

## THE GATEWAY TO CHIP HISTORY

by Steve Passalacqua

Harvey Fuller, Phil Jensen, Howdy Herz, Al Moe and Doug Saito have all done the deed. Each one of these gaming historians have dedicated a part of their life to locate former casino owners and unearth their stories. Their past and continuing effort to preserve periods of gaming history is and will be savored by the current and future collector.

Reading and hearing of their face-to-face interviews with many of the early casino pioneers, has intensified my hunger for knowledge about the way it was. Every new piece of information added more character to the chips. The sharing of these distinctive accounts flooded my brain with personalized meaning for many of the gaming chips in my collection.

Each chip has a story of it's own. Who made it? Where was it used? When was it in play? Who were the players that might have temporarily utilized it to flirt with Lady Luck? A hard luck drifter might bet a single chip and the wealthy bet many. GAMbling is done at all levels on the ladder of wealth. From the 1800's to the present day, chips are the gamblers utensil of choice. Chips have become flashy markers to track a players ups and downs. More flaunt success, less confirm loss. The intent of the gambler is to cash in a pile of chips, and the intent of the collector is to maintain a pile of chips.

I have collected chips for over 25 years, the first 15 years was on looks alone. Over the last 10 years the hard to find gaming history came creeping into my life. History has added life to my chips and is now the driving force for my chip collection. Some of my favorite chips were hot stamped with a greek style lettering that read "George's Gateway". I wanted to know more about these interesting gaming artifacts and the man behind the chips. An interview with Barbara Anne Canon gave me my chance to uncover a bonanza of research about George Sam Canon, the man that built and owned GEORGE'S GATEWAY at South Lake Tahoe, Nevada.

On September 24th, 1908, George Sam Canon was born in Merkel, Texas. He was the oldest of five children. After his parents separated, George's mother and her 5 children worked their way to California picking cotton. As a teenager in California, George had his own watermelon patch in El Centro. In 1927 the price

of his watermelons were at an all time low. George could no longer profit from the melons left in his field. He was not about to let anyone else profit from his hard work, so he drove his truck through the field smashing all of the remaining melons and joined the Navy.

At the age of 19 he was learning more than how to be the average sailor. As a talented Navy boxer he was never knocked off his feet. He earned the title of Heavy Weight Boxing Champion of the Pacific Fleet. This was an early boost of the confidence he would carry through out his life. It also gave him respect among the men in the days when the boss was the toughest guy on the street. He proved to his cronies, that if the time ever came, he could and would run the show.

Earlier George had promised his mother not to marry until he was 21. Toughness would not alter the respect George has for his mother. He would honor his promise and marry the love of his life five days after he turned 21. On September 29th, 1929 he married Anna.

One day George awoke in jail. In a hospital there was a man in serious condition stemming from a fight and could not remember what took place. Not remembering the fight scared George, he realized that drinking could put him out of control. George would stop drinking booze at the age of 21. In my opinion, going on the wagon was a necessary step for George to succeed. He knew that being a tough guy was not enough to run the show, you had to be in control.

George and Anna had their first of two children born in 1932.



Barbara Ann Canon left, George Canon middle, Anna Canon right



Barbara Anne was the first of two girls. Her sister Carol would be born 12 years later.

Aboard ship George was learning and refining his occupational calling. This career was not centered around swabbing the deck. Gambling was becoming his way of life. The Navy saw gambling as a substantial obstacle to the All American Sailor. Those caught would have to pay the price. In 1934 his heavy involvement with gambling at sea would earn him a Bad Conduct Discharge. George was a proficient gambler and the revenue from gambling aboard ship was extremely good. He could not walk away from the guaranteed riches to be made at sea. After his discharge, to profit from gambling, he and a buddy were stowaways on a Navy ship headed to Shanghai, China. During their stowaway stay they hid in the boiler room and the only thing George lost was 15 pounds from the heat. It wasn't long before they were apprehended, detained and returned to shore. The gambling experiences aboard ship would serve as a strong foundation for his future in legal gambling in the State of Nevada.

