

from

# The Christmas Tree

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In 2002, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Gloria Stein at The Christmas Tree to talk about one of the landmarks of the Reno/Tahoe area. She was kind enough to relate the history of, and her involvement with, the property. Gloria Stein passed away in May of 2003.

In the fall of 2001, a food critic for the Reno Gazette-Journal visited the Christmas Tree restaurant on Mount Rose Highway. Still noted at the time for its mahogany-grilled steaks and the exquisite simplicity of its cuisine, the Christmas Tree had begun to show the effects of its long and, at times, tumultuous history. The food critic complained of the stale cigarette



## to The Tannenbaum



smoke that affronted her in the entryway and the disrepair of the restaurant. Her table at the window still afforded “one of the area’s best dining views of twilit Washoe Valley framed by mountain ridges and Scotch Pines,” but she lamented that this perspective was disrupted by trash littering the grounds. Her dinner, for the most part, aspired to live up to its renown, and she concluded that with a few cosmetic updates the Christmas Tree would once again “lay claim to being local dining’s king of the mountain.”

The Christmas Tree, however, would not regain its renown for fine dining. It would close less than two years later, bringing an end to a restaurant that had provided warm

respite to mountain travelers since 1946. Fortunately for previous visitors and connoisseurs of Northern Nevada history, the Christmas Tree was not allowed to languish in desuetude for too long. It has been resurrected as The Tannenbaum Alpine Events Center, and the new proprietors have conscientiously preserved the rich history of this Mount Rose landmark.

The Christmas Tree was originally opened as a bar by John and Alice Ross in 1946; they added the restaurant the following year. Situated on the majestic slopes of Mount Rose, The Christmas Tree was roughly equidistant from Reno and Lake Tahoe. It was a modest establishment, unpretentiously offering travelers the opportunity to take-in the sublime views of Washoe Valley as they enjoyed their evening repast.

When Mr. and Mrs. Ross first opened their little bar on the mountaintop, it is doubtful that they foresaw the rich and varied history to come. Over the next several decades, in spite of its modesty (or, perhaps, because of it), the Christmas Tree would host a collection of celebrities and impresarios and garner an important place in the history of Northern Nevada.

Early in its history, various notable Reno businessmen and gaming concessionaires became associated with the Christmas Tree's gaming. In the first six years of its existence, the restaurant saw several distinguished concessionaires run its gaming. Virgil Smith, partnering with Bill Harrah, is believed to have first leased the restaurant's gaming rights in the mid-1940s. By this time, Smith had already established a long history of



leasing gaming rights in local hotels and casinos, including the Palace Club, the Golden Hotel, the Villa Sierra, the Villa Roma, and Colbrandt's Flamingo Club, among others.

In the late 1940s, Nick "Tonopah" Abelman became a part owner of the Tree and took over control of its games. Abelman was a successful businessman who had opened downtown Reno's first elaborate club, the Ship and Bottle Club, and owned and operated the Riverside Hotel and Stateline Country Club.



