

# A Set of Montana Illegals

by Deborah Whole



When I was in Anaconda, Montana, this summer, I went to dinner at Jim & Clara's Supper Club on East Park. While waiting for the restaurant to open, I had a chance to speak with the owner, Jim Pearson, Jr. and learned some history of the area and the club.

There were three Jim Pearson's; grandpa, Jim, Sr., dad, Jim, Jr., and son, Jim III. Jim Sr., bought the Silver Tip in Missoula, MT, three years after it was built and ran illegal 21, pan and poker. Jim, Sr. and Jim, Jr. bought Midget's Bar in Anaconda, MT, in 1962 and renamed it Jim and Clara's after Jim, Jr. and his wife, Clara. It was very small and catered to a rough crowd. Jim, Jr. bought the buildings on both sides of the bar along with one in back and added a supper club and a gaming room. Jim, Jr. now runs the bar and supper club with his son, Jim, III. The restaurant has some of the best food in Montana. Jim, Jr. cuts his meat (local Montana beef) as it is ordered. It was the best tasting steak I've ever eaten and the price was right. He opened the gaming

room in 1963 and ran two poker games and two blackjack tables. The law fined him in 1967 for illegal gambling and closed the gaming tables. Poker has not been played there since then. Jim, Jr. was kind enough to sell me his entire set of 300 chips that consists of six denominations.

Gambling in Montana was legalized in 1973. At that time anyone that sold liquor could have a gaming license. The games allowed were poker of all kinds. The state had no rules for poker when the games first started and for the first two years it was a runaway. A lot of money was won and lost. Of course, the house and the dealers were taking money from the players like you would not believe. Drops were as high as 10% with no maximum caps. It was not unusual to drop a \$100.00 out of a pot, and that didn't count what the dealer could get out of it. Greed once again got in the way of the game of poker.

Then in 1975 the state put a \$100.00 cap on all pots. The pot limit maximum was raised to \$300.00 per pot in 1989, but for a lot of card rooms it was too late, some reopened some did not. Video poker and video keno became legal in 1986, and that was the end of poker as the old timers knew it. Poker players started playing video games and all but wiped out the poker base that was left.



Jim Jr. in his late 70s, and still pulling a shift behind the bar



J&J stands for Jim, Sr. & Jim, Jr. Both sides of the chips are shown

They still have a happy hour when they get 10 to 12 people. What's sad is that as the old timers pass away the history is also dying out.

I have collected a lot more chips and history on Montana. I spent two months there, talking to bar owners, dealers, people who ran games and players. When I get my notes and chips together, I would like to print a catalog on legal and illegal chips in Montana; hopefully in time for the next CC&GTCC Chip Show. I have a lot of unknown chips for collectors to see and collect.

If you would like more information you can reach me by e-mail at [joandeb@gte.net](mailto:joandeb@gte.net) or at (702) 396-9008

Anaconda was mostly a mining and railroad town. When the Anaconda Copper Mine in Butte, MT, shut down due to the low price of copper in the late 1970's and the copper smelter plant in Anaconda closed in 1985, so did the town. Anaconda, like many of the old towns in Montana, is financially depressed. There are no jobs for the younger people, so they leave town as soon as they need to earn a living.

During its heyday, there where 64 Bars within 4 blocks and no-limit poker games everywhere. The miners would take the trolley up and down the 4 blocks, stop at every bar for a shot and a beer, then move onto the next, and this was just at lunch and right after work. Then they would go home, have dinner, clean up and go back to town for gambling, and girls. There were brothels above or behind most of the bars and supper clubs. I was told the bars were so crowded, you could not walk through one in town without stepping on

someone's toes which would sometimes lead to a fight or two with the brawlers making up and having a beer together. Now they may have 8 to 10 bars with one or two people in them.



The outside of Jim & Clara's. Built in the 1920's