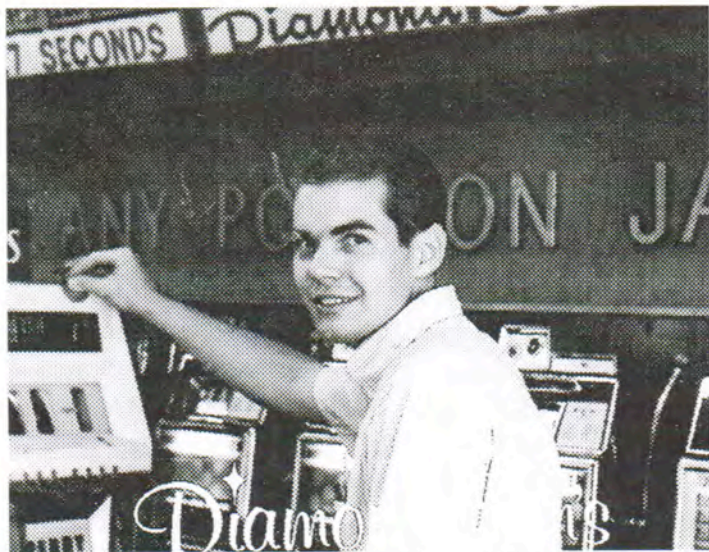


PHIL'S FORAYS LIVING LARGE IN LAS VEGAS

by Phil Jensen

Although I preferred living in Reno, every couple of years I'd move to Las Vegas just so I could hunt for Southern Nevada chips. Las Vegas in the late '60's and early '70's was a far cry from what it is today but I still had a lot of fun exploring the Strip and the small clubs on Fremont Street. There were places like the Red Garter, Nevada Club, Frank Schivo's California Club, Pioneer, Club Bingo, Sinabar, Carousel, Mint, and Honest John's downtown. All have been absorbed into the few large casinos that make up Fremont Street today. Places like the Horseshoe and Golden Nugget were a lot smaller and more fun too. I spent many hours playing the old nickel machines at the Golden Nugget which dropped an \$8.00 jackpot into the coin tray all at once.



Here I am playing a penny slot at Diamond Jin's Nevada Club on August 25, 1965. It would be another four years before I would get the bright idea to collect chips.

Most of the places had quarter craps so there were plenty of low denomination chips to collect. Some even had ten and fifty centers. Even though I got to visit a lot of the joints that are no more, I regret not seeing places like the Bird Cage, Fortune Club, Savoy, and Boulder Club. They must have been pret-

ty neat.

One of the activities I enjoyed was exploring the small clubs in North Las Vegas. A good friend of mine, Warren Stanley, was the constable out there for many years and knew a lot of the old time operators. He was able to get me quite a few obsolete chips from long closed places and relate many stories about them.

One of those places was the Town Hall Round-Up Club which was so named because a lot of North Las Vegas city officials would gather there for lunch. Supposedly, a lot of business was conducted there. Across the street was the Embassy Club which, in addition to gambling, had burlesque-type entertainment. At the time it was the only place like it in town and was pretty popular. At night cars would be parked for blocks along the boulevard.

Warren or "Stan" as he preferred to be called, was also able to dig up chips from the Oxford, Zanzibar, Louisiana, and Brown Derby Clubs. Some were located on the West Side and I was afraid to go into them.

Just down the street was a place called Bill and Bud's Montana Bar which is still in business as the New Montana Bar. There was a single twenty-one table in there and every time I went in I'd grab a few chips. They had one and five dollar denominations and for the \$25 chip they used a hot-stamped 25¢ Chesterfield Club which was what the joint was called previously. Anyway, one day I was playing and the pit-boss left to use the rest-room. I asked the dealer, who was obviously new, what the chips in the middle were. She looked at one and said it was just a 25¢ chip. I asked her if I could buy four of them and be obliged. I quickly stuck them in my pocket just about the time the boss returned to his post. He immediately noticed the missing \$100 worth of chips. "Where did those chips go?" he screamed. The frightened dealer quickly pointed at me as I sat there with an innocent look on my face. "Give those back-they're worth \$25 each" he said. "Oh, I thought they were only worth a quarter" I replied as I gave up my treasure. Anyway, they used a red 10¢ hotstamp that matched the yellow one for drink tokens and I was able to get several of those. So I still wound up with a Chesterfield Club chip for my collection.