Into the late 30's George and Anna were living in Vallejo, California, located about 35 miles northeast of San Francisco. Vallejo was a navy town and the home of Mare Island navel ship yard. This area employed over 50,000 Navy and blue collar ship builders. The passenger ferry to and from the island docked close to the end of lower Georgia Street. Lower Georgia Street was the reckless part of Vallejo, off limits to the domesticated citizens. This two block area was said to have more night clubs, and bars per block than anywhere in the world, including Singapore. A good friend and past Navy shipmate Norman Reinberg A.K.A. Dopey Norman had a club in Vallejo. Most of these clubs had liquor and dancing out front, with gambling in the back, and the ladies upstairs. Often the alley behind the clubs had long lines of sailors and ship builders waiting to climb the back stairs and pay for some pleasure with a lady of their choice. According to Barbara her father would not get involved with prostitution or drugs.

George was working as a bouncer for a good friend William "Willy" Musso at a Georgia Street club. One night two sailors tried to take George down. The first sailor got down behind George with the second one trying to knock George backwards over the first. George's wife Anna was present and knew just what to do as the plot was unfolding, she grabbed a pool cue

and broke it over the head of the standing sailor. For many months George would travel up and down Georgia Street bragging to everyone about his courageous Anna.

In 1939 George and a partner took over the Vallejo Locker Club on Georgia St. and started C&S Sportland. It was a Penny Arcade in the front, with lockers in the rear for sailors to store their uniforms when dressed in civilian clothes. Of course the gambling was up stairs in the back



Vallejo Locker Club bought by George Canon and turned into C&S Sportland Vallejo, California

During the summer of 1946 Willy Musso and the Canons were in Daytona Beach, Florida. Barbara was 13 years old and remembers enjoying the beach and fishing from a boat. At night her father and Willy ran the gaming at the Chateau Lido. One night in a private poker game her father won a hand full of loose diamonds. Barbara received one of the 5 beautiful rings made from that nights victory. The operation at the Chateau Lido was short lived. One night the local boys showed up and introduced themselves as George and Willie's new partners. Willy told them to go to hell. It was time to get back to California.

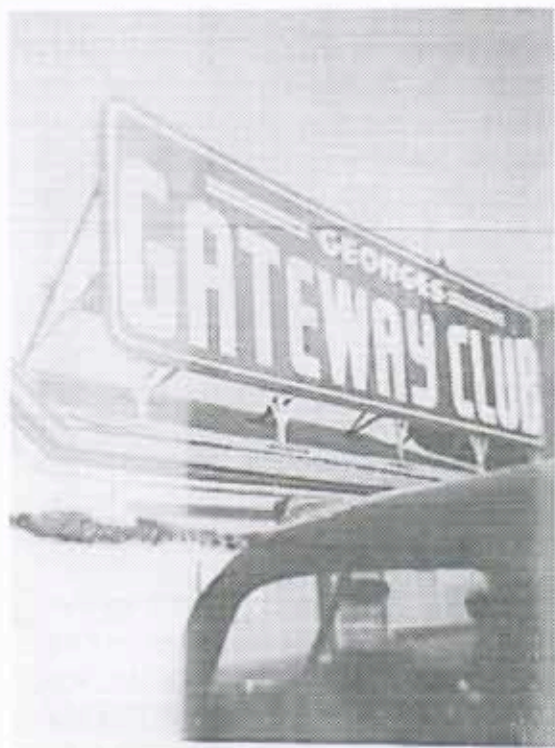
In 1947, George and several partners owned a bar and dance hall in Colfax, California called the Quonset Club. With the income from the dance club dropping, George decided in the winter of 48 to dismantle the quonset hut piece by piece, load it on two flat bed trucks and haul it to Nevada. The strategy was to rebuild it in Nevada as a casino. The destination was at the south shore of Lake Tahoe on the lake side of Highway 50. It was to be the first club on the left when entering Nevada from California. George put up the money to move the hut to Nevada and owned



over 50% of the rebuilt club, called GEORGE'S GATEWAY.



