

# A Nevada Landing DIG for Chips and Tokens of Pop's Oasis!

## Part 1

by Jim Follis and Jim Steffner

Coming on the heels of the Hernando, Mississippi / Playboy Atlantic City casino chip Dig (CCTN Volume 21, Number 2, page 29, "The Playboy Find") we now have the Pop's Oasis Chip and Token Dig at the Nevada Landing!



A prospected pile of Pop's Oasis chips, tokens and concrete chunks from the Nevada Landing foundation at Jean, NV. (Photo courtesy Tarl Cooley)

For some of us, this find began with a fairly innocuous post on Greg Susong's on-line, Internet Message Board, The Chip Board.com.

This highly popular on-line gathering place of hundreds of casino memorabilia collectors from around the World provides a wealth of information 24/7, 365-days a year on our hobby, but sometimes you need to read the details.

Appearing in one of the nearly 100 threads created daily, was a post on June 12, 2008, simply

entitled: "Nevada Landing...". By opening the message, the reader was presented with this content:

*"Probably not new news to most, but it was to me...some chips were found in the foundation of the Nevada Landing (well, what is left of it)"*

Posted by Club member Paul Danielson, when he said "what is left of it" he was referring to the fact that last year the Nevada Landing Hotel and Casino in Jean, Nevada was closed and in recent months the building was razed.

No fancy implosion, just a swarm of bulldozers in the Nevada heat. Having been purchased by MGM/Mirage (as part of the Mandalay Resorts (previously Circus Circus, Enterprises) acquisition) it was decided that the Nevada Landing, which was right across the highway (I-15) from the Gold Strike Casino and Hotel (also MGM/Mirage owned) would get the wrecking ball and the land would then be developed for a planned residential community.

Danielson's post also included a link to another website called, "Leaving Las Vegas". That website is maintained by a local Las Vegas (Joel) who bills himself as a bit of a historian of Las Vegas. In visiting Joel's site, he pays tribute to past casino/hotels, motels, attractions

and other such historic elements of Las Vegas.

The site included a photo essay (with a few descriptions) on the life of the Nevada Landing. Jean, NV was certainly beyond the limits of Las Vegas proper, but Joel, according to his website, had often visited the Nevada Landing in his travels between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, CA., so it touched a nerve in this history-buff to document some of the demise of the Nevada Landing before it was gone forever.

Maintained in a chronological manner, Joel's site chronicled the final year of the Nevada Landing starting in March, 2007. With numerous pictures depicting the inside and outside the property (while it was still open for business) there are at least a hundred before and after pictures on the site.

In subsequent visits he took numerous pictures during the preview portion of the auction, and later on (August, 2007) as the "bulldozers are starting to gather." Finally, in March and April of 2008, Joel had a segment that showed the building being gone and all that remained was the tall marquee.

In a final follow-up on the website, in late June (2008) he and his wife paid a visit to the cleared site and saw that the perimeter security fences had been removed and the

land was more desert-like than it had been since the casino was first built in 1989 by Peter A. Simon, II of Jean, NV. (More on Simon in a bit.)



Only the now dark “Nevada Landing” marquee remains adjacent to the bulldozed property. (photo courtesy of Richard Loritz)

As described on Joel’s website, he and his wife walked around the property, reminiscing about their past visits there when the Nevada Landing was open for business.

They walked the ground where they envisioned the restaurants to have once been as well as the Main Cage. Looking around they came across chunks of broken-up concrete, some of which had remnants of chips and tokens protruding at all sorts of angles.

It was upon closer examination that they could see that the chips and tokens were from the long gone Pop’s Oasis, a casino that was located nearby, in fact, just feet away from the Gold Strike Casino, which is just across the highway (I-15) right there in Jean, Nevada.

On his website, Joel remarked how it was an act of homage to the old and Good Luck to the new, to place chips and tokens into the foundation of a new casino.

However, we collectors recognize this act to be more of a function of chip and token destruction,

and are aware that back then, it was a simple way to affect the destruction of some Pop’s Oasis chips and tokens.



