Francisco who owned the Cal-Neva Lodge at Crystal Bay on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe.

But Bones also owed the IRS \$800,000 in back taxes. So Bones asked his friend Wingy Grober if he could pass the ownership of the Cal-Neva, who also, as a result of his sudden and unexplainable ownership of a casino, ended up with his own set of tax problems. With the IRS after him, Wingy Grober put the Cal-Neva Lodge up for sale.

On July 13, 1960, the day John F. Kennedy won the democratic nomination in Los Angeles, it was announced that Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Hank Sincola and Sinatra's old friend and business partner from New Jersey, Skinny D'Amato made application to the state of Nevada to purchase the Cal-Neva.

What wasn't announced in the papers, was that Sam Giancana owned Wingy Grober, Wingy was into Giancana for a lot of money. So Wingy and Sam made a idea. If Wingy Grober sold the Cal-Neva at a reasonable price to some friends of Giancana, Wingy was off the hook for the money that was owned Giancana.

The reasonable price turned out to be very reasonable. The Cal-Neva Lodge was sold in 1960 to Frank Sinatra and Associates for \$250,000. Everything – the whole place – for 250 Large!



Cal-Neva in the 1930's

What also didn't make the newspapers about the deal, was the FBI assumption that Sinatra was nothing more than a front in the Cal-Neva for New York's mob boss "Fat Tony" Salerno.

As for Giancana's interest in the money-losing casino, he was probably only in the deal to keep next to Sinatra, who was trying, desperately, to keep next to Kennedy, which everybody in the Chicago Outfit wanted.

Before the deal was signed, Dean Martin became aware of the mob's interests in the casino and pulled out of the deal. In 1960, Frank Sinatra was able to purchase the Cal-Neva along with his partners Dean Martin and Hank Sanicola.

For the historians out there who are jumping up and down, saying that Dean Martin *was not* an owner of the

Cal-Neva, he really was. Deano was an original owner until he found out that Giancana was involved in the joint – then he bailed.

Deano put up his 33 1/3% and it was bought by Sandy Waterman.

As of Aug. 15, 1961, Nevada records show that Frank owned thirty-six and six-tenths percentage of the Cal-Neva. By May 15, 1962, Frank's interest rose to fifty percent.

Sinatra was convinced that the Cal-Neva, a seasonal place, could be turned around, that it could produce a hefty profit, even with the mob connected pit bosses stealing the place blind. He told Giancana that with the right investment that the place could become a year-round operation. To draw attention to the place, on opening night, Sinatra's guests included Marilyn Monroe, Joe Kennedy and his son John F. Kennedy. Also there



John F. Kennedy and Frank Sinatra

that weekend was Johnny Roselli and Sam “Momo” Giancana. Uninvited and hiding up in the hills around the casino lodge, was an FBI surveillance team with long range lenses.

What the agents couldn't see was what went on inside the Cal-Neva's secluded bungalows after the opening night party had ended. Momo Giancana reportedly told his brother that he had been present at a Kennedy brothers slumber party that night at the Cal-Neva Casino. “The men,” he said, “had sex with prostitutes, sometimes two or more at a time, in bathtubs, hallways, closets, on floors, almost everywhere but the bed.” (From the FBI Frank Sinatra files).

The Cal-Neva was open only from June through Labor Day weekend in September, but Sinatra wanted to make it a year-round operation. It was one of the reasons that he put in the heliport! (No, it doesn't make a lot of sense to me either but he was quoted a number of times as saying the heliport wasn't just for his buddies, it was for guests, too!)

The Showroom at the Cal-Neva was called the Celebrity Showroom, Sinatra knew acoustics. He had the showroom enlarged to seat 350 and had it built so he could perform without the need for a microphone.

Apparently the sound quality in the Celebrity Showroom was as near perfect as you can get in a cabaret.

Sinatra played the Cal-Neva Celebrity Showroom the first week of June for the 3 years he owned the place!

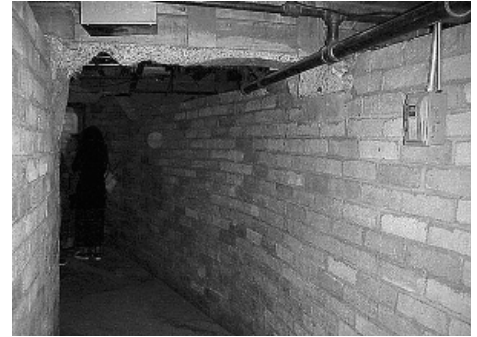
Then Sinatra installed the tunnels. One tunnel was installed between the showroom and Cabin Number 5, Frank's Cabin, and another between Cabin Number 3 and Cabin Number 5!