Quonset Hut becomes George's Gateway at South Lake Tahoe



First sign at the newly constructed Quonset at Lake Tahoe

Lake Tahoe was only a summer vacation destination at the time. The new club would be open year round with modest to almost no business in the winter. The snow would close down Highway 50 cutting off access from most of California. George did everything in his power to promote Lake Tahoe into a year round play ground. George and one of his major Gateway partners, Philip "Curly" Musso, Willie's younger brother, were a hard working team. Everything they did was to make money and share it with family and friends in the form of giving them a job. With over 65 employees there were plenty of

family and friends working at GEORGE'S GATEWAY. In my opinion from 1949 and on to into the 60's George Canon was Mr. Lake Tahoe.

George's daughter Barbara Anne was pregnant with her first child during the construction of the Gateway. Being pregnant didn't stop Barbara from working on the soon to be casino. She stripped tree bark with draw knives to shape the wooden log beams in the Gateway's rustic dining room. Over the years Barbara worked at various jobs associated with casinos. At that time in Nevada, she informed me, children of casino owners were allowed to work in the gaming area of their parents casino before they were 21. When she told me she was a "pot hopper", I had to ask her for a definition. She would give change and hop from one jackpot to the next to pay off the winners.

These were the days when a family run casino could be put together on a shoe string allowance with little regulation from the Gaming Control Board. In the first week of business at George's Gateway someone hit a jackpot of \$750. There was not enough money in the cashiers cage to make the payoff. The payoff money was taken from the crap and blackjack tables in the pit. In a casino today, a slot machine payoff from the pit would be ridiculous, if not prohibited.

It was not long before Barbara was the Manager in the cashiers cage. In an 18 hour period over the 4th of July in 1953, more than one million dollars went through the cage in slot machine and table fills. After Barbara turned 21 years old she left the cage to deal games in the pit, craps, roulette and blackjack.



Barbara Anne Canon dealing blackjack inside George's Gateway



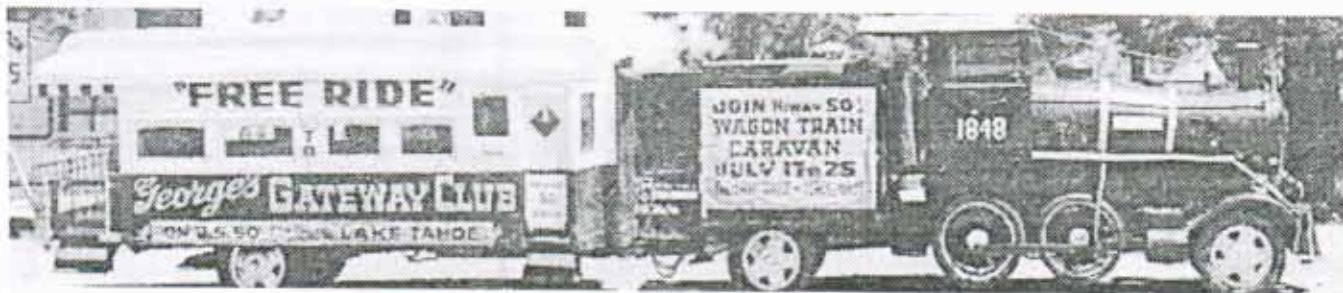
Each season at Lake Tahoe was bigger and better than the year before. In August of 1953 the entertainment at South Shore Lake Tahoe included Barney Dodd's Quartones, in the Round Up Room at GEORGE'S GATEWAY CLUB. HARVEY'S WAGON WHEEL was on the right side of the Gateway with the Delta Rhythm Boys appearing in the Sage Room. Across the street at SAHATI'S STATE-LINE COUNTRY CLUB was Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five. Just 1/4 mile into Nevada from state line, the SKY HARBOR CASINO was hosting The Ink Spots and the CASINO de PARIS had a variety show headed by the Arnaut Brothers.