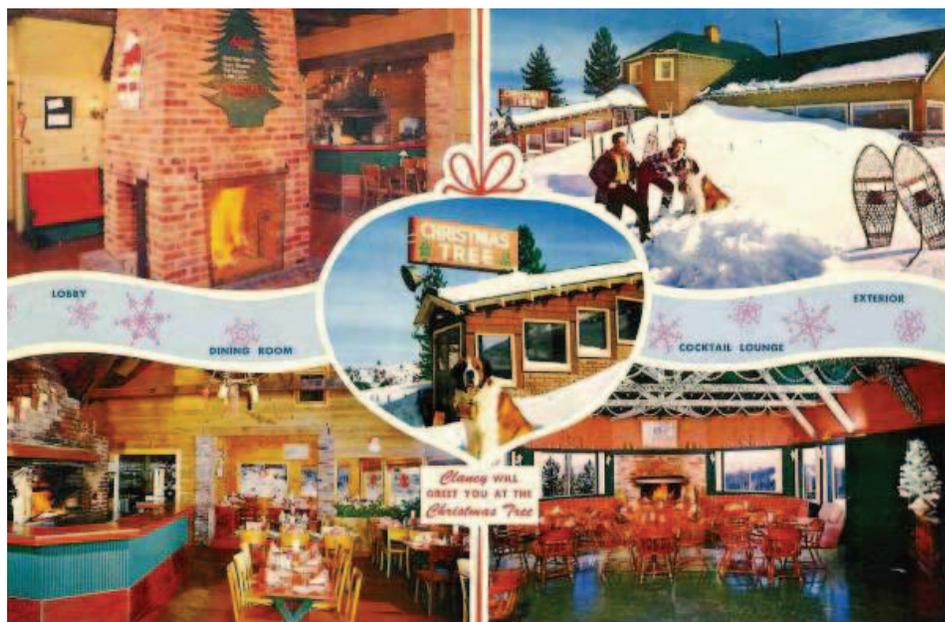
In 1952, Guy Michael and Art Fisher bought the restaurant from Jim Jeffress, who had acquired the property from the Rosses in 1948. Michael and Fisher maintained the gaming license and became owner-operators of the restaurant and casino. This event ushered in a tumultuous period in the Tree's gaming history. Under the management of Michael, who employed and partnered with several different men over the next decade, the Christmas Tree's gaming saw immense success and popularity.

However, this period also witnessed more infamous moments of crooked gaming: in December of 1959, the Nevada Gaming Control Board closed the establishment because a 21 dealer was caught "turning the deck," and in July 1966, it was closed again when the Gaming Control Board confiscated loaded dice from the craps table.

Despite these setbacks, the Christmas Tree quickly became a favorite spot for locals who returned time after time to luxuriate in the warmth of a crackling fire and indulge in steaks grilled over mountain mahogany. A trademark of the Tree, the mahogany grilling infused the famous steaks with a subtle smoke taste that satisfied customers for the next four decades. With a charismatic host in Guy Michael, the "Davy Crockett of Mt. Rose" in a coon-skin cap to greet them, guests found a warm sanctuary atop the frequently snow-encrusted mountain.



The spectacular panoramic views of Washoe Valley, the warm simplicity of the restaurant, and the signature cuisine at the Christmas Tree not only



attracted area locals but also Hollywood starlets, entertainers, politicians, and business moguls. The evening destination of choice for many celebrities visiting Northern Nevada, the Tree provided the opportunity for casual diners to glimpse the more intimate moments in the lives of celebrities. On any given night one might find oneself dining next to Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Clark Gable, or Bill Harrah.

On the evening of August 30, 1951, guests found themselves the unwitting spectators of one of Hollywood's many domestic dramas. Frank Sinatra and his mistress Ava Gardner were dining with Henry Sanicola (associate producer of both *The Frank Sinatra Show* and *Ocean's Eleven*, which had been released that year) and Sanicola's wife. The Sanicolas, and the rest of the restaurant, watched as Sinatra and Gardner had a fight that would leave one of them nearly dead.

As The Chairman drank his Jack Daniels like water—he liked it, after all, cut with water over ice—and Gardner's thirst proved equal to his, she loudly confessed that she had an affair with a bullfighter during the filming of *The Angel Wore Red* (1960) in Spain the previous year. Sinatra had always suspected that Gardner had been less than angelic in Spain, but she had assiduously denied any such indiscretion before this evening. Now, the Sanicolas and other diners at the Christmas Tree were privy to an explosive argument between the lovers, which concluded with Gardner storming back to her car and driving all the way back to Los Angeles. Somehow, in spite of her inebriation, she managed to make it to her home in Pacific Palisades,



where a ringing telephone greeted her. Sinatra, Sanicola told her, had responded to their fight just as recklessly, taking an overdose of sleeping pills. She flew straight back to Reno, where she was reconciled with Sinatra, who lived to return to the Christmas Tree under more auspicious circumstances in the future.

