

With apologies to Mohammed, I believe the phrase is, "Since the Mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain".

left home 2 weeks before the show to allow myself plenty of time to obtain the items I needed, plus spend a day visiting a cousin of mine I had not seen in 55 years.

John Goes To The Mountain

by John **Bollinger**

During the four plus years I have been seriously collecting gaming tokens, I have noticed the paucity of offerings at the collectibles shows I attend and the apparent reluctance of the dealers at these shows to commit working capital for such slow selling items. Is this enough to deter a serious token collector from his search for the Holy Grail? No Way!!

It just gives me a built-in excuse to take the time and effort to get the pieces myself, before they become obsolete and destroyed, then forgotten. There is nothing that worries me more than the thought that a certain gaming establishment may have put a \$5, \$25 or \$100 token in play, and then the establishment abruptly closes, is sold, or the token gets so little play that the machines are removed from the floor and the tokens are destroyed before any collector even knows about it. This scenario has occurred with chips also.

Therefore I decided I would make a once in a lifetime pilgrimage across the width and breadth of the land to obtain whatever elusive items I came across. The 2001 CC>CC convention gave me the perfect time and excuse to accomplish this feat. I

My itinerary was to take I-70 and I-80 to the Midwest from Maryland, then head to South Dakota (Deadwood), proceed South through Kansas and Missouri, stop for a day in Oklahoma to visit my cousin, then continue on the way to the convention. So far, so good.

Nearing Michigan City, Indiana, I noticed a billboard promoting the Blue Chip Casino. Since I had visited the casino a couple of years ago, there was no need to stop but then I remembered that at that time, the Blue Chip did not have a \$100 token in play. Lo and behold, this time they had 3 or 4 \$100 token machines in play so my first stop on this journey was a success. What other pleasant surprises lay in store for me?



While negotiating my way back to I-80, I saw a billboard that proclaimed that the Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, Indiana was now open. Whoa! What gives? I was aware that Jack Binion was attempting to purchase the Empress River casino in Joliet, Illinois, but not the Empress Casino in Hammond.

Sure enough, the Empress Casino in Hammond is history and now proudly proclaims itself the Horseshoe Casino (I'm glad I made my collecting foray at the Empress a couple of years ago).

The new tokens of the Horseshoe Casino are rather plain looking and all have the same design with a likeness of Jack Binion on one side and the name Horseshoe Casino spelled out in black letters on the other side. The denominations are: 5¢, 10¢, 25¢ 50¢, \$1, \$2, \$5, \$15, \$25, & \$100. Now that is a collection by itself.



Back on the road again and as I neared the Indiana-Iowa border, I refer to my Midwest casino guide map and note that Catfish Bend Casino is several miles South of the Interstate. I already have the \$1 and \$5 tokens from there, but still have a nagging suspicion that they may have a little more to offer.



At the next gas station, I called the casino on their toll-free number and inquire about the games, table limits, and slots. Informed that there are 2-\$25 slot machines in play, I immediately head south for Fort Madison, Iowa (mistake!). Thus began one of the most bizarre experiences I have ever had since I began enjoying this insane hobby... where I really get my feet wet, literally.

The road heading to the boat landing was flooded so I had to park my car in the overflow parking lot across the main highway and take the shuttle bus to the casino. The bus is much higher and able to drive through the water. After entering the boat I obtained my tokens and settled in to play some blackjack. About an hour later, the public announcement system announced that the river water was rising and the casino was closing. Of course, I was the slowest one around to cash in my chips, and by the time I left, the water was already knee-deep on the walkway to the shuttle bus stop. There was no alternative but to wade across to the shuttle. I started feeling sorry for myself until I was an elderly couple with walkers braving the waters so I continued on, debating whether or not to take my shoes off. I'm glad I didn't. Aboard the bus I overheard a lady tell another lady that she saw a snake swimming in the water near the casino boat. Yikes... all this for a \$25 token I would otherwise probably never get. Seems like pretty stiff odds for the prize.

Anyway, with wet shoes, socks and feet, I was happy to see Fort Madison disappearing in my rearview mirror as I headed for my next stop at Prairie Meadows Race Track.

When the Prairie Meadows track opened, they issued a \$25 token with a colorized center. After some difficulty, I managed to obtain an example of this but had no success in ever locating a \$100 token I was let to believe also existed. At the casino the staff proved very polite but condescending to this "nut" who collected tokens but no colorized \$100 token was to be found in the casino cashier cage and I was assured that the cage manager would make a thorough search to see if any were around. I figured this was their polite way of dismissing a pest but I was surprised to receive a subsequent letter from Ms. Toni Holmes explaining that there never was one issued.

