

PHIL'S FORAYS LEAVING LAS VEGAS

by Phil Jensen

Living in Southern Nevada in the early '70's was fun but it was difficult to pursue my passion for small town gaming chips. Unlike the Northern part of the state with its well established history of gambling in the hinterlands, Clark County was practically barren of any live gaming outside of the Las Vegas valley.

I made my first trip to Pahrump in the summer of 1970, which was seven years after electricity and three years before the Saddle West which was Pahrump's first full-bore casino. The only bar in town was a place called Joe's Cotton Picken' Saloon which by the way is still in business and looks much the same now as it did then, however the name changed to the Waterhole. It's also been known as the Eight Ball Lounge and BJ's which had a 21 game at one time. After the long trip from Vegas I was anxious to go inside and have a cold one. I was disappointed that there wasn't any gambling there but passed the time talking to the bartender-who could have been Joe himself-and he told me that the bar came out of an old saloon in Virginia City. I thought that was interesting as I had spent some time in the bars there when I lived in Reno. Anyway, I asked him if there were any other places around and he directed me to a place called Fred's Bar located a few miles down the road on the way to Death Valley.

I finished my beer and headed out in search of the place. It wasn't hard to find as Pahrump in those days was mostly desert and critters. I pulled up to the bar and as I got out of the truck I came within inches of stepping on a very large snake who had been sunning himself in my parking space. I don't know who was more startled but we both took off in opposite directions-me into the bar yelling "SNAKES!" or something to that effect. The bartender-who could have been Fred-thought it was real funny. Anyway, we talked for a while and I put a few nickels in the two or three antique slot machines that stood along the wall. I was disappointed that there was no 21 game but didn't really expect to find one. As it turned out it would be my only visit to Fred's Bar as it burned down sometime after that. You can still see the ruins if you know where to look.

Leaving Fred's I took off into the desert on a dirt road that went through the Ash Meadows Wildlife Area. I had heard there was some neat stuff out there and wanted to check it out-besides, I still hadn't located any chips and was getting a little frustrated.

It wasn't long until I ran across a bar with an attached runway, swimming pool, and cathouse. It was pretty nice actually with quite a few slot machines but no live gaming. After a beer or two I continued my journey through the outback of the Amargosa desert. Shortly I came across Devil's Hole, home of the endangered Pupfish and former stomping ground of Charles Manson. Curious, I climbed down into the hole and watched the little Pupfish swim around. Today, the place is surrounded by a chin-link fence and impossible to enter.

Continuing on, I finally reached the paved highway leading to California and eventually discovered the Stateline Saloon. Much to my delight, there was a 21 and poker table although neither looked like they had been used for some time. Luckily the

owner, a lady by the name of Doris Jackson, who by the way still owns the place today took me in the office and sold me some of her chips. After a long, dry trip I had finally hit pay dirt-wa-la. Happily I headed back to Las Vegas but would return whenever I could to the Stateline Saloon, the crown jewel of the Amargosa.

Heading south from Las Vegas were a couple of places I could scrounge for chips. The first was Searchlight and there was a neat old place there called Sandy's. It was originally owned by a Sandy Sandquist and the chips which bore his name were still in use. By now though, Warren Doing owned the joint and he was quite a character. One could usually find him wearing a red baseball cap and yuking it up with the old timers who hung out in the place. Once in a while the boys would get up a poker game with some old Boulder Club chips from Vegas. They were the small crown red ones with an insert showing the old sign. One day I was able to talk old Warren out of one and I was real proud of it.



Sandy's Club in Searchlight probably early '70's. The building still stands.

Next door was a place called the El Ray Club. It wasn't the original one owned by Willie Martello which had been across the street but a second version which had one 21 table and about four slots. They used a yellow \$5 chip from the Last Frontier in Vegas-the one with the dancing girl on it. It was one of my favorites and I managed to rathole a couple extra. Still, I wished they had used something with the town name.

Another place called the Chevron Bar was located at the opposite end of town and was connected to a Chevron Gas Station. Unfortunately, it had closed in 1969 so I just missed it. I was able to locate the owner and he gave me a couple of the chips. I was disappointed that they didn't say Searchlight on them but was glad to get them just the same. You can still see inside the place with its rather ornate ceiling.