Farther north on Las Vegas Boulevard was a joint called Al's Liquors and it was kind of a tough joint. There was one 21 game in there and they have one and five dollar chips. One night I was playing and rat-holing chips whenever I thought the dealer wasn't

looking. Pretty soon I got up to leave and the pit boss said I couldn't take chips! So I said I was just going to use the rest-room and I'd be right back. I went toward the back looking for an exit which I quickly used. Once outside I took off through a dark and bumpy field. Fortunately I got to my truck without breaking my neck. Anyway, I got my chips and it wasn't much after that the joint was closed for cheating.

Next stop was Bunny's Bar just down the street. It had a curved facade with a mural of a boy rabbit chasing a girl rabbit painted all around. The wall is still there as part of the present-day Poker Palace but the mural was painted out years ago.

As it turned out, Bunny was a crabby old guy who watched his chips closer than the joint across the street. They were old and worn rectangle mold ones with denominations of 50¢, \$1, and \$5. One time I was playing and picking out some good ones for my collection. When I attempted to leave, Bunny told me to leave the chips on the table. Again I used my ploy of having to use the rest-room but he would have none of that. I was really in a spot but soon Bunny turned his back and I bolted for the back looking for an exit. I ducked into a door and found myself in a store room with a bunch of mops and assorted junk. I looked for a window to crawl out of but there was none. I started to wonder if this chip collecting thing was all that much fun. Afraid to leave, I just stood there hoping Bunny wouldn't walk through the door but after a few minutes I ventured out. No Bunny. I don't remember how, but I got out of the bar, the chips being real treasures. Not long after that a guy named Mickey bought the place and had chips made with that name. They weren't nearly as neat as the originals though.

Another joint I liked a lot as Cal's Gin Mill. Cal was an old timer who held gaming license number 17. He also used chips from an old casino called the Rancho Inn that had been next door and burned down around 1966. I used to ask him about the old days whenever I got the chance and one time he even gave me some old chips. He operated a 21 and poker game and also a tub-style crap table that was gone by the time I got there. Later on he got rid of the Rancho Inn chips and had some made that just said CAL'S. Later he changed the name of the joint to Cal's Jackpot Club but the place has been closed for several years now.

The current Opera House has gone through several changes over the years but when I was collecting in the early '70's it was called the 101 Club, owned by the Bon-Bec Corporation. At one

time it was owned by Don Laughlin who used the money from its sale to buy the Riverside in Laughlin. Later it was owned by Glen Jones who was Clark County Sheriff at one time. My friend Stan was able to find some chips from there that I think went back to the original owner. Anyway, I remember that there was an old Chuck-a-Luck game one could play for nickels at the 101 and it was one of the last ones in existence-I had a lot of fun playing it.

I first met Bob Stupak around 1974 when he was first getting started and was in the process of opening a place called the Million Dollar Gambling Hall and Museum. He had bought an old Lincoln Mercury dealership located on Las Vegas Boulevard and Main Street which is the sight of the Stratosphere today. It was an old wooden building with a row of service bays outback. He papered the walls with dollar bills and had some old gambling memorabilia on display. A friend of mine even had his chip collection on display.

He charged \$3.50 to get into the place and in return you got ten dollar-size washers with paper stickers on both sides. Once inside, you played these "tokens" in an eight reel slot machine. If you were fortunate enough to line up the eight special symbols-which was a naked girl straddling a fancy M-you won \$250,000 which, at the time, was the largest jackpot in Las Vegas. Bob had 100 ten thousand dollar chips made up which were black hotstamps on the NEVADA mold and placed them in the machine's hopper. You would get 25 of them each time you hit the jackpot. Anyway, the gimmick lasted exactly nine days when the gaming control board decided the lack of security in the place made such a large jackpot a risky proposition. Needless to say the jackpot never got hit.

One day as I was getting off work around eight in the evening, I noticed a huge black, oily cloud of smoke billowing in the sky. I could only get within a couple of blocks of it but I knew it was the Million Dollar Gambling Hall. There was a large crowd of people standing around and Bob was running in and out of the burning building salvaging panels of dollar bills. The place was a total loss but it was a blazing finish for the Million Dollar Museum.