Stuck in the grasp of concrete is a fractured \$25 Bud Jones Coin-In-Center chip from the Dig! Offered on eBay, it received no bids. (photo by Jim Follis)

Of course this was at a time that the Pop’s Oasis had just been closed (1988) (and torn down) and the Nevada Landing was just beginning to be built (1989). And since both properties were owned by the same person, Peter A. Simon, II (still more on him in a bit) it certainly stands to reason that this Find was the remnant artifacts of a chip and token destruction from a date some 21 years ago!

In looking at the post made by Danielson, there were only four other people that; read it, followed the link, saw the snippet about the Pop’s Oasis chips and tokens, and then posted back that Danielson’s message was an “interesting” read. Because none of the four replies made mention that the chips found were from Pop’s Oasis, it seems that Danielson’s post went relatively un-remarked about for several days.

But that would all change as the chip collecting World was just about ready to visit Las Vegas for the CC&GTCC, Inc.’s 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention and 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Business Meeting at the Riviera Hotel and Casino.

As one of the readers of Danielson’s post and by happenstance, it turned out that my annual trek to Las Vegas (from Tucson, AZ) for the Convention was starting the week before the big event and I and the Family needed to make a brief side trip to Los Angeles, CA.

As we headed South on the I-15, I mentioned to my wife (Pam) about the Pop’s Oasis chip find at the demolished Nevada Landing and we wondered if what Joel wrote about was real.

**Within an hour we knew; there really were Pop’s Oasis chips and tokens in the broken-up foundation of the Nevada Landing!**

For our little 40 minute detour we collected a few examples of chip and token encrusted concrete chunks and highly damaged chips and tarnished tokens.



Examples of tokens and broken chips. Photo by Jim Follis)

Although we had found a few examples of intact chips, they were definitely the exception and certainly not the rule. And even if wholly intact, they were subject to severe nicks, scratches and warpage from the stresses of being released from their concrete hold by the extreme forces of earthmovers and bulldozers.

It was noted that there were far more tokens than chips, and it was rather interesting that the tokens, by and large, were in new condition.

Although most were black or green from some sort of tarnishing, it was from later reports from others “prospectors” that visited the site, that once the green and black was removed (soaking in white vinegar) the tokens were like-new with little to no-wear. In fact, the partly reeded edges were like the serrations of sharpened knife blades!



Before and after by Tarl Cooley.

It was during this impromptu visit that Pam lifted out this Trophy specimen, as shown in the picture of my son (Casey) and I with the still standing Nevada Landing marquee in the background.

This is a great looking chunk of concrete (in a nice symmetrical



“The TROPHY” being held by Jim Follis with son Casey Focazio-Follis

shape) with multiple \$5 chips affixed and protruding from the mass of concrete. As seen here, The Trophy boasts 19 visible \$5 chips, 11 of which are fully intact. Additionally, there are 12 spots (impressions) where chips were once in contact with the concrete, but fell out when this chunk was broken free from a larger mass of concrete by a bulldozer. I can only imagine the full beauty of this rock if all 31 chips were still in-place and unbroken!

Pam also found this smaller example of a lone \$25 chip in the clutches of a glob of concrete. She suggested offering it up on eBay, and as we left Jean for Los Angeles, I photographed the piece on the dash of the car and with the aid of a laptop computer and broadband internet access, I created an eBay offering that was to begin later that day and run for 3-days; ending well into the first day of the Convention.

I then posted to TheChipBoard about the eBay offering (which eventually ended without a bid) and also about the Find!

Suddenly, Paul Danielson’s post was read by many more people. My post was viewed hundreds of times and when we returned to Las Vegas the next day, in order to be at the Palms Casino Resort for Greg Susong’s annual Chip Board Get Together, the “Dig!” was quite a topic of discussion.



“The TROPHY” in detail! (photo by Jim Follis)

I brought along ‘The Trophy,’ for collectors to see it first-hand, and noted that there was at least one other chipper in attendance who had also been to the Dig site. He was freely passing out Pop’s Oasis tokens that he had gathered earlier in the day, as souvenirs for some of the attending collectors.