Every year George would take several employees elk hunting to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Always returning with 14 elk, the Gateway would host an annual Elk Feed. This event was attended by prominent guests from 4 states. Herb Caen, a famous San Francisco newspaper columnist, visited and wrote three favorable articles about George's Gateway and the food they served.



Trailer overturns on Elk Hunt

One of the first, if not the first, shuttle vehicle for gamblers was started by George. It was a commercial truck transformed into an improvised train engine pulling a look alike passenger car. This shuttle would travel on Highway 50 giving gamblers a free ride to and from the casino. This shuttle vehicle was also used later on in Carson City when George ran the gaming at the Senator Club.



Most probable the first shuttle at Lake Tahoe Later used at the Senator Club in Carson City.

In 1953 part of the agreement in selling the Gateway to Bill Harrah, from HARRAH'S CLUB, in Reno, was for George not to be involved in gaming for one year. During the year away from gambling Canon and Curly Musso were two of the partners that started the now famous ski resort, Heavenly Valley. George sold his share of the ski resort in 1960.



Carol Canon and George Canon on the lifts at Heavenly Valley.

Although George was never granted another gaming license in the State of Nevada after selling George's Gateway Club. For many years he was involved with gaming at clubs throughout Nevada. The CASINO de PARIS, formerly the TAHOE VILLAGE, experienced several unsuccessful opening until Canon and Musso hosted the gaming action.



George owned a plane and was his own pilot. Naturally, he was involved with the dirt air strip and gaming at Sky Harbor. Some time afterward he was named Business Man of the Year for heating the air strip at the Lake Tahoe Airport in California. The heated air strip would generate year round flights. In Jackpot, Nevada he built another dirt air field so he could fly in and out when he operated two more clubs and a motel. His first club in Jackpot was GEORGE and TEX'S GATEWAY. It had a huge slot machine on the front of the building with the pay out area as the front entrance. Barbara thought that after this Gateway was destroyed by fire, Diamond Jim's was built on the same property. Barbara said that her father was proud of the logo he designed for Diamond Jim's. The logo was a diamond held high by the gambler. Adjacent to the casino property he had the Annabelle Motel named for his wife. In the late 50's George was so involved in Jackpot, Nevada the local slang name for the town was Canonville.



Steve Passalacqua and Barbara Anne Canon

The following is a sample of the chips used at George's Gateway Club in Lake Tahoe.



Pink



Yellow



Black



George & Tex's Gateway in Jackpot, Nevada



Red



Yellow



Black

GEORGE'S GATEWAY CLUB  
BOX 67  
LAKE TAHOE,  
STATE LINE, CALIF.

M1611  
8/18/53

5300 89 HUB CHECKS  
3000 RED STAMP 1 SIDE \$5.00 IN GOLD  
1500 YELLOW STAMP 1 SIDE \$25.00 IN GOLD  
800 BLACK STAMP 1 SIDE \$100.00 IN GOLD

STAMP REVERSE SIDE ALL CHECKS SPECIAL  
DIE: GEORGE'S GATEWAY IN GOLD \$500  
GATEWAY CLUB \$2500 GATEWAY CLUB \$10000

Rec'd 5-18-53 M-1611  
Comp. 8-21-53

5300 Hubs  
3000 Red - 5.00 one side \$10000  
1500 Yellow - 25.00  
800 Black - 100.00  
Reverse side George's Gateway Club in gold \$500  
\$2500 GATEWAY CLUB

His last Nevada enterprise was in the early 1970's for about two years at STOCKMAN'S in Elko. After leaving Nevada he settled in the Sacramento area. He would continue to run local poker games in clubs, bars and halls. In 1979 a fall from a ladder, resulting in a severe head injury, he was never the same. Barbara was able to care for him the rest of his life. George Sam Canon died December 13, 1988. An entrepreneur and true casino gaming pioneer of Lake Tahoe, Canon is buried in the Happy Homestead Cemetery at Lake Tahoe.