To quote Skinny D'Amato again, “Cabin 3 was for the Broads, 4 was for the Pals, and 5 was Frank's”. There were three small cabins at the Cal-Neva, 3, 4 and 5, all next to each other, all commanding the premier view of the Crystal Bay portion of Lake Tahoe. When Sinatra came in he made a rule, Cabin 5 was his, 4 and 3 and cabin 5 would never be rented out, period!

Cabin 3 is probably best known as Marilyn Monroe's cabin. Though there were many many women who stayed in Cabin 3 as Frank Sinatra's personal guests, Marilyn's frequent visits there have been pretty well documented.



Over the 3 years that Frank Sinatra was in charge of Cal-Neva, Marilyn was reported to be in Cabin 3 while



Tunnel between cabin 5 and cabin 3.

JFK was reported to be in Frank Sinatra's Cabin Number 5, or Marilyn was reported to be in Cabin 3 while Bobby Kennedy was reported to be in Frank Sinatra's Cabin 5. Or Marilyn was reported to be in Cabin 3 while Frank Sinatra was reported to be in Frank Sinatra's Cabin 5.

Lots of FBI and news reports on Marilyn's comings and goings including her very last visit, July 27 through July 29, 1962.

She overdosed on pills while in Cabin 3, but managed to call the reception desk. Rescue personnel reached her in time, her stomach was pumped, and she survived. She was there that weekend with the Lawfords, Peter and his wife Pat, and possibly Bobby Kennedy though I don't even want to go into that speculation. That's never been proven!



Cal-Neva in the 1940's

Ten days later on August 5, 1962, Marilyn Monroe died.

Cabin 3 was “for the broads” said Skinny D’Amato, and looking again at that list of women who it’s said to have spent at least one night with Frank Sinatra, well, you get the drift

Cabin 4 was “for the pals”. Though Cabin 4 was used by Deano and Sammy and Vic Damone and Milton Berle and Don Rickles, what Skinny D’Amato meant by Pals where “Friends Of Ours”.

Johnny Roselli stayed in Cabin 4, Ray Patriarca had a key to 4, Jimmy Hoffa loved the place, but didn’t want to be seen there, so did Carlo Gambino and Paul Castellano and Aniello Dellacroce and lots of other friends. Men who wanted nothing more than to be able get away from the office for a few days, out in the country where you can think. Frank Sinatra’s Cal-Neva was perfect.

In 1961 a Chicago hood named Crackers Mendino died of a heart attack. Over the years, he had worked under everyone from Torrio to Giancana in the juke box, pinball and gambling end of the business. Tony Accardo, Capo of the Chicago Outfit, was one of his pallbearers, and anybody who was anyone in the Chicago outfit was there for the burial. Probably the last big time mob funeral since the days of Al Capone.

At the funeral, Tony Accardo (who you may have run into in one of my stories as “Joe Batters”, the name Capone gave him) and Sam Giancana held a meeting.

Johnny Roselli who worked for Accardo was called in and told to plant in Nevada somebody to watch



Cabin No. 3

over Frank Sinatra because the boys had decided that Sinatra was much to enamored with the Kennedys and wasn’t thinking straight anymore.

When Roselli returned to the West Coast he called a hood named Lou McWillie, whom he had first met back in 1938, when Roselli did a short stint as the Chicago representative to the Sans Souci Casino in Havana.

McWillie had worked in Cuba for years, mostly for Meyer Lansky. McWillie was never clear to anyone on exactly what it was he did for Lansky, telling the Warren Commission only that he was a “key man” at Lansky’s Tropicana Casino in Cuba.

When Castro booted Lansky out of Cuba, Lansky arranged to have McWillie moved into the Tropicana in Las Vegas as a “Casino Executive.” Otherwise, there was very little known about McWillie who also used the alias of Lewis N. Martin. According to the Warren Commission files, the FBI kept him

under surveillance and considered him to be a top mob hit man and enforcer for hire.

Roselli told McWillie that Chicago wanted him out at Sinatra’s Cal-Neva Lodge to keep an eye on their investment in the place. To watch over Sinatra and report his activities back to

Roselli (At this time Roselli was living at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, running among other things a business called the “Monte Presser Talent Agency”. I’m going to hold the Monte Presser story for another time, it’s just too long to go into here).