Bob wasn't out of business for long. He bought a dairy freeze operation down the street and called it - what else - the Million Dollar Dairy Freeze complete with his girl on the "M" logo. He managed to squeeze eight or ten old slot machines into the place and if you hit the jackpot you got to keep the machine. I made a deal with him to make up a display of old

chips and some articles and pictures of the fire at the Million Dollar Museum. For my effort he gave me a couple of his \$10,000 chips that were salvaged from the fire.

About this time - around 1974 - Bob bought the old Sinabar downtown. It was one of those sneak-joint bars where the dealers would drink on their breaks. Bob added a couple of 21 tables and a crap game. I went in on opening night and Bob was watching a 21 game. When he saw he reached into the rack and tossed me a \$5 chip - a brown hotstamp top hat and cane mold, I was thrilled to add it to my collection.

After about a year Bob changed the name of the Sinabar to the Vault Casino. Up went the panels of dollar bills that had been a familiar sight at the Museum. He also made one and five dollar gaming tokens by pasting stickers over washers for use in the slot machines. I sure hated paying six dollars to add. Another of my favorite past times was hanging out on the Strip. In those days, there were twelve major hotels that included the Sahara, Thunderbird, Riviera, Stardust, Frontier, Desert Inn, Sands, Flamingo, Dunes, Aladdin, Tropicana, and Hacienda. There were other, smaller operations with live gaming but I thought I'd get all the \$5 chips from the big hotels first. I figured I'd hit one or two hotels a week and spread out the cost.



Flamingo in the days of the Bubble Tower

The first place I went was the Dunes Hotel, one of my favorite places. I asked the cage cashier if I could buy a \$5 chip and she said sure but did I want some of these obsolete ones she had in the back of the drawer? It wasn't in my budget but I agreed and would up with four or five different chips. I left with mixed emotions about spending so much money but was glad to get

them. I had the same experience at other hotels and in the end wound up with a fairly good collection of old chips. Even some of the older places had only been around for twenty years or so and with little competition, I had a fairly easy time finding stuff.

As I mentioned, there were small clubs on the Strip as well. One of my favorite was Honest John's located in a shopping center at Sahara and the Strip. There were a couple of other locations but this one was the only one with live gambling. It was a noisy slot joint with free peanuts at the bar. Later on the Money Tree and Jackpot Casino opened and the Mayfair Market in the center became the Big Wheel, the Wheel, and Centerfold complete with gambling in the front and strippers in the rear. You could spend the whole day there. The Jolly Trolley later occupied the sight.



Sahara and the Strip around 1978 showing the Money Tree, Honest John's and The Jolly Trolley Casinos. The Jolly Trolley which was previously the Centerfold Casino featured the Centerfold Revue which was a topless show.

Another neat place was the Pussy Cat A-Go-Go. It was mostly an after hours joint with not much happening before midnight. After that the place would be jumping until the early morning hours. I remember a couple of 21 tables with nice inlay chips. I was also able to get some hotstamps used by a previous owner. There were rumors around that not all the cards came off the top of the deck. Could be - the joint closed in 1971.



Another place I hung out at was the Sneak joint a couple of blocks off the Strip on Spring Mountain Road. There was a lone twenty-one table there with 50¢, \$1, and \$5 chips. They were just hotstamps and I was able to rat-hole what I wanted without any problems from management. It was a relief after all the hassles I had in Northtown. Later on, around 1979, a new owner had some nice \$5 inlay chips made up but shortly thereafter the place was changed to Sonny's Saloon with slots only. Recently, the place was torn down to make way for road construction.

Other places on the Strip that had live games included the Silver Slipper, Castaways, Riata, Mr. Slys, (later Big Reds) El Morocco, Flamingo Capri, Louigi's Broiler, and Lucky Slots which later became the Silver Saddle. So in addition to the dozen hotels I also had to budget money for chips from those places. It was a daunting task but I managed to get what was available. Of course, I had a lot of fun doing it not thinking some day most of these places and all of the chips would be obsolete. Anyway my early years in Las Vegas provided fun the likes of which I would never experience again.