Continuing down the road I stopped in Council Bluffs to check out the Bluffs Run Casino for new tokens since the Harvey's organization recently bought the facility. Nothing new there, so I stopped at Harvey's Casino and got the \$5 token I was missing (the one with Council Bluff on the map) and continued north on Interstate 29 to South Dakota.

My first stop in South Dakota was the Fort Randall Casino where I picked up the \$5 token I needed and proceeded for my next destination, Prairie Wind Casino. To say that this casino is remote is like saying the Pacific Ocean is a large body of water. My casino guide said it is 10 miles east of Oglala, South Dakota but that 10 miles encompasses nothing but flat prairie land inhabited only by gophers and insects. After an eternity of driving on a narrow 2 lane county road without seeing anything of interest, suddenly on the left is a tent-like structure that can only be the casino. It seems that the bus industry must be thriving since buses seemed to outnumber cars (at least that was

my impression). I quickly picked up my treasurer and continued toward my next stop, The Rosebud Casino.

This casino located between the South Dakota-Nebraska border is not as isolated as the others but for some reason the tokens never seem to show up in the dealers offerings. I therefore assume that anyone who visits here probably keeps the tokens as a souvenir for themselves.

The next area of interest for me is the Kansas City, Missouri vicinity where recently there were some changes. The Flamingo Casino became the Isle of Capri and the Station Casino is now Ameristar. Since I already have the tokens from the newer establishments, my focus was on the older operating casinos.

First I paid a visit to the Ayoy Riverside Casino and immediately was successful in getting a \$10 token from the machines. However, the \$25 machines were removed from play on the floor so I asked the cage about their status. She replied that they were removed a year earlier due to slow action. When I asked if there were any \$25 tokens available in the cage, she directed me to her supervisor who explained to me that yes there were tokens in the cage but she could not let me have one until she received approval from the gaming commission. The representative was not available at the moment so I would have to wait. After an hour and a half, she walked up to me and said if I went to the cage, she would sell me one but only one. I never saw her leave the cage and no one else except casino personnel entered the cage so I strongly suspect that she felt sorry for me and took responsibility upon herself to let me have the item.



Needless to say, if this is the case, this casino employs the nicest management personnel I have met. I truly appreciate the gesture.

My next stop was Harrah's Casino from which I was lacking the \$25 token. I had low expectations of success from this venture since the piece in question is in silver. Harrah's has 2 boats/barges next to each other and of course, on the first boat there were no \$25 machines. I asked the slot machine attendant if there were any \$25 tokens available in the cage but she directed me to the other boat where the machines are still in play. The design of this token which depicts the Harrah's tower is absolutely breathtaking. I gasped at the sheer magnificence of this handsome piece and wondered to myself if they were still using silver tokens when everyone else has switched to lesser metals.



From Kansas City my journey now was directed to the Native American Casinos in Kansas. The Kickapoo Golden Eagle Casino in Harton and the Prairie Band Potowatoni Casino in Mayetta each have issued a \$25 and \$100 token. If I thought that the Harrah's North Kansas City \$25 was gorgeous, there are no words for me to describe the splendid example of medalllic art displayed on the \$100 token of the

Prairie Band Casino. The clear graphic details on the "Keepers of the Fire" design are simply awesome. I do not think that this design can be surpassed for sheer beauty. I only hope the illustration in this article can do it justice.



With my Kansas acquisitions completed, my next stop is McAlister, Oklahoma to spend a day visiting my cousin whom I had lost contact with in 1946. When my family moved to California in that year she was a pretty 17 year girl and I was a six year old brat. I will not bore you with details but we had a wonderful time in catching up a half century of family matters.

The next stop in my travels is the Texas seaport town of Corpus Christie. This is where the gambling ship "Texas Treasure" sails from. I arrived too late for the morning cruise but the wait was well worth the long drive.

This was to be the last gambling cruise for the next 3 days since the ship has an obligation to make a

cruise to Mexico once a month and it was scheduled to sail to Vera Cruz the next morning. Looks like my timing almost did me in on this occasion.

The shipboard activities were both enjoyable and relaxing for me and well worth the \$27 boarding charge. There was a skeet shooting competition from the fan tail, different kinds of dancing on various levels of the ship, there were talent contests and sing-alongs, continuous feeding at the food tables, and above all, three decks of gambling which opened it's operations after we entered International waters.

Although the cruise line calls itself, "Texas Treasure", this name is nowhere to be seen on the tokens or chips. The tokens have a cruise ship depicted on the obverse and "Island Holiday" on the reverse. The same is true for all denominations. I managed to obtain a 25¢, \$1, \$5 and \$25 token. Now...on to New Mexico.



