

THE DUPONT PLAZA TRAGEDY REVISITED
By: George Davis

If there is one thing that excites a chip collector more than a chip that is old, rare and still in good condition, it is a chip that has been a witness to history and has a story to tell. Time, circumstances and disaster combined to make a cheque from the Dupont Plaza Hotel and Casino just such a chip. Each Dupont Plaza chip bears the scar of tragedy.

On December 31, 1986, on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico, the luxurious 22 story Dupont Plaza Hotel stood like a beacon on fashionable Ashford Avenue, washed by the warm and blue Caribbean waters over its sun drenched beach. The hotel's 420 rooms were filled with guests who fled their cold north habitats to ring in the New Year and enjoy a few days of Caribbean sun and relaxation. Perhaps a turn or two at the craps or blackjack tables would do to enliven the pre-holiday festivities before the witching hour of twelve o'clock that would usher in the New Year. All was in readiness for a gala holiday celebration, or was it?

What the hotel guests did not know was, an acrimonious labor dispute was ongoing at the Dupont Plaza. Long, drawn out contract negotiations were in progress between the hotel and a Teamsters Union Local. Earlier that day, the hotel had provided one of its meeting rooms to the Union membership in an effort to expedite a favorable vote by Union members to accept management's newest proposal. The ground floor ballroom in which that Union meeting was held was stockpiled with new furniture still wrapped in its protective plastic, intended for use by the hotel in a redecorating project. Several explosions were reportedly heard in the vicinity of the ballroom shortly after the Union meeting was adjourned. At approximately 3:30 in the afternoon, an odor of smoke was first noticed and then seen on the mezzanine level of the hotel which housed the casino.

Witness Kevin Condon, a guest from Connecticut, was playing blackjack at the time someone in the casino reported there was smoke in the area, "but nobody paid any attention and we continued playing." It was later reported to authorities that there were approximately 70 guests in the casino at the time. "Then there was a big burst of smoke and we went running toward the exits. When someone opened the door, we saw the whole hallway was covered with black smoke. Then the panic began." Condon said he broke one of the floor length windows with a chair and jumped fifteen feet below, fracturing his ankle. He was one of the lucky ones to escape the ensuing inferno. Other casino patrons used the window escape route and paid for their jump to safety with broken limbs or worse. Survivors state they could look up to the casino level and see people pounding on the glass windows desperately trying to escape the flames. Many never made it to safety.

Even though the fire was confined to the basement and mezzanine levels, smoke billowed throughout the remaining areas of the hotel and prevented guests from fleeing to safety through the main exits of the hotel. Many guests fled to the roof through the fire stairways. Others reported that there were no fire alarm signals or announcements and that the sprinkler system failed to operate.

Puerto Rican police officer Angel Rojas, a helicopter pilot, saw the smoke billowing from the hotel from his station at Isla Grande Airport, and immediately made a flight to the area. When he saw the people on the roof of the burning hotel, he and Lieutenant Julio Colon returned to Isla Grande where they removed the chopper's doors and then flew back to the hotel. At first, strong winds prevented the chopper from approaching the hotel, but later Rojas and others were able to make dozens of rescue landings on a narrow corner of the roof area while the fire escalated and raged for a total of six hours. Rojas was awarded the Medal of Honor for his part in the daring rescues.

A thorough investigation by the combined forces of the F.B.I., A.T.F. and the Puerto Rican police determined that the fire, causing 97 deaths and 140 injuries, was set. On January 5, 1987, Commonwealth Secretary of Justice Hector Rivera Cruz summed up the results of the investigation by declaring "this was a malicious fire; it was arson."

Years of litigation resulting from the deaths and injuries sustained in the Dupont Plaza fire realized the largest federal mass damages trial in U. S. history. In all, payments for the deaths and injuries totalled more than 230 million dollars and involved 2,411 plaintiffs and 230 attorneys. Photocopying and fees for expert consultation costs for the trial were put at \$110,400, and court records show that the case generated more than 3 million documents. "You need a scorecard to keep track of everything," stated presiding U. S. District Court Judge Raymond Acosta. While 96% of the settlement money was distributed in 1991, several aspects of the settlement are still not fully resolved.

Of further interest to chip collectors is the prior and subsequent history of the Dupont Plaza property. Originally, the ITT Puerto Rico Sheraton occupied the premises, opening October 3, 1963 and closing in February, 1974. The Sheraton reopened briefly on January 7, 1977. From November of 1978, the hotel was operated as the Dupont Plaza until the fire gutted it on December 31, 1986. Sometime between December 31, 1986 and February 1, 1995, the Palm Hotel Syndicate took over the property and built a new hotel edifice in which a new casino, the "Palm," was to operate. A beautiful rack of Palm Hotel & Casino chips was ordered in anticipation of operating a casino. There are two variations of what then occurred. The first is that no casino license was ever obtained and hence the casino never officially opened. The second

is that a casino license was obtained (perhaps conditional) and pulled almost immediately after the casino opened. Not all of the Palm chips were destroyed and Palm chips that can still be found are much sought after by serious collectors. On February 1, 1995, the hotel reopened after extensive renovations as the San Juan Marriott and Stellaris Casino.

Because of the worldwide interest in the fire, its large death and injury toll and the long and tedious investigation and subsequent revelations of arson, the Dupont tragedy occupied the front page of the New York Times for seven consecutive days and continued news coverage chronicled the disaster for a total of thirty-one days. The Dupont Plaza tragedy brought about stringent changes to Puerto Rico's fire codes and enforcement policies so that today, more than ten years after the tragedy, the Island's continuing prosperity is reflected in part by the growing number of safe and successful casinos. At this writing, eighteen are in operation and more are on the drawing boards!

One of this writer's collection of Dupont Plaza chips was melted out of shape from the intense heat of the fire. Its appearance is grotesque and in a sense pitiful. It almost seems to be crying out in pain. Do you have a Dupont Plaza chip in your collection? If you do, I wonder what story it would tell, if it could only speak!

Sources: Caribbean Business, The Puerto Rican Tourist Bureau, The New York Times, The San Juan Star.



Chip Burnt In
The Fire