McWillie did as he was told, and created a job for himself at Sinatra’s casino, working under the title of “Pit Boss.”

After only two years, the Cal-Neva was starting to sour on Sinatra and only added to the miseries he was having in the summer of 1963. On June 30, 1962, an intoxicated Chuckie English, a Giancana hood, staggered out of the Armory lounge and bumped into one of the FBI agents tagging Giancana. English told the



Peter Lawford and Marilyn Monroe

agents that if “Bobby Kennedy wants to know anything about Momo all he had to do was to ask Sinatra.”

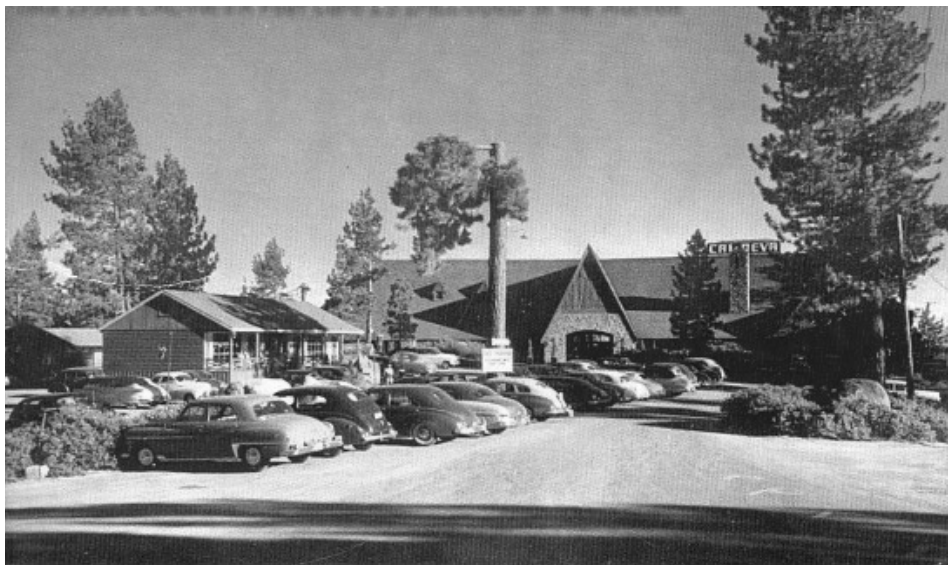
The agent reported the conversation back to Hoover who brought the comment to Robert Kennedy’s attention. Kennedy told Hoover to increase the FBI’s surveillance on Sinatra and the Cal-Neva.

The casino was already being investigated because the Feds suspected that the casino’s manager, Skinny D’Amato, was running a state wide prostitution ring out of the place. The agents suspected that the women were being flown in from San Francisco with the operation being run openly from the hotel front desk. (The above information and quotes again from the Frank Sinatra FBI Files)

Then, a few days after the Chuckie English fiasco, there was the attempted murder of a Cal-Neva employee who was shot on the front steps of the lodge. No one knows if it was mob related or not, since the incident was hushed up.

On June 30, 1962, Deputy Sheriff Richard Anderson came to pick up his beautiful brunette wife at the lodge where she worked as a waitress. She had been one of Sinatra’s girlfriends for a while before she married Anderson, three months before. Anderson had noticed the way Sinatra stared at his wife and heard about the rude and off color remarks he made to her. The Deputy, who was twice Sinatra’s tiny size, warned the singer to stay away from her. Sinatra backed down and apologized and promised to leave the woman alone.

But Sinatra was a man who brooded and let things build up inside him and on the night Anderson came to pick up his wife, as he stopped by the kitchen to talk with some of the help there, Sinatra came in, saw Anderson



Cal-Neva in the 1940’s

and ran up to him and screamed at him, “What the fudge are you doing, here?”

Anderson remained calm and said he was waiting for his wife.

Suddenly, while the cop was still in mid sentence, Sinatra grabbed him and tried to throw him out. After a brief wrestling match, Anderson ended up punching Sinatra so hard in the face that he couldn’t perform on stage for a week.

Several weeks later, on July 17, 1962, Anderson and his wife were driving down Highway 28, not far from the Cal-Neva, when they were driven off the road by a late model maroon convertible with California plates. Driving at high speeds, Anderson lost control of his car, skidded off the road and smashed into a tree, killing him instantly. His wife was thrown from the car, and suffered severe broken bones and fractures.

In an interview with a Reno Television station, Anderson’s mother said: “We still think to this day that Sinatra had something to do with our son’s death.” Anderson’s left behind four children.