Scenes for the tabloid press aside, the Christmas Tree was also a site for far more joyous celebrations. On October 17, 1960, the cast of the "The Misfits," including Marilyn Monroe, threw a joint birthday celebration for playwright and screenwriter Arthur Miller and Hollywood star Montgomery Clift at the restaurant. Despite its solitary location, perched between Lake Tahoe and the city of Reno, the Tree became a



renowned hot spot for locals and famous out-of-towners alike.

Arguably, the true celebrity of the Christmas Tree was not a Hollywood movie star or a powerful state senator but a young woman from Chico, California. In 1953, Gloria Nooner came to the Christmas Tree as a waitress, and ended up intrinsically linked with the restaurant's history and success. As a waitress and, later, manager, owner, and chef, Gloria's involvement and pervasive influence spanned over fifty years – almost the entire history of the Christmas Tree itself. Merely a young waitress when she arrived in 1953, by the time of her passing in 2003 she was known as the "Queen of the Mountain."

Gloria Nooner married Guy Michael, the owner of the Tree in 1953, and, thus, became co-owner early in her career there. As though challenged by the immaculate wilderness in which they lived and operated their business, they became known for living somewhat eccentrically. Gloria was famous for a menagerie of exotic animals she kept as pets on the premises – African lions, jaguars, St. Bernards, and Newfoundlands were popular with the restaurant's patrons. Her husband, Guy, was fond of

stonework and he put this skill to use in the stone accents of the Christmas Tree, as well as their home. A lapidary workshop also yielded similar productivity, albeit on a smaller scale, as Guy created jewelry and other keepsakes that the Tree's customers could purchase as souvenirs.

As legend has it, Gloria's pet lions proved to earn their keep. After his tenure at the Christmas Tree, Guy Michael moved to Incline Village and managed a restaurant called The Chateau. It had become a habit to feed any leftovers from the restaurant to Gloria's pet lions, effectively disposing of the remnants while inexpensively feeding the voracious felines. At one point, Guy Michael decided to change meat suppliers for the restaurant; a shocking, and somewhat disturbing, realization occurred when he later went to feed Gloria's pets and discovered that the lions would not touch the new meat. Wisely, Guy took their expert advice seriously and promptly switched back to his old supplier. Back during the Christmas Tree days, though, the lions were less quality assurance consultants than they were emblematic of the at times kitschy symbiosis obtained between the Tree and its mountainous environment.

The Christmas Tree's steady development into a fixture of Northern Nevada culture and history was abruptly interrupted in 1964, when an unexpected fire ripped through the Tree and burned the popular establishment to the ground. Rumors abounded, persisting to the present day, that the fire was not an accident but a disaster created by a disgruntled ex-employee of the Tree. Speculation aside, however, arson was never proved, and Gloria and Guy Michael worked to resurrect the Christmas Tree from its ashes. A new



The fireplace from the original building sits to the left of the new structure built in 1965

building was erected immediately adjacent to the old building's site – the original fireplace and chimney can still be seen in its original location next to the new building – and the Tree re-opened on June 1, 1965. The new version of the famous restaurant included a massive stone fireplace with the relief of a Christmas tree built into its face; that symbol was adopted as the business' logo and became synonymous with the Christmas Tree restaurant.

Despite the phoenix-like resurrection of his business, Guy Michael decided to sell the Christmas Tree shortly after it was rebuilt. The destruction of the property, in combination with treatment from a cancer

diagnosis, put a strain on his finances and, undoubtedly, his nerves. He sold the Tree to Al and Jean Kuckhoff and retired to Incline Village.

Gloria Michael Stein, now remarried to a retired Los Angeles police officer, remained integral to the future trajectory of the Tree. In 1968, she suddenly took over the restaurant's cooking responsibilities when the scheduled chef didn't show up for work. As her daughter, Gail Triglia, later attested, "She cooked more than 200 dinners. It was a busy night." Maintaining the tradition of mahogany-grilled meats, Gloria remained in charge of the kitchen thereafter.

