

PHIL'S FORAYS
THE LONELIEST ROAD
Phil Jensen #118

A few years ago, Life Magazine I think it was, did a story about "The Loneliest Road In America". Basically it was about U.S. 50 as it stretched from Gallon to Ely - some two hundred and fifty miles of not much of anything. I was quite amused by it as I had traveled that very road many times in my search for old and current casino chips.

Since Fallon was only sixty miles from Reno, I went there often. There were some neat joints there although clubs such as the Esquire, Keystone, Owl, Pastime, Jet, Eddie's, Star and Lucky Spot had already closed. The Sagebrush, Horseshoe, Frankies, Palace, Nevada Bank and Roadside were still in operation though, but some had ceased live gaming. Nevertheless, there were lots of chips to be had with not too much effort.

My favorite place was the Roadside Inn, also known as Mom's Place. "Mom" was a lady by the name of Emily Mitchell who not only owned the place but was also the twenty-one dealer. She was quite elderly-close to ninety by some accounts but very sharp. She had a crap table next to the 21 game and kept a close watch on it. Many times I would hear her correct the dice dealer as she dealt the cards.

The dice table itself was quite interesting. It was oval in shape with a layout that Mom had designed herself. I remember it had no place to bet the don't pass line. Mom didn't want the players betting with the house! She told me the table was once used in the old Lawton Springs casino outside Reno.

Mom used a 10¢ and one dollar chip with the Roadside name. Some of the dimes only has "10" on them and Mom told me that way she could use them for ten dollars! She also used some green five dollar chips that only had a clover on them. They had been used years earlier at the Old Clover Club downtown. Since most of her clientele were low-rolling service men from the nearby Navy base the five dollar chips didn't see much play.

Among the various chips that Mom gave me were some Star Club roulettes. She and her husband owned the place from 1955 until 1962. I was sorry I had missed all those old places.

Mom died around 1977 and left the Roadside to Alan Childers a local contractor and long-time friend who had previously operated games around Fallon. He

radically changed the place removing the walls and partitions enlarging it greatly. He also had a new rack of chips made on the horseshoe mold. Most of the stuff from Mom's was auctioned off including the oval crap table. The new place bore little resemblance to the old with roulette and even Keno being added. Anyway, the place only operated until 1980 when it was closed and demolished.



The Nugget, downtown, was owned by Otto Lauf. He was a great guy who always had time to talk. He would even take me into his office and scrounge around for old chips. I got quite a few old Nugget chips from him one time, and some were twenty-fives and hundreds on the old TK Specialty mold.

Next to the Nugget was the Palace Club and I remember a couple of twenty-one tables and some slots but by 1967 the place had closed and was taken over by the Nugget. You can still see where the entrance was by a large "P" formed by real silver dollars embedded in the sidewalk exists. The silver dollars were removed years ago but I can still remember checking them to see if any were loose.

Next to the Palace was a place called Frankies. It had live gaming in the fifties and sixties but by 1970 the place operated as a bar only. One could usually find a few of the local residents passed out on the floor on the other side of the room presumably where the games used to be. It was absorbed into the Nugget around 1977 and was used partly to build new restrooms on the north end of the Nugget.

Another place I used to spend a lot of time was the Sagebrush Club. Now defunct, it was an old place having been around since the legalizing of gaming. The owner was a Chinese man by the name of Tom Wong who had operated the United Club in Reno in the early 60's. He was usually in the place playing Pan on a second floor ledge that overlooked the casino.

Unlike the Roadside there was a crap table in there that was practically square. I don't know if it was home-made but I've never seen one like it since. Like the Palace, there's still a big iron "S" in the sidewall that marks the entrance.

A couple blocks off Maine Street was an antique shop run by a lady whose family apparently ran the old Keystone Club. She had quite a few chips from there that she sold for a dollar a piece and every time I went to Fallon I'd buy a few. There were three different ones - a red five, a black five, and a ten dollar one that looked like it had been stamped on a roulette chip. Anyway, after a while she ran out and I figured I'd cornered the market.

There was a guy I got to know pretty well by the name of Willie and at one time he owned the Esquire Club at the head of Maine Street. He told me he had a sack full of old Esquire Club chips that he and his buddies took on hunting trips to play poker with. Somehow, over the years, they had become lost and he was never able to locate them much to my disappointment. What he did have though, was a large cardboard box that was about a third full of old Palace Club chips. There were quite a few different ones including some \$5 and \$25 aerodies. Every time I'd go visit him I'd buy a few - I guess I should have bought the whole box! Anyway, the Esquire closed in 1957 and was torn down as it had been damaged by the Dixie Valley earthquake that occurred a couple of years earlier.