Sinatra’s troubles with the Cal-Neva weren’t over yet. A few days

after Anderson was murdered, and one week before her own death, Marilyn Monroe flew to the Cal-Neva at Frank Sinatra’s invitation.

Sinatra told Monroe that he wanted to discuss their upcoming film together, *What a Way to Go*. Monroe didn’t want to go, but someone told Marilyn that Bobby Kennedy would be there. It sounded logical to Monroe, since it had been in the papers that the Attorney General was in Los Angeles on business.

Sinatra flew Monroe out on his own plane along with Peter Lawford. Sinatra was no longer speaking to Lawford after the Kennedy’s dumped him, and Lawford’s wife, Patricia Kennedy Lawford.

Exactly what happened that weekend at the Cal-Neva, isn’t known and may never be known. Louie McWillie, who was still working for Sinatra at the Cal-Neva, said in a newspaper interview, “There was more to what happened up there than anybody has ever told. It would have been a big fall for Bobby Kennedy”.

What is known is that there was dinner with Momo Giancana and Phyllis McGuire, Peter and Pat

Lawford, Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe.

Momo, of course, had no business being in the Cal-Neva since he was listed in the Nevada Black Book, "The List of Excluded Persons". The book was made up of persons forbidden to enter a casino, in fact, he was at the top of the list of restricted persons, but, as San Francisco's new columnist Herb Caen said: "I saw Sinatra at the Cal-Neva when Sam Giancana was there. In fact I met Giancana through Frank. He was a typical hood, didn't say much. He wore a hat at the lake, and sat in his little bungalow, receiving people." (San Francisco Chronicle, June 3, 1962).

Exactly a year later, Sinatra's involvement with the Cal-Neva came to an end, when the McGuire sisters were scheduled to perform there. Giancana was dating Phyllis McGuire, with whom he shared a chalet during her performance there.

Unfortunately for Giancana, McGuire, Sinatra and the Cal-Neva, the FBI photographed the hood playing golf with Sinatra and having drinks and dinner together in the Cal-Neva dining room.

The FBI was also watching that same evening when, during a small party in McGuire's room, Victor LeCroix Collins, longtime friend and the road manager of the McGuire Sisters, became irritated when Phyllis McGuire kept walking by his seat and punching him on the arm.

"So I told her," Collins said, "you do that again and I'm going to knock you right on your butt. A half an hour later she punches me again and so I grabbed her by both arms and meant to sit her in the chair I got out of, but I swung around and missed the chair and she hit the floor. "She didn't hurt



McGuire Sisters

herself but Sam came charging across the room and threw a punch at me wearing a huge big diamond ring that gouged me in the left eye".

"I just saw red then and grabbed him, lifted him clean off the floor, and I was going to throw him through the plate glass door, but thought, why wreck the place? So, I decided to take him outside and break his back on the hard metal railing on the patio. I got as far as the door and then got hit on the back of the head. I don't know who hit me from behind but the back of my head was split open."

"It didn't knock me out but I went down with Sam underneath me, he had on a pearl gray silk suit and blood from my eye was running all over his suit. I had a hold of him by the testicles and the collar and he couldn't move, that's when Sinatra came in with his valet George, the colored boy, they were coming to join the party, the girls were screaming and running around like a bunch of chickens in every direction because nobody knew what was going to happen. George just stood there with the whites of his eyes rolling around and around in his black face because he knew who Sam was and nobody ever fought with Sam. Sinatra and George pulled me off of Sam, who ran out the door." (verbatim - FBI Sinatra Files)

The next morning, the FBI, which had a fairly clear idea of what had

happened the night before, as well as several rolls of film of Sinatra with Giancana, filed its report, with photographs, with the State of Nevada Gambling Control Board.

After reading the report, the Control Board's chairman, Ed Olson, called Sinatra at the Sands in Las Vegas and asked about Giancana being on the property. Sinatra said that he saw a man who looked like Giancana and that they just waved and nodded to each other and that was all.

But the FBI also had wind of the fight and told the investigators who flew to Omaha, where the McGuire Sisters were playing at the Orpheum Theatre. They interviewed Collins who filled them in and then went back to Sinatra who denied knowing anything about it. Olson thanked Sinatra for his time and hung up. There was little else he could do. Sinatra was a casino owner, with substantial investments in the state, and he was also a major celebrity who was singularly responsible for drawing tens of thousands of tourists into Nevada.