The new Isleta Casino and Resort had just recently expanded and there were new tokens to be had. Among the new tokens, all of the same design, were \$1, \$5, \$10, \$25 and \$100 So far, so good. Next stop for me is a trip to the Dancing Eagle Casino. This is a small struggling casino whose future may be in doubt. I needed the \$5 token and was determined to get one. Success. While playing the machines I was talking with a trucker who mentioned that the Sky City Casino, only six miles away, now had \$25 and \$100 token machines. Guess where I headed next.

Although the trucker said there were \$100 machines, he was wrong but there indeed were \$25 tokens so I added this to my holdings.



Now to back track to Albuquerque. The Downs of Albuquerque racetrack had a \$5 token I needed so that was my next target. After getting the token I headed north towards Santa Fe. The Sandia was supposed to be opening their new expanded casino but in this case I missed out since the opening of the new casino had been delayed. I then inquired about the casino that was rumored to be opening in Espanola by the Santa Clara Indian tribe. Once again the new casino is being delayed. So now I am on my way to Farmington to get the \$1 and \$5 tokens of the Sun Ray Casino. No only was I successful in getting my tokens, but I also hit two different machines for \$100 each. This is going to be one of my favorite places of all time.

I arrive in Las Vegas the Friday before the convention and stop to look at the offerings of Bill Akeman's booth at the Gambler's General Store downtown hoping that I arrived before the maddening crowds for the show. I was wrong. It seems the hordes of collectors beat me there by a week and nearly wiped him out of goodies. Janice O'Neil steered me onto a few obsolete (expensive) \$25 and \$100 Nevada tokens, but for the most part the majority of the better pieces were already sold.

It is still 5 days before the show starts so I decide to check out Laughlin. No luck... now onto California to check out the action there. The Casinos Aqua Caliente, Spotlight 29, Spa and Pechanga each have recently issued a \$25 token to compliment the others so I dutifully added one of each to my holdings. Things are looking up!



Back in Las Vegas, I was disappointed at the meager offering of tokens which required my own expedition. I did manage to obtain a few obsolete items from the dealers there but in most cases these items were tucked away in back of the dealers cases and took some time for the dealers to search and find them. The rest of the time we spent talking and trading with other collectors at the show.

Now comes the hardest part of my journey...the casinos of Central and Northern California. Checking my itinerary closely, the first stop is Paiute Palace Casino in Bishop. This casino is still using the paper slips so no tokens here. Next up is Eagle Mountain Casino in Porterville which has the \$1 and \$5. No onto the Chicken Ranch Casino where I am again chagrined to learn that the paper slips are used. But along the highway is a billboard announcing the opening of the Black Oak Casino in Tuolumne where happily I obtained a \$1 and \$5.



At Jackson Rancheria, I managed to get a \$1 and \$5. Next in line I stopped at Oroville which has 2 different casinos, Gold Country and Feather Falls and both casinos offer \$1 and \$5 tokens.



The Feather Falls Casino provided me with an interesting experience. During the course of a blackjack session the pit boss came over to our table and announced that whoever get the first blackjack of the next hours play will receive a voucher of \$100 worth of gas at the casino's gas station.



Since I am from the east coast and this is Northern California, guess who won the \$100 worth of gas. Of course it was me. When I lamented that I was passing through, the lady playing at 1st base offered me \$20 for the voucher. When no one else spoke up, I accepted the offer. It isn't often I give away \$80 but I felt since I'm still \$20 ahead of the game there are 2 winners.

When I related the above to my sister who lives at Clear Lake, California, she asked why I didn't save the voucher for her. I explained that it would take a tank of gas round trip to fill up her tank so she couldn't benefit either.

After staying a day with "Sis", I visited the 2 local Clear Lake casinos that offered \$1 and \$5 tokens; the Twin Pines and Sho Ka Wah casinos.



My hopes and dreams of a bountiful harvest from the casinos along the Pacific Coast became less than anticipated. Except for the Cherrae Heights Casino at Trinidad which had \$1 and \$5 all of the other casinos only offered \$1 tokens. These included the Black Bart, Colusa, Elk Valley, Konocti Vista, Lucky Bear, Lucky 7, and Susanville casinos.



Oops!... I forgot to mention the Win River Casino in Redding has \$1 and \$5 tokens. The \$5 token is worth mentioning for there are 2 \$5 machines. One dispenses tokens and the other pays out paper slips. Seems as if management is undecided which course to take and is watching to see which machine gets the most play.



There is nothing noteworthy to relate about the rest of my trip except that I drove through North Dakota on my return and picked up samples of \$5 tokens I needed at 3 locations, The 4 Bears, Dakota Sioux, and Spirit Lake casinos. All of these tokens have been in use for 5 to 8 years, but never seem to turn up anywhere.



Anyway, the exhaustive journey resulted in many acquisitions I feel I would never have gotten otherwise and I'm glad I made the effort. I hope you enjoyed the experience as much as I did.

Happy collecting all!