A few miles down the road was the Cal-Nev-Ari Casino and landing strip. It opened in 1967 and was owned by Slim Kidwell and his wife, Nancy. Slim was an old time pioneer aviator who also tended bar on occasion. I asked him why he built his place in the middle of nowhere. He told me one day he was flying around scouting for a site and had his plane on automatic pilot. He wound up falling asleep and when woke up he was just about out of gas. Fortunately, he was able to land ok and when he got out of the plane declared the place Cal-Nev-Ari. Anyway, they had a crap and 21 game in there but rarely opened them due

to a scarcity of dealers in the area. I was able to buy the chips, the one with the Horsehead mold.



The Cal-Nev-Ari around 1970 showing the original sign with "CASINO". It was later changed to 21-SLOTS

Leaving the main highway, the road to Laughlin snaked over the mountains down to Davis Dam and the Colorado River. From there a narrow road followed the river into Laughlin itself here there were three casinos- The Riverside, Monte Carlo and Odie Lopp's Nevada Club.

The Riverside was a small, cramped place with 4 or 5 twenty-one tables and a crap game that was so close to the wall you could hardly get by it to use the restroom. The Post Office was also located there using the name Laughlin. It's interesting to note that the dollar token in play had the location as Davis Dam, Nevada and the name Southpoint was used by the government. Anyway, for it's first few years of existence there was some confusion as to what the name really was but Laughlin won out in the end. Anyway I rounded up the available chips and headed down the road.



The original Riverside Resort as it appeared about 1970.



... and several years later after some major improvements.

Down the road on the other side was the Monte Carlo Resort. I believe it was a little larger than the Riverside and I remember it being rather cool and dark inside-a nice respite from the summer sun. The bar ran the length of two of the walls so the bartender was kept on the run. There were probably 4 or 5 twenty-one tables and a crap and poker game. There was never much business as hardly anyone went to Laughlin in those days. I bought in on the 21 game and began looking through the chips which turned out to be all in good shape since the place had only been open about a year. I was delighted that they used a dove tail 50¢ chip even though it didn't have the town name on it-just Monte Carlo. I was only able to get a few and discovered that there were actually two varieties-I was really on a roll! Anyway

the place lasted until 1977 and was at a disadvantage because it was away from the river. It was re-named the Crystal Palace and that lasted until about 1985 when it closed. I believe the building was used by the Chamber of Commerce for a while and it still stands today.



The Monte Carlo Resort as it looked around 1970.



...and a few years later after an addition had been built on the front.

Leaving the Monte Carlo there was a fork in the road. If you went right you were on your way to Needles-if you went left it took you down to the river and Odie Lopp's Nevada Club. It was previously the Bobcat Club which supposedly had live gaming a couple of years earlier but I was never able to locate any chips from there. Anyway, you couldn't see it from the road because the sagebrush and blocked the view and I think there was a small sign directing one to the casino. There was also a row of trees in front of the place which was the only shade in town. If I stayed overnight I would park under them to escape the morning sun.

The chips were kind of neat having Odie's name on them and some of the five dollar denominations had the name Southpoint. The place went through a series of owners after Lopp sold out around 1975 and today the place is the Golden Nugget. Amazingly, the pit area is much the same today as it was in 1970!



The Nevada Club probably sometime after 1975 showing some additions and improvements.

The eighties saw phenomenal growth as Laughlin blossomed into a mini-Las Vegas complete with biker rallies and rodeos. I still go down to goof off and collect a few of the chips and tokens that are issued these days but I still have fond memories of when Laughlin was young thirty years ago.



The Colorado River Resort probably taken in 1979. It was the forerunner of the Pioneer Club.

The last holdout for chips in Clark County was Mesquite, a sleepy community eighty miles east of Las Vegas. Unfortunately, there was only one place with live gaming and that was George Harmon's Valley Inn. It was a dusty old joint with only one twenty one game and some old slot machines. Getting the chips was a real challenge since the game was hardly ever open. It took several trips before I was able to get the one and five dollar diamond molds that were in use and later a plain black 50¢ chip on the NEVADA mold. After George died around 1975 the new owners pasted stickers on the chip to coverup the Harmon name. I thought it was pretty tacky. In recent years the place was demolished and replaced with the Golden West Casino.

The present-day Oasis was called Western Village in those days but had no live gaming. It was mostly a restaurant serving travellers on their way through town and had a long row of slot machines overlooking the street. Eventually a 21 table was added and bit by bit the place grew into the resort it is today.

There were two other bars in town, the Corner which is still in operation, and a neat old place called the Blue Spot which looked like a house with a screen porch. It was located roughly across the street from the present-day Stateline Casino.

Anyway, I made a lot of dry runs to the outlying areas of Las Vegas but even if I didn't come up with any chips I always had a good time-I'll always remember them.