Over the course of the week (Convention week) there were several visits to the site by various other collectors. These early-morning visits (to avoid the heat of the day) turned up more of chips, tokens and chunks of concrete, and from time-to-time (during the Convention) I would be shown some items or heard stories from other people about their adventure to Jean, NV.

And while the majority of items found were tokens, followed by broken chips from Pop's Oasis, it was a bit surprising to hear of other tokens also being found at the site. All-in-all, there were a few examples (as shown in the picture) of \$1 slot machine tokens from Caesars Palace, the Mint ('79), Slots-A-Fun, Golden Nugget, Hilton (Las Vegas), Whiskey Pete's ('79), the Aladdin and even a token from the Royal Caribbean cruise line!



(scan courtesy Tarl Cooley)

Also found was a badly damaged, non-denominated, Pop's Oasis, diecar mold, clay composition chip by co-author Jim Steffner, as shown in the picture.



(scan by Jim Steffner)

Aside from that lone damaged clay-composition chip, all other chips seemed to be the well recognized, \$1, \$5 and \$25, Bud Jones, Coin-in-Center, diecar mold (incused) chips, as shown.

Before this discovery, it was generally believed that the entire rack of Pop's Oasis, Bud Jones chips were in collector circles already, so finding some in the foundation of the Nevada Landing begs the question:

*If the entire rack was in the collector community, then why would any of them be buried in the foundation of the Nevada Landing?*

In trying to look back in time, one possible explanation is that the relatively minor amount of chips at the Nevada Landing site could be the remainder of turned-in chips following a redemption period some time back in 1987 or 1988.

Of course this would probably mean that the rack was already moved from the vicinity of the redemption location (probably the Gold Strike) otherwise it stands to reason that any turned-in redemption chips would have just been mixed-in with the rack when it was then made available to the collecting community.

But then that makes it difficult to explain the Dig chips. At the time of this writing, it is not specifically known how and when the Pop's Oasis rack entered the collecting community in the face of Nevada Gaming Regulations requiring some sort of "approved" destruction method.

Perhaps the buried chips (and tokens) were part of the "approved" destruction method and the remainder of the rack was somehow unaddressed. Such instances are not unknown to have happen in the past. (Look at the Dunes Golf Course chips, and the Sands, Las Vegas \$1 pinwheel chips, just to cite a few examples.)

In the research conducted so far by myself and co-author Jim Steffner (with the assistance of others) it is not clear when Pop's Oasis ceased operation, except that the consensus is some time in 1988.

Even more confusing is when Pop's Oasis first had gaming! By one account, Peter (Pop's) Simon, a uranium prospector, bought the Standard Station (which had a 7-stool lunch counter) from a Shorty Smith in the 1940's and by 1947, the casino floor rivaled that of the Fabulous Flamingo!

That's right, some 27 years before the opening date of 1972 as listed in "The Chip Rack." And some 15 years before the opening date of 1964, as noted in the Campiglia/Wells "Official U. S. Casino Chip Guide". Although, the "Official" guide does conjecture that gaming may have been present at Pop's Oasis before 1964 in the form of slot machines.

Indications are that Pop's Oasis was closed between the opening dates of the Gold Strike (1987) and the Nevada Landing (1989) and all three were then owned by Pop's only child, Peter A. Simon, II, who was 24 years-old when he took over operation of "Pop's" legacy. (More on Simon, II, in a bit.)

Pop's, who came to the United States in 1898\* from Syria, somehow ended up in Southern Nevada as a prospector. Indications are, he was a pretty sharp guy. He owned several mines (gold and otherwise) and numerous claims, in and around Jean and Goodsprings, Nevada.

There is one account that for the fact that Pop's owned a Geiger counter, he, and two others, are credited for paving the way for the United States to become the leader in rare earth technologies.

It seems that the other two men needed to borrow Pop's Geiger counter to verify the radio-activity of some rock samples found by and held by another person. Pop's

required an agreement with the borrowers, that they split 3-ways, anything that came of the effort.

This was in 1949 and bastnasite (a rare earth mineral) was what they ended up validating. It was found at Mountain Pass, California, and they subsequently sold their interests to Molycorp (of Colorado) for an unknown amount.

