

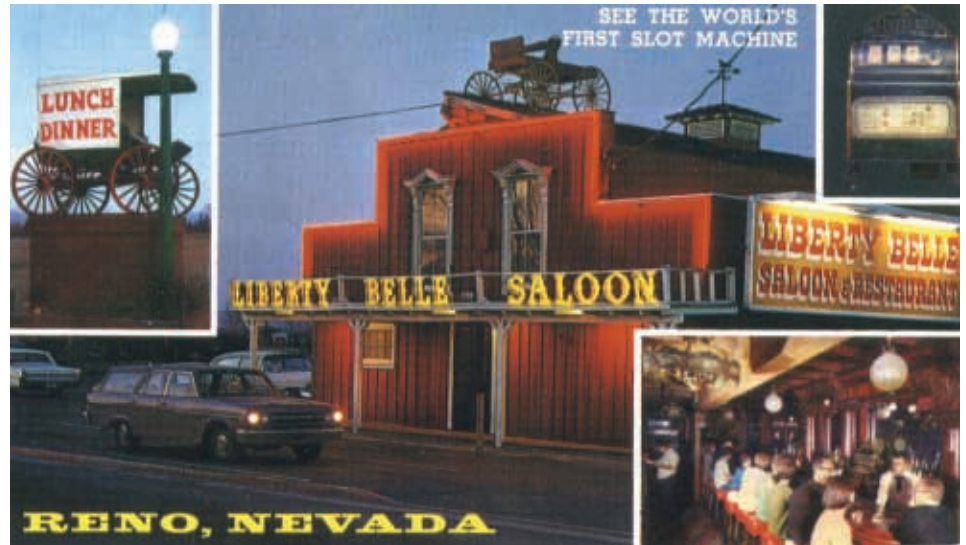
Phil's Forays

Last Call at the Liberty Belle Saloon

by Phil Jensen

St. Patrick's Day, 2006. A late-winter snow storm is falling and at Reno's forty-seven year old Liberty Belle Saloon it is the final day of business. More than just a bar and restaurant, the Liberty Belle is a Reno icon. Many of Reno's residents don't know it any other way. It has always been there, on South Virginia Street, the familiar barn-like structure with the surreys and buckboards on the roof. It has a warm and friendly place with owners Frank and Marshall Fey and their longtime employees serving beef, beer, and booze. You could always count on it. During my years in Reno I spent many hours there, often closing the place up at night. When I learned of its impending demise, I was devastated. It was like a second home.

The Feys opened the place in 1958, renaming a previous bar that had been called The Little Red Barn. In those days, it was out in the sticks, far from downtown Reno. Even the police wouldn't answer a call from there. The brothers' assets were few, but they capitalized on the fact that



their grandfather Charlie had invented the modern day three-reel slot machine in San Francisco in 1895. He called it The Liberty Belle, and one of them was put on display in the bar.

Over the years, guns, posters, antique slots, and other items were added. There were always a variety of old machines licensed for play, and I got a big kick out of playing them. When you bought a roll of coin, Marshall usually reminded you that you were playing at the Liberal-T-Belle!

The Liberty Belle was a study in Reno history—the old Brunswick bar came from The

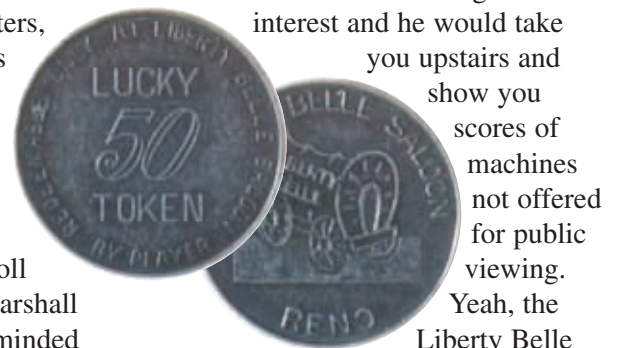
Owl Club downtown and light fixtures were out of The Winehouse and other establishments around town. Marshall would give you the story on it all. He was a walking encyclopedia when it came to antique slot

machines. Show the slightest interest and he would take you upstairs and show you scores of machines not offered for public viewing. Yeah, the Liberty Belle was a history buff's delight.

In 1965, in response to the great American half-dollar shortage, the Belle issued a 50¢, Osborne coinage, token for use in their machines. It was one of the first I put in my collection. Later, in 1979, a one-dollar token manufactured by the Nevada



Phil Jensen, Marshal Fey and Jeff Fey



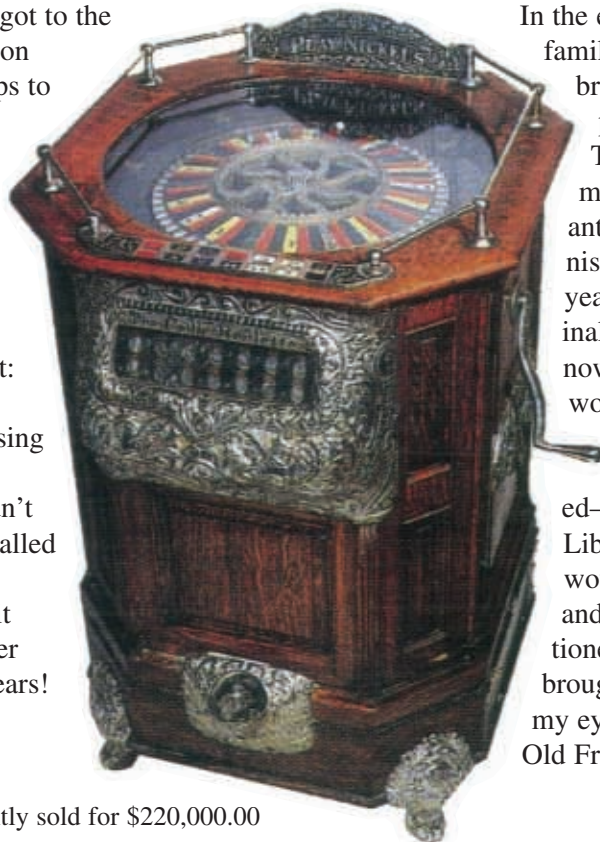
City Mint was added. I thought it was pretty neat.

As the years rolled by, Reno grew—mostly to the South—engulfing the Liberty Belle in malls, bars, and restaurants. In 1964, the Centennial Coliseum was built behind the Liberty Belle. It later became the Reno/Sparks Convention Center and continued to expand. In 2002, an eminent domain effort was made to acquire the vulnerable Liberty Belle, but an outcry by the good people of Reno stalled the effort and the Convention Authority relented. I can remember breathing a sigh of relief.

By now Frank had retired and his son Jeff was working in his absence. Things had seemed to settle back into a good-old-days mode. Living in Las

Vegas, I only got to the Liberty Belle on occasional trips to Reno, but it was always good to go “Home.”

Then, suddenly, the announcement: The Liberty Belle was closing on March 17, 2006. I couldn’t believe it. I called my old friend Marsh—yes, it was true—after forty-seven years!



In the end it was a family decision that brought the place down. The old machines, bar, antiques, and furnishings bought years ago at nominal prices were now collectively worth millions. And so it was decided—the old Liberty Belle would be closed and the stuff auctioned off. It brought a tear to my eye—Goodbye, Old Friend!

1904 Caille Peerless Roulette. A similar machine recently sold for \$220,000.00