In the mid 70's the Horseshoe Club was still open although the live gaming had ceased. One day I wandered in and asked the owner, a guy named Charlie, if he had any of old chips laying around. To my surprise he opened a door under the bar and pulled out several boxes of them. There were twenty-five and fifty cent chips with a picture of a horsehead and horseshoe along with the club name on them. There was only a couple of the dollar denominations but they all matched and were the small crown mold. There were a few five dollar aerodies but they only had a horseshoe on one side and \$5 on the other. Anyway, I bought them all for what was probably a pittance as my chip budget was limited in those days. I wondered what had happened to the dollar denominations and several years later I found out when I ran into an old dealer at the Tonopah Belle in Tonopah. I don't know how many he had but he sold me a box of 100 for twenty dollars. I figured he must have worked there and "saved" them when he left.

Heading east out of Fallon marked the beginning of the Loneliest Road. It was a one hundred twelve mile trek to Austin with not much in between. Just over the mountains was Dixie Valley where the Navy held bombing practice and there was a place called Frenchman on the west side of it. The only building I remember was a small bar-restaurant operation and I would always stop there even though there was no gambling.



Anyway, as one crossed over Dixie Valley, there were signs warning of the low-flying Navy bombers and not to stop. I had never encountered any so I didn't think much about it until one day I decided to explore the ghost town of Fairview which was on the east side of the valley and a short distance off the hiway. As I drove up the mountain I ignored signs to keep out. I parked the truck and began to look around. Just as I located an old safe that was half buried in the dirt one of the Navy's finest came screaming through. He was at eye-level and maybe fifty feet away. Needless to say, it scared the bejeez out of me. I made a mad dash for the truck and bounced down the mountain to the hiway. I would never stop there again!

Austin was always a welcome sight after the long drive from Fallon. The main place there was the Austin Hotel which was a two story building with a neat old bar and attached restaurant. In the bar were a couple of 1935 vintage slot machines, which I enjoyed playing, and a twenty-one table that was usually covered with an oil-cloth. One day I asked the bartender what the chips looked like thinking I was going to get some that said Austin Hotel. He reached under the bar and pulled out a couple of boxes of chips from the old Palace Club in Fallon. I thought it was kind of risky using them since my friend in Fallon had so many. The bartender explained that the game was hardly ever open and there wasn't much of a chance of anybody

slipping in a ring.

One of the Hotel's residents was a guy by the name of "Swede" Anderson. I could usually find him at the bar having a cool one. He was an interesting guy to talk to and would tell me stories about the Frontier Tavern - a place he used to operate on the other side of the Austin Summit. Naturally I asked him if he had any of the chips from there and he said he did. He went up to his room and returned with a green \$1 Portland Card Co. chip marked with the initials FT. He also gave me creme colored BC Wills with FT only on both sides which he said was used for five dollars. As it turned out they were among the few chips from Austin that were actually made for the place where they were used. Seems everybody else used somebody else's chips! Swede also gave me several trade tokens from the International Hotel down the street - I think they were good for a drink. He seemed to value them a lot more than the chips.

One day I noticed a sign had been added to the restaurant part of the hotel advertising the "Austin Nugget". I thought it looked pretty strange but was told there were plans for a quite a few slot machines to be added. Unfortunately, the hotel burned down shortly thereafter and the Nugget was short-lived.



Next door to the hotel was a place called Clara's Golden which was owned and operated by Clara Williams. She usually opened around 8 p.m. so it was tough to see her especially if I had to drive back to Reno that night. She would always park her 1961 Chevy right in front and the first thing she would do would be to take a cardboard box and go over to the hotel and get it filled with ice which she used to make drinks. She would just set it on the back bar and I guess when the ice melted she would close. Also,

hanging on the mirror was a sign that read: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone". I always thought it was funny.

Anyway, Clara was the sole employee in the place and in addition to tending bar she would also deal 21. I remember I and several people were playing 21 one time and everyone wanted a drink. Clara spread the cards and went and got them while we all waited patiently.

The 21 table itself was pretty crude. The legs were basically a sawhorse type of construction but it added some personality to the joint. The dollar chips were actually old wheel chips from the Tahoe Country Club - the ones with the Indian on them. There seemed to be a lot of them around so Clara carved a groove in the ones she used. Boy, talk about security! The five dollar chips were red aerodies from an old place she used to own across the street called Moms. They had Moms on one side and \$5 on the reverse. Clara also had a box of matching \$25 chips which she kept under the bar. Every time I'd see her I'd talk her out of one but I only got a few. Clara said her son had a lot of old coins and trade tokens and I should talk to him. One problem though, he was never around. When Clara died he took over the operation of the Golden and had new chips made but it didn't last long and was closed.

Down the street was the International Hotel. There was a 21 game in there run by a Chinese man who had previously operated in Wells. Unfortunately the chips only had chinese characters on them. He said they had been used in a poker game in Sacramento at one time.