Then the newspapers got hold of the story and backed Olson into a corner, forcing him to remark that his investigation would not conclude until "certain discrepancies in the information provided by various people at Cal-Neva could be resolved."

Sinatra read that and called Olson and asked him to come to the Cal-Neva for dinner "to talk about this, your statements." Olson said that he felt it was inappropriate to be seen at the Cal-Neva having dinner with Sinatra, since the singer was, technically, under investigation by Olson's office, and even if Sinatra weren't under investigation, Olson said, it would still be unacceptable for the Gaming Commissioner to be seen fraternizing with a casino owner.

“But Frank kept insisting,” Olson said, “and I kept refusing. The more I refused the madder he got until he seemed almost hysterical. He used the foulest language I ever heard in my life.”

To calm Sinatra down, Olson agreed to meet Sinatra in Olson’s office but Sinatra didn’t show up. An hour later Sinatra called Olson in a rage. “You listen to me Ed, you’re acting like a fudge-filled cop, I just want to talk to you off the record.”

Olson, in an attempt to take back the high ground that his position required said: “Who I am speaking to?”

“This is Frank Sinatra! You fudging so-and so! F-r-a-n-k, Sinatra.” Olson avoided the insults and said that any meeting between them would have to be on record in the presence of witnesses. Sinatra cut him short and screamed, “Now, you listen Ed! I don’t have to take this kind of shit from anybody in the country and I’m not going to take it from you people, I’m Frank Sinatra!”

Sinatra went on and on, until, at one point, Olson warned Sinatra that if he didn’t show up for an interview that Olson would have him subpoenaed. “You just try and find me,” the singer threatened, “and if you do you can look for a big fat surprise, a big fat fudging surprise. You remember that, now listen to me Ed, don’t fudge with me. Don’t fudge with me, just don’t fudge with me.” (verbatim - Sinatra FBI files)

“Are you threatening me?” Olson asked. “No...just don’t fudge with me and you can tell that to your fudging board of directors and that fudging commission too.”

The next day two investigators came to watch the count at the Cal-

Neva and Sinatra yelled across the casino to Skinny D’Amato, “Throw the dirty sons of bitches out of the house.”

But since the count had already started, the agents left before an incident could be started, but came back the next day, only to have D’Amato offer them \$100 each “to cooperate.” The agents reported the bribe to Olson, who took moves to revoke Sinatra’s license.

When the news was announced that Sinatra was under investigation and would probably lose his casino license, very few people in Nevada rushed to his aid. There were a lot of people in Nevada who resented Sinatra, others despised him and very few people felt that he should have gotten a state gaming license in the first place, and the word around the capitol building, was that Sinatra needed to be taught a lesson.

The lesson they taught him was to take away his license to operate a casino or hotel in Nevada, thus forcing him to sell not only his 50% in the Cal-Neva, but also his 9% interest in the Sands, about 3.5 million dollars worth of holdings in 1963.

From the Kitty Kelly book, *His Way*, “I talked to Sam (Giancana) the next day,” said Joe Shimon, a Washington, D.C. police officer assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency, “and he told me that Sinatra had cost him over \$465,000 on Cal-Neva.” He said, “That baboon and his big mouth. All he had to do was to keep quiet, let the attorneys handle it, apologize and get a thirty to sixty day suspension but no, Frank has to get on the phone with that damn big mouth of his and now we’ve lost the whole damn place. He never forgave him. He washed Frank right out of his books.”



The Rat Pack

Nevada’s Governor, Grant Sawyer, stood behind the Gambling Control Board’s decision to yank Sinatra’s license. However, while the case was still pending, President Kennedy came to the state and was given a caravan parade through the streets of Las Vegas, and found himself sitting in the same car with Governor Sawyer. Kennedy turned to Sawyer, and said, “Aren’t you people being a little hard on Frank out here?”

The Governor didn’t reply, but later repeated what Kennedy had said to Ed Olson, who was startled by the remark. “That’s about the highest degree of political pressure you could ever put into the thing,” Olson said.

But the Cal-Neva incident was, for the Kennedys, as Peter Lawford said, “the end of old Frankie boy as far as the family was concerned.”

During the three years that Frank Sinatra had partnership in the Cal-Neva, there were only a few artifacts with his name on them, including a few chips, ashtrays and some other scarce items.

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Steve writes and sells on eBay under the name OmahaGrampa. His book, *When the Mob Ran Vegas*© will be first offered for sale during the Casino Chip and Gaming Token Convention at the Riviera in August.