But the discovery led to the access of large amounts of rare earth materials (and ore) which permitted research and experimentation, that propelled US scientists to becoming the principal source of knowledge for these materials. While many of these materials are used in everyday household items, at the time many had military applications.

According to Molycorp's website, they plan on re-opening the Mountain Pass facility again this year.

Pop's seemed to have a hand in quite a few things Southwest of Las Vegas, and also in North Las Vegas, and even Downtown Las Vegas. One such dealing was the development and construction of the "Simon Building" at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Fremont in Downtown Las Vegas in the 1950's.



This close-up from an old postcard (courtesy of Pam Goertler) shows the location of the Simon Building being the last structure at the far right of this block on Fremont Street in the late 1960's.

The building was home to the Simon Rainbow Quarries (the quarries are now owned by Las Vegas Rock), a Photo Store, the Melodie Lane Restaurant and the IRS (on the second floor).

The Melodie Lane Restaurant was owned by a friend of Pop's, a Tom Panos. In 1945 Panos had opened a café in North Las Vegas, interestingly enough called the Oasis Café. Later on, in 1950, Panos operated the Nellis Air Force Base coffee shop.

What is also interesting to note is that Pop's is tied to a much earlier business venture on the North side of Las Vegas, where he allowed the use of an airstrip he owned for a fledgling airline that was to provide service between Las Vegas and Reno.

This was in the 1930's and while the airline failed, the airstrip later became Nellis Air Field. Perhaps it was between then and 1950 that Pop's may have befriended Panos, and when Pop's told Panos of his plan to build the Simon Building, Panos asked that he save the ground-floor corner location for Panos to open a restaurant. Pop's did and the restaurant was called the Melodie Lane Restaurant.

From 1972 to 1975 the Simon Building was the location of the Red Garter [Gambling Hall and Saloon] at 234 E. Fremont Street, but it is unknown if Pop's had any involvement with the casino, or if his heir had ties to the building which has since been absorbed by the Fremont Casino.

Pop's passed away July 2, 1980. It appears that his son (an only child) Peter A. Simon, II had already taken over operations of the family businesses at 24 years of age, some years earlier.



Peter A. Simon, II (Courtesy of Desert Magazine, May 1980, photo by Gary E. Squier)

Aside from inheriting the material aspects of his father's life, he also turned out to be a pretty sharp guy like his father before him and I suspect some elements of his mother (Peggy, who passed away at age 98 in February 2007). Under his management, the Pop's Oasis casino leveraged Simon II into the Gold Strike and Nevada Landing operations.

Later, when they were acquired by Circus Circus, Enterprises, Simon II became an Executive at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino, which continued when Circus Circus, Ent. became Mandalay Resorts.

Later still, when Mandalay Resorts was bought-out by MGM/Mirage, Peter continued as an Executive with MGM/Mirage, but he has since left and is looking to develop a casino in West D'Iberville (Gulfport), MS.

Simon II received approval (in 2007) for the site and has stated that he plans a 52,500-square-foot casino with 1,500 slot machines and 50 table games.

In looking back to when Simon II took over the business, again at age 24, he was interviewed in a local Las Vegas TV show called the Troy Cory Show. For readers with access to the Internet, here is a link to that 6 minute video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnO5rexblkA>

In that episode from May of 1973, Simon II was a guest discussing his recent purchase of the Bonnie and Clyde Death Car. For those who have traveled between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, you might recall that the Whiskey Pete's Casino (at the I-15 and the Stateline, now called Primm) once displayed the Bonnie and Clyde Death Car.



(scan courtesy of Carey Burke)

While in recent time, the Death Car has been moved to the Primm Valley Casino Resort (now Terrible's Casino, Primm), but according to the interview of Simon II, he had it on-display at the Pop's Oasis Casino in Jean shortly after he acquired it for \$175,000.00.

However, according to another account, the Death Car was put on display at the Jean Raceway (owned by the Simon Family, as

was the movie theater, the church and other places in and around Jean, NV. In fact, Simon II was the Justice of the Peace for Jean.