Heading east out of Austin, it was seventy miles to Eureka, with nothing in between. The biggest place in town was the Lincoln Hotel but the casino had closed about a year before I first got there in 1969. A lot of the equipment was still there but was piled up in a corner. Also, the owner, Blanche Olinger, had been murdered in one of the hotel rooms some years earlier.

Anyway, sometime in the early 70's, I believe, the place was taken over by a man named Francis Escobar and renamed the Alpine. He told me that he would drive around and pick up hitch-hikers in the desert and offer them jobs at the hotel. It was the only way he could get help he said. Anyway, he had some pretty creepy looking people working there. One day I noticed a wheel of assorted poker chips sitting on an old poker table. They were mostly plain non-descript ones but one of the tubes had some purple BC Wills stamped LH and \$1.00 on the reverse. I knew they had

to have been used there when the casino was open. Anyway, when no one was looking I borrowed about ten of them. I'm sure no one missed them and I was glad to get them.

Next door to the Lincoln Hotel was Louie Gibellini's place. I got to know him over the years as a state champion single-jack driller. He competed in Tonopah at Jim Butler Days before they moved the competition to Carson City during Nevada Day. Even then he was probably in his sixties. Whenever I got to Eureka I'd stop by the bar and talk to him. At one time he operated a 21 game but it closed around 1966 a couple years before I got to town. The table was still in the bar in the early 70's but Louie could never come up with any chips much to my disappointment.

Across the street was the Nevada Club, Gold Bar, and Owl Club. There were only slots at the Gold Bar but it was still a neat old place.

The Nevada Club had a lone 21 game that was installed in 1969. I remember I was there when they first opened it and was able to get the original chips that were marked with a small nc and \$1 and \$5. They were white and green respectively. I guess later they were replaced with some that had the name spelled out.

The Owl Club was owned by a grouchy old guy named Vic Bereincua. He had some slots and a 21 game that was hardly ever open. One day I asked him if he had any old chips since the place had been open since the 50's. He said he had a lot of them in the basement but couldn't get them right away. So I hung around for a while playing the slots and sipping beer. After a while he came up to me and handed me some \$5 and \$25 chips that were stamped with his initials, VB. Also there were a couple that just said Owl. He mumbled something and walked off. I was glad to get them.

There was a bar across from the Owl called Jim and Lorraine's that didn't have any gambling but Jim had a blue, \$5 chip, Diamond mold in the cash register that was stamped TC. He said he had taken it from a guy who said it came from the Tonopah Club. I gave him \$5 for it and never saw another one like it.



Leaving Eureka, the loneliest road stretched another 77 miles to Ely. Finding obsolete chips from there proved to be a difficult task although I did manage to find a couple from the Alpine and Town Club. Over the years I got several from Norm Foeringer who owned the Nevada Hotel which was the main place in town. One time, my friend, Louis Dotson, from Wendover, gave me some \$5 blue BC Wills from the Northern, a place his father ran from 1959 to 1964. I also got to know Frank Smith who ran the Commercial Club in Ruth, a small town out of Ely, but he could never come up with any chips with a name.

Kitty-corner from the Nevada Hotel was the shuttered Bank Club which was owned by the late Bud Simpson among others. There was an attached bar called The Lounge which was open though. I soon learned that there were several boxes of \$5 black, BC Wills chips in a drawer in the back bar. One time the owner gave me a few and every time I'd go in I'd con the bartender on duty out of a few more. It was always one of my favorite chips.

Pinky Simpson, Bud's widow, owned the Mustang Club across the street from the Bank Club. It was a small place and had a 21 and a crap table. Also, in the back was a pan game where there was always a bunch of old-timers playing. There were 10¢ and \$2.00 well worn chips in play but I was never able to buy any. The guy who ran the game was adamant about letting any out. Later they ordered new ones on a different mold but I still couldn't get any. The name of the place was changed to the Saddle Club in 1975 but was basically the same. It closed four years later and was turned into a restaurant.

There was a place a few miles north of town called the Fireside Inn. I remember a 21 and roulette game in operation which I thought was a strange com-



mination. Anyway, I was glad to get chips from a rapidly declining part of Nevada.

Back in downtown Ely was a bar called the Pit. The live gaming had ceased in 1968 about a year before I got to town. One day I asked the bartender if any of the chips were still around and he said they were all in the basement. He said if I waited until he got off at 5 o'clock he'd get me some. That was a couple hours off but I hung around anyway. He did get me a set which was five or six chips and I was glad to get them. Still, I had to drive back to Reno that night which was 317 miles. It made for a long day.

So anyway, highway 50 certainly was lonely but I had a great time driving it. It's been many years since the last time I experienced it but I still have vivid memories of the great times I had.