



Opa's TACKle Box: A Fish Story

by Doc Finstuen (R-2331)

My father-in-law, Maurice Wenzel, is an old German originally from New Braunfels, Texas. He worked at the Pearl Beer Brewing Company for over 36 years, and retired in 1985. We all call him "Opa" which is German for grandfather. He fought in the South Pacific in World War II and was part of the U.S. Army of occupation in Japan. Opa, now in his 70's, is quite a character, and an avid sportsman. He is also very lucky and I have seldom beat him at poker or blackjack. His favorite pastime these days is following the horses at the new Retama Park race track that recently opened in Selma, Texas, just north of San Antonio.

Back in the mid-80's I owned a ranch in Medina County, about 45 miles from San Antonio. I had a large irrigation stock tank on the place, filled with catfish and bass, and Opa would come out from San Antonio on weekends and

we would go fishing and drink a few cans of Pearl. One day I noticed what looked like poker chips in his tackle box. I asked him what they were and he said they were fishing "chits" from a tackle and bait shop on the Texas coast. He said he used to go fishing at Galveston during his summer vacations with some of the guys at the brewery back in the 50's. Most of them were \$1 and \$5 and had 'TAC' in capital letters, with 'SL' or 'BR' beneath. "Do you want them?", he asked. "They aren't any good any more, but you can have 'em if you want 'em". "Sure," I said. I knew what chits were, the NCO club used them when I was stationed overseas in Samsun, Turkey. On payday we would buy \$20 worth of the aluminum chits for \$18 at the club; that way you got a discount but you could only spend the tokens at the club. I still had a couple in a "junk drawer" that I had not cashed in, so I tossed Opa's fishing chits in with them and didn't really think about it again until the summer of 1995 when my wife and I went to Las Vegas for our 24th wedding anniversary. While we were there we visited the Pioneer Club's Nevada Gold Casino Check and Chip Museum. Some of the old chips and checks looked vaguely familiar.

My wife is lucky, much like her father, and while we were in Las Vegas she won eight of the .999 silver tokens from the slot machines. I had picked up an application to the Casino Chips and Gaming Tokens Collector Club (CC>CC) at the Pioneer Club. As a Professor (UTx Austin PhD Class of '77),



I teach statistics for the graduate school of Baylor University at Ft. Sam Houston, and had been thinking that some gambling examples might help to get the point across when I cover the theory of probability in my classes. Besides, my wife had all those tokens and I wanted to find out more about them, so when we got home I sent off my application to the CC>CC.

In the first issue I received of the Casino Chip and Token News I noticed Michael Knapp's article "The Information Booth" which has pictures of unidentified chips and questions and answers about casino history. I remembered the fishing "chits" and finally dug them out from our "junk drawer" at home. They were very much like the 26 diamond pip check (#722) from the Green Light Club attributed to Galveston in the article. One afternoon, when my mother-in-law, Oma, was visiting I asked her if she knew about the "chits". "Sure", she said, "your father-in-law used to bring those back from the coast. They used them for fishing." She remembered that 'TAC' was short for the tackle shop and thought the 'BR' was boat rental or bait and rental. The 'S' of the 'SL' was for the scaling house(?), but she was pretty sure the 'L' was for the locker plant because they always brought home frozen fish. "Sometimes they brought home a lot of frozen fish", she said.

After doing a considerable amount of research I finally found out that the "chits" were gaming checks from the infamous Turf Athletic Club (TAC) in Galveston, run by the Maceo syndicate from the 1930's to the mid-1950's. In June of 1957, the Texas Rangers raided more than 40 illegal gambling casinos and shut them down. The Studio Lounge (SL) was on the second floor of the Turf Grill Building and ran roulette, blackjack and poker games "wide open" for over 20 years. The Balinese Room (BR) was out on a pier in Galveston bay and is still standing today. The Maceo mob always went first class. The list of performers they booked as acts in their nightclubs reads like a who's who of show business with stars such as Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Bob Hope, Guy Lombardo, Phil Harris, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Joe E. Lewis, the Ritz brothers, Peggy Lee, Frankie Lane, and many others. Even Frank Nitti, the gangster of the "Untouchables" fame got his start in Galveston during the "rum running" days of prohibition. One very good book I found out about from Vern Blanck, the president of the CC>CC in Houston, is "Ray Miller's Galveston", 2nd edition, 1992, which has a very detailed account of the "wild and crazy" days of illegal gambling on the Texas coast.

A few months ago when we were visiting Opa and Oma and I brought along the TAC checks and some of the newspaper clippings and articles I had found. Opa had just got back from the track, and reported that he had had pretty good luck that day. I showed them what I had found. After looking over the pictures Oma said "Now I know why Opa always had me pack a white shirt and tie in with his fishing clothes! And he told me it was so he could go to church before he came home on Sundays".

"Ja, ja", said Opa, "and I did that too!, and that was **40 years ago!**". Later Opa told me that he and his brewery fishing buddies sometimes went to a fish market in San Antonio before going home and bought the frozen fish there because it was easier than buying and hauling fresh fish all the way from Galveston bay. "Besides", he said, "we didn't want to crowd the ice chests".

Going home with my wife that night, she remembered "Opa always brought home a church bulletin for my mother, and usually lots of frozen fish".