But getting back to the Bonnie and Clyde Death Car, according to an internet source, the car was hidden behind a roll-up movie screen and every half-hour a film about Bonnie and Clyde (purchased from the Texas Rangers) would be shown on the screen. At the end of the film, the house lights would come up, as would the screen, thereby giving the audience a good view of the Death Car!

Quite the showman to say the least.

For this article I have asked the prospectors to show me their finds, or other photographs from the site. They are interspersed throughout this article and I thank them for their cooperation.

But the story does not end there. My co-author in this article, Jim Steffner, with assistance from myself, has been trying to contact Simon II or representatives of the MGM/Mirage, to solicit permission to visit the site (which is now marked with no trespassing signage) and attempt to acquire arti-



Playing craps at the Pop's Oasis. (Courtesy of Desert Magazine, May 1980. Photo by Gary E. Squier)

facts of the Pop's Oasis casino for the Club's "Museum of Gaming History" as part of the Club's Preserving Gaming mission.

Jim has made several visits to the Gold Strike and made numerous phone calls, seeking out MGM/Mirage executive(s) to pitch his case. He has also submitted written requests to the mailing address for Simon II, seeking his assistance in the cause. To-date, Jim has managed to get a telephone



Prospected examples of token and all three chip denominations. (Scan by Jim Follis)



Pop's Oasis 1987 (This copyright protected photo is used courtesy of Jim Munding. Photo by Jim Munding)

interview with an MGM/Mirage representative that has responsibility for the Nevada Landing site.

That representative has told Jim, that it needs to be discussed at a higher level and he will get back to Jim later.

Hopefully, there will be a Part II to this story!

Our thanks to the several other "prospectors" (very similar to the tradition once established by old-timers like "Pop's") for sharing their adventures with us by way of words and pictures.

I should also point out that the vast majority of the information contained herein was gleaned from the Internet.

Here is a gallery of other Pop's Oasis related material.



Darryl Lynch souvenir



Photo by Tarl Cooley



A trip to the desert usually means emptying the trunk!



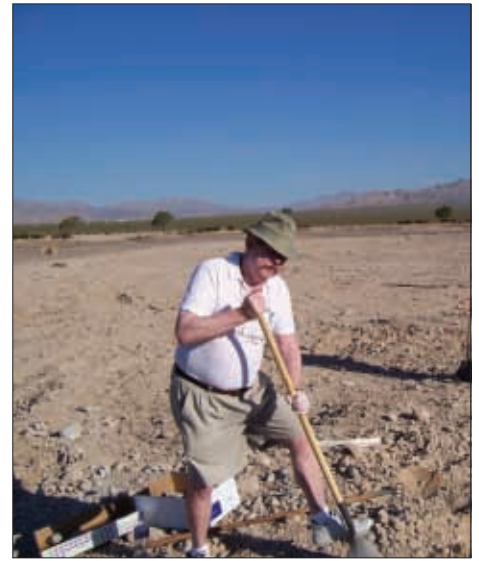
"Meet the Bartender" token, courtesy of Carey Burke.



A pair of prospectors. Scott Snider and Lou Lucente.



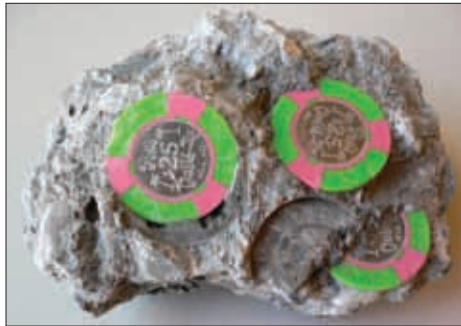
Prospector Tom Munro. The shadow indicates early am, before the heat sets



Prospector Paul Bender. Practicing techniques for Convention tear-down!



“Chief Red Cloud” Photo by Richard Loritz)



“The Three Musketeers” (photo by Richard Loritz)



“Lone Wolf” (photo by Richard Loritz)



“Cold Blue :Lake” photo by Richard Loritz)



“Dante’s Inferno” photo by Richard Loritz)



(Photo by Tarl Cooley)