

GAMING HISTORY OF LAKE TAHOE

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE

by Steve McClendon

Much has been pinned about Lake Tahoe's South Shore gaming establishments through the years. Since June of 1932 when the Nevada Club opened its doors for gambling on the east side of Hwy. 50 at State Line, over 30 "Clubs" have come and gone. Much speculation has gone into exact locations of these establishments.

The East side of Hwy. 50 at State Line is by far the toughest to map out. At least 15 of these Clubs occupied the ground on which Harrah's now covers! During the 40's and 50's the mortality rate was high for these joints on the South Shore, some lasting less than 1 year. The Twin States (45 days), The Main Entrance (2 Months), Villa Tahoe (2 Months) Itaha's (Sahati spelled backwards) 47 to ? . You get the idea. Their window of opportunity



began here. The Nevada Club and the State Line Country Club both received their gaming license on June 1st 1932. Both had been serving more than trout and a cold beer before this date however. The State Line C.C. was geared more for gaming. It was

was very small. Maybe 90 days of reliable weather to bring in enough gaming capital during the summer to survive the long harsh winters in the high Sierras. Hope you enjoy these rare and revealing prints that I've collected over the years that give us a glimpse of Nevada's Gaming past up at the "Lake in the Sky".



The Eastside Story

The Eastside of US 50 at State Line is a good place to start since gaming at the south end of the Lake

larger and had more tables. The Nevada Club was more of a "locals bar" with several table games and a few slots.

These two Clubs had the South Shore much to themselves along with Carl's Club, the State Line Market and the Nevada Drug Store for the first 12 years . Slow traveling on a dirt road made access to these Clubs slow and challenging to say the least.



As the roads improved in and out of the Tahoe Basin, traffic began to flow up and down the old Placerville Rd (US 50) and business improved for everyone. The 40's brought with them a lot of growth to the State Line, The Main Entrance, Itaha's, The Twin States, The Colonial and later the Tahoe Bowl c1950, the Circus Room c1952, the Tahoe Plaza c1953, the Tahoe Palace Club c1956 and the Tahoe Colonial Club c1954...All of these at one time or another operated out of those 3 or 4 buildings between the State Line C.C. and the Calif./ Nevada border. AND all of those properties put together would easily fit into the Harrah's Tahoe of today.

The Westside Story

The year is 1944. Harvey Gross buys an older building on the west side of US 50 (Still not paved!) and has it moved up to the road. He puts in a 24hr gas pump, now the only service between Placerville and Carson City at this time. On the pump was a sign: "Ring bell for service" and out would come one of the dealers to fill'er up and take an order of refreshments. If the customer choose to come in, he could kill some time by playing one of THREE slot machines. Harvey's wife Llewellyn prepared most of the food served atop their 6 stool bar at their nearby home and the Wagon Wheel Saloon and Gambling Hall was born.



In 1945 joining the party with a sign twice as big as the Club itself was the Gateway Club soon to be George's Gateway in 49'. (See Steve Passalacqua's indepth interview with Barbara Canon in our July 98 Club magazine). Then Tony Grech (Tony's)



as well as Norman Reinburg (Dopey Norman's) Seems many of these owners/operators cut their collective teeth in California Clubs and Bars before putting it all "on the Line" at South Shore.

Down Around the Corner

About 2 miles up US 50 from State Line is Kingsbury Grade to the right and Kahle Dr to the left down toward the Lake. These intersections saw their share of gaming as well. The Tahoe Village 1946-51. Casino De Paris 52-57 and Oliver's 57-63 all occupied the same location. It's still operating today! No slots, no table games, it does have a book however...a booking station! It's the local Douglas County Sheriff Station. Down Kahle Dr. towards the Lake just west of where Lakeside Inn now stands was maybe the most unique club of them all. Sky Harbor c1947-54 stood at the north end of a runway which was heated to accommodate year round air traffic. Today this runway would dissect the Edgewood



Golf course. Eddie's Stardust which lasted only one year 57-58 was near by as was the Glass Crutch (1962-67), Bonanza (1966-67), South Shore Club 65-66 and the South Shore Riverboat which was open for less than 3 months in 1970. If you've stopped by the Burger King for a bite

in Zephyr Cove you can say you where in the Tahoe Nugget c1965-81.



Last Men Standing

The cool winter winds of 1955 blew down off the Sierra's and over the Lake bringing a man like no other to the South Shore of Tahoe. Bill Harrah had visited the Lake on occasion and was amazed. " We walked into George's Gateway. It was really a crummy place, just terrible! Still the business was unbelievable! The crap tables were 2 deep. The 21 tables, the slots, it was busy, busy, busy. We had a very nice place in Reno and George's was a crummy place. But they did 3 times the business!" He had been involved



with gaming in Reno for over 18 years by now. He'd been sober for 9. Bill wanted a piece of the action at the Lake. His first move was to buy the vacant Gateway Club (on the site where Harvey's of today sits) and smaller neighboring clubs (Tony's & Dopey's et al) as well and renovate the Lake Club to his high standards. What could Harrah's do to keep the customers flowing year round in this June to September playground? With a stroke of brilliance and the help of Greyhound, Harrah's started bussing up customers from California's heartland as well as the Bay area. Offering them a chicken dinner and a roll of nickels on their arrival and a bottle of champagne for the ride home. Next door Harvey Gross started running his own charters up and over Echo summit. At this time only the U.S. Army employed more buses than Harrah and Gross. This one promotion which started with only 2 buses and grew to over 40 per day (out of 31 cities), did more to put Bill Harrah and year round gaming on the map at South Shore.



Inside the Nevada Club

One year later Bill is at it again, this time on the East side of US 50. First buying the State Line Country Club, then the Main Entrance and eventually the Nevada Club and several smaller clubs, the Tahoe Plaza and Tahoe Palace. By 1959 Bill Harrah OWNED the east side of State Line. He truly was the "Last Man Standing" and Harrah's Tahoe was born. ♦



Pictures courtesy of the Steve McClendon Collection.