

THE INFORMATION BOOTH

Michael Knapp

The First Annual CC>CC Convention is now history, and many of us who were fortunate enough to be able to attend managed to come home with a substantial number of chips we can't identify. Judging from our mail, there are probably many more of you who have a box or several album pages of UFC's (unidentified flying chips) stashed somewhere just waiting for identification.

Please don't feel bashful about sending copies of those chips (or tokens) for identification through this column. We don't know all the answers, but we're willing to bet that there are members out there who might. That's what *The Information Booth* is all about: it's a way for club members to share not only their questions about chips, but their information as well. The column is not just for unidentified chips—we'll try to answer any question you have about gaming history or other subjects related to chip and token collecting. If you see a chip in the column that you can identify, please share your knowledge with other collectors by dropping your columnist a note at 5410 Banbury Drive, Worthington, Ohio 43235.

As usual, we'll begin with answers we've received to previously published UFC's. But first an addition to the last column's discussion of cruise line onboard casinos. There was a major casino omitted from the list: the Crystal Harmony (Crystal Cruise Line), whose onboard casino is operated by Caesars Palace. The venture is the first outside Nevada and Atlantic City for Caesars, and the chips say "Caesars Palace at Sea." We've received relatively few answers for this issue, but we'll share some of the information we learned at the club convention in Las Vegas.

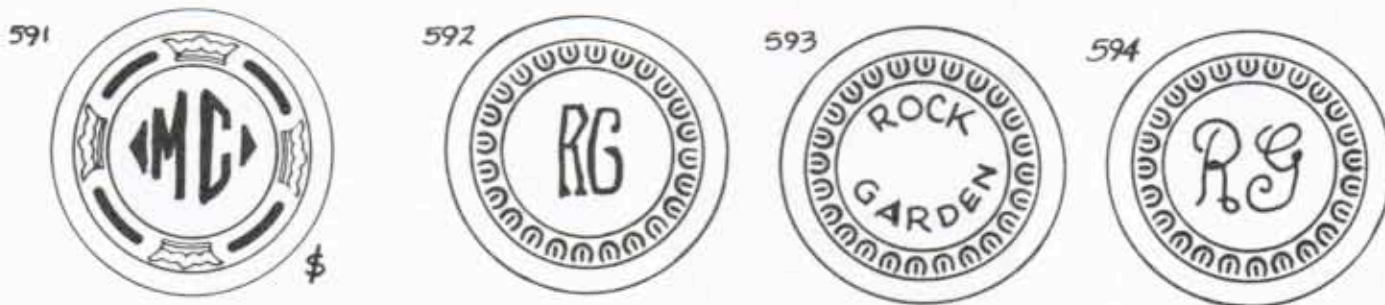
504: This chip, hotstamped only "303" is, in fact, from the Lucky Spot card room in Bakersfield, CA. Member Hank Boss tells us that the Lucky Spot is still open, and the number does relate to the address of the club: 2303 Edison Highway. Why only the last four digits are used on the chip we can't say, but it might have to do with a street renumbering which occurred after the club originally opened.

515: Speculation has it that this cord rim chip with the initials **WH** is from the White House, an illegal casino in Mentor, Ohio. Mentor is on Lake Erie, east of Cleveland toward the Pennsylvania border. We have not been able to confirm the identification, though. Can someone from Ohio's North Coast help?

554: The **Little Nevada Casino** is a card room in Billings, Montana. The chip illustrated is a plastic, injection-moulded chip.

579: Both Ron Dorian and Bill Akeman have identified the **Table Mountain** chip as having come from Table Mountain Rancheria, an Indian reservation card room near Friant, CA. (For those of us who have never heard of Friant, it's 18 miles northeast of Fresno.)

The following chips, all of which have new numbers, were seen at the club convention, and because they are attributed, we thought that the membership might be interested in them. As we have done in the past, we have used a "\$" to indicate those chips which have only a denomination on the reverse side.



591: This chip was found by members Gene Grossblatt and Ernie Wheelden, and its origin has been thoroughly authenticated. It was used on the S.S. Monte Carlo, one of the offshore California gambling ships which operated in the 1930's.

Many collectors are familiar with chips from the S.S. Tango and the S.S. Rex, but relatively few chips from other floating casinos have been authenticated. The first of the offshore California ships to offer gaming was the Monfalcone, anchored off Long Beach, and owned by Tutor Sherer and Rasmus (Razz) Pendleton. It opened in 1928, and burned to the water line only two years later. By that time, the offshore gambling business had attracted the interest of Jack Dragna, the Los Angeles mob boss, and he and Johnny Rosselli (later involved with the CIA-Mafia plot to kill Castro in Cuba) cut themselves in on the action.

The Monfalcone was replaced by the Rose Isle in 1931, operated by Sherer (who would later become a pillar of the Las Vegas gaming community), and partially owned by Dragna and Rosselli.

In the early 1930's Anthony Stralla (better known as Tony Cornero) became involved with gambling ships of his own. It was Cornero who operated the S.S. Tango and the S.S. Rex. Stralla was known as "the Admiral," but he earned that moniker not because of his gambling ships, but earlier. During Prohibition, Cornero was one of the major rum runners, who brought imported liquor in from supply ships in the Pacific on fast speedboats into Los Angeles. His fleet of booze-carrying speedboats resulted in his nickname.