The next few years at the Christmas Tree were lean ones. The winter of 1968/1969 was particularly harsh and patrons ventured less frequently up the mountain to visit their old favorite haunt. The Kuckhoffs eventually sold the Christmas Tree in 1969 to Peter Apostolos, but business continued to suffer. Not three years



later, in 1972, American Savings and Loan foreclosed on the Tree and it remained closed for several years. It was not until the “Queen of the Mountain,” a representative of past, more prosperous times, took control that the Christmas Tree reopened and a new peak in the Tree’s history was ushered in. Gloria moved to become the sole owner in 1976, retaking her role as the restaurant’s hostess and, of course, continuing as its cook. Leasing part of the premises to Don Gilfillan, Jr. for gambling, the Tree was rediscovered and once again became a popular dining establishment for the local populace.



The view looking toward Washoe Valley.

In 1983, after nine very successful years, Gloria sold the Christmas Tree to David and Mary Ellen Houston. However, she continued to work as the chef and restaurant manager for the duration of their ownership. Indeed, the bank loan given to the Houstons for the purchase of the Tree stipulated that Gloria be maintained under contract as the restaurant’s chef and manager.

In 1995, two significant events took place: the Houstons sold the Christmas Tree – signaling the last

stage of its heralded existence as a restaurant and sometime casino, an existence that had already spanned 50 years; and Gloria Stein retired. Both of these events ushered in the eventual decline of the beloved Tree. By 2003, the Christmas Tree closed its doors completely, awaiting potential new owners or, possibly, even demolition. Its future was uncertain and uncomfortably precarious.

Abandonment had allowed the

Tree to slip into nearly irretrievable condition; such that banks did not believe it would be financially responsible to lend the money required to restore the premises. Brothers Christian and Gunter Nobis and their wives Julie and Michelle, respectively, believed that the Christmas Tree still had future prospects as rich as its past, and in 2004 they received a loan from their parents to purchase and renovate the old Christmas Tree.



Construction on the Christmas Tree to produce The Tannenbaum.





The back of The Tannenbaum showing the wedding or events area.

It was an undertaking that demanded substantial investment and work, producing a building (the Tannenbaum Alpine Events Center) that aspires to live up to its past. Visitors are greeted by an arching timber entryway that invites them to enter a facility in complete congruity with its surroundings. The stone lobby has been completely renovated and features an inviting lounge area in front of the original double-sided fireplace—the other side of the fireplace faces the banquet room. This original fireplace, along with its stone relief Christmas Tree, has been assiduously preserved and transformed from wood- to gas-burning. Central to the Nobis’ vision for the new premises is a great room that brings together the areas that used to constitute divided bar and restaurant spaces. With newly installed floor-to-ceiling windows, the large banquet



The fireplace from the original Christmas Tree still stands in The Tannenbaum. The wood burning fireplace has been replaced with gas.

room offers spectacular wall-to-wall panoramic views of the Washoe Valley reaching towards a horizon that features the Virginia Foothills. The kitchen has been renovated and now functions as a staging area for caterers. Downstairs the Nobis’ have installed a Bridal/Hospitality Suite featuring everything a bride and her attendants could require for their preparations, including a wet bar. Taking nearly a year to complete, the renovations have resulted in a building that studiously conceals its modernity behind an exteriority that seamlessly fits into its majestic surroundings.

Envisioning that the past provides the most solid foundation upon which to build the future, the Nobis family transformed the remnants of the Christmas Tree into the new Tannenbaum Alpine Events Center. In addition to providing a meeting space for corporate and social events, the Tannenbaum Event Center hopes to provide couples a wedding reception site that is as saturated in history as it is breathtaking in its beauty. We might recall that Tannenbaum is the German word for “Christmas tree.” In a similar manner, the Nobises have translated the old Christmas Tree, preserving the resonance of a name that has meant so much to Northern Nevada and promises to do so well into the future.

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*Best Wishes  
Allan & Gloria  
Sept 29, 2002*