The Johanna Smith was next to open, off Long Beach, CA, and was owned and operated by Guy McAfee and Milton B. "Farmer" Page. McAfee, a colorful Los Angeles figure, had been a police officer, and had been in charge of the vice squad. Alleged to have been one of the most corrupt cops in Los Angeles, McAfee virtually controlled illegal gambling in Los Angeles, and made sure that his friends in the business were tipped off before any planned raid by the police department. When McAfee retired from the force, he became openly involved in illegal gambling. He would later move to Las Vegas, as would Page, and it was McAfee who originally built the Golden Nugget downtown. The fate of the Johanna Smith is the subject of some debate. One story has it that it was freed to shut down after a murder occurred onboard in September, 1933. Another story says that the ship burned down in 1932.

In either case, the S.S. Monte Carlo was towed out (virtually none of the gambling ships had engines, because they never went anywhere!) and anchored near the Johanna Smith by operators Ed Turner and Marvin "Doc" Shouweiler, opening for business in May, 1932. Tony Cornero and his group owned the ship, but he was busy operating the S.S. Tango at the time.

Two years later, the Monte Carlo was raided by the LAPD, and all the ship's gambling equipment was confiscated. To reopen, the Monte Carlo was re-outfitted with the gaming tables and slot machines from the Johanna Smith, and business continued.

In 1936, the Monte Carlo was sold to Clarence Blazier (who had been involved with Cornero, Ben Siegel, Jack Dragna and Johnny Rosselli as owners of the S.S. Tango), who moved the ship to the San Diego area. It operated there for the remainder of the year, and closed for the winter. A violent storm in December, 1936, grounded the ship on the beach near the Hotel del Coronado. It was never rescued, and remained visible for ten years, until finally covered by sand.

The chip shown above is the first to have been positively attributed to the S.S. Monte Carlo.

Chips from the Johanna Smith, the Monfalcone, the Rose Isle, the S.S. Texas, the Showboat, the S.S. Lux, and other offshore gambling ships, have never been authenticated.

Offshore gambling in California finally ended in 1939, when the Attorney General (Earl Warren, later Governor of California and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) conducted a concerted legal battle to shut them down.

[Information for this discussion has several sources, among them *All American Mafioso: The Johnny Rosselli Story*, by Charles Rappleye and Ed Becker; Ernest Marquez, who will soon publish a book on the history of the gambling ships; *Life* magazine; *Loose Change* magazine; and "Three-Mile Limit," by Stephen P. Alpert, published in *TAMS Journal*.]

592-594: Member Bill Akeman tells us that these chips are from the Rock Garden, an illegal casino in Cicero, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago.

595: The Crystal Club was an illegal casino in Galveston, Texas.

596: According to member L. D. Kelley, this chip is from El Presidente Casino in San Jose, Costa Rica. He isn't sure what the initials CI stand for, but it is undoubtedly the corporation that owns or operates the casino.



597: There are at least two possibilities for this chip. It might be from Duck's Card Room in Tracy, CA, or from the Duck Club Bar in Princeton, CA. Can anyone from the Left Coast confirm an identification?
 598: This chip is supposedly from the Lucky Lady Casino (*not* lady Luck) in downtown Las Vegas. We have no details about this club, though, and cannot confirm the identification. Can someone help?



599: This chip might be from the Northern Lounge in Ely. Then again . . .
 600: B & G is believed to be from the B & G Club in Washington State. Further details would be appreciated!
 601 and 602: These chips, like UFC 232, which has different initials but the same hotstamp design, are believed to be private issue poker chips with the initials of the owner on them. Does anyone have any other information about them?



603: There is a Phoenix Casino card room in Sacramento, CA, but there have been other Phoenix clubs as well. Can someone help with an identification of this one?
 604: We assume that this is an advertising piece for Toppers Restaurant in Chicago, rather than a gaming chip. Does anyone have other information?
 605: This one appears to be a generic faro chip. If someone knows that it was used in a particular casino, please share that information with us.
 606: We cannot be certain about this chip, but East Peoria, IL was the home of a number of illegal casinos

operated out of Chicago during the 1930's and 1940's. The rim design fits with the era, but we know nothing about a Lyceum Stag Club in E. Peoria. Can one of you help?

607: This chip, enlarged to show detail, is a real puzzler. It's a hat and cane rim, and appears to be of fairly recent vintage. But does the chip say "Border Town" or "Bordertown"? It appears to be two words at the top, but what about the bottom? That seems to read "Bordertown, Nev". Trouble is, there is no such place as Bordertown, Nevada! Can someone tell us where this chip is in use, and where the casino is located?

The following illustrations are new UFC's sent to us by several members, and any information you have about them will be appreciated.

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OBV.



REV.

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Thanks for the input for this issue's column to those members identified above, and to: Roy Endres, Allan Myers, Bill O'Brien, Eric Rosenblum, Steve Roy, Doug Saito, and Al Zaika.