

## RUNNING AMUCK IN WINNAMUCCA

by Phil Jensen

Of all the places I've been in Nevada - and I've been everywhere there was a bar, slot machine, or chip to be had - my favorite was Winnemucca, a small town in the North Central part of the state.

My first recollection of Winnemucca was in the late 1950's when our family took a trip to California from our home state of Wisconsin. We were traveling old U.S. 40 and stopped in Winnemucca for gas. I had never been in a casino and was really anxious to get a look inside one even though I was under age. Anyway, we stopped at a station I remember being just down the street from the Star casino. I figured here was my chance and took off on the run hoping I wouldn't be missed. I darted into the Star and was awestruck by all the slot machines. I went up one row and started back down another when suddenly I was confronted by a very large security guard. In a moment I was back on the street - my adventure lasting probably under a minute. I ran back to the car where my dad was still gassing up. Nothing was said but I'm sure he knew what I was up to.

By the time I got back to Winnemucca it was the summer of 1966. I had driven from Tahoe where I was working at Harrah's with a friend just to take a look around. I remember going into Scotty's Club which was next to the Star Broiler. There were so many old guys sitting around it looked like a retirement home. Scotty's claim to fame was that there were no ashtrays anywhere - you simply put your butt out on the floor. It was a wonder the joint didn't burn down. Ironically, after the place was acquired by the Star, it did burn in 1978 destroying the entire casino. Although I didn't get any chips then I did get several sets from the former owner several years later. They were just BC Wills hotstamps but were among my favorites.

My search for chips put me in contact with some pretty colorful characters. They ranged from club owners to desert rats.

Probably my favorite was "Disaster" Mike Lizanetz. I first met Mike in the summer of 1969 at the old Ferris Hotel on Bridge Street where he ran the "21" and roulette games. The Ferris was an old-time joint having been there since 1948 when it was spelled Farris. The bar ran down the middle separating the restaurant from the games which were up against the left hand wall. The place was empty except for the bartender and Mike who was behind the roulette table. I sat down at the bar and ordered a beer trying not to be too conspicuous. Anyway the bar and roulette table were only 3 or 4 feet apart so I slid over and introduced myself to Mike. I told him I was looking for old casino chips and did he have any laying around?

Now, there was a stairway that went up to the rooms along the wall where the pit was and it formed one of those triangular shaped closets underneath. I remember thinking I sure would like to go in there and nose around. Anyway, Mike turned out to be pretty nice guy especially to a kid with a strange request. His face lit up and he said just a minute and disappeared into the closet. He returned a few minutes later and I swear he had a bowling ball in his hands which he plunked down on the roulette table. I was speechless at first but politely declined his offer to sell. He took it back and returned with several more items but I reminded him I was only interested in old chips. He told me to come back

in the morning and see the owner of the hotel.

I was back the next day, having spent the night in my camper. There was Mike right where I had left him the day before behind the roulette table. He told me to have a seat and the owner would be around shortly. Pretty soon a couple of guys came out of the back room and Mike introduced me to one of them - I think his name was Hawkins and I asked him if he had any old chips. He said he'd go see what he could find. As I waited, I thought if this guy shows up with a bowling ball I'm outta here for good.

In about 15 minutes the guy's back and he had a handful of old chips - all different from the Ferris. They were all BC Wills hotstamps - ones, fives, and a twenty five that was spelled Farris. I couldn't believe it, I really hit the jackpot.

Mike and I became good friends after that. I would always go and see him at the Ferris whenever I got to town. I soon learned that Mike himself was a degenerate Wheel player. He was always trying to raise a bankroll to take to the Nevada Club in Reno where he always played. He liked the single "0" wheel they had and loved to tell stories about the owner, Lincoln Fitzgerald, who he always referred to as "Fitzy".

Mike would always talk about the 'Tommy' Club which he said he owned before he came to the Ferris. I thought "Tommy" was an unusual name but never asked him about it. He said he didn't have any of the chips which was disappointing to me. One day he took me across the street to get some ice cream. He said the ice cream shop used to be his old 'Tommy' Club and proceeded to point out how the place was laid out. It was like going back in time - I wished I had seen it before it closed.

Some time after that I discovered some 'Atomic Club' chips in a coin shop in Carson City. The owner said they came from Winnemucca. Then it hit me -- all this time Mike had been talking about the Atomic Club. He did have a bit of an accent - I don't know if it was Basque or what - but the next time I saw him I showed him the chips which he verified. I said, "Mike you told me this place was call the Tommy Club." He looked puzzled and said, "Yeah, that's right - the Tommy Club"!

After the Ferris closed in 1973, Mike bounced around town working different places. He wasn't hard to find as everyone in town knew him and the first person I asked always knew where to find him. It was kind of funny.

One day I walked into the Boondocks which was a large bar that had been created out of Pepper's and Candy's Clubs. Neither one of them were too exciting but I remember stumbling onto a "21" game in Pepper's one day and getting some chips. The game closed after three months. Anyway, back at the Boondocks, Mike had set up a poker game. When I saw him he was fast asleep in the dealer's seat - his glasses falling off his face. It was quite a sight and I had a good laugh. I walked over and gave him a nudge. "Mike", I said. "I need some of your chips". I could see he had quite an assortment from 10¢ through \$25. We went into the back room and he sold me some of each up to the \$5 denomination. I always kept track of the number of chips I had and to add 4 or 5 at once was always a thrill. Mike had come through once again.

The last time I saw Mike he was working as a pit boss at the Model T truck stop sometime in the late 70's. I hadn't seen him in a long time and he was glad to see me. The first thing he said was that he had to use the restroom and would I watch the "21" game that was in progress? So he took off and there I was - instant pit boss. He was gone for about fifteen minutes and I was

getting nervous hoping the owner wouldn't show up and get Mike in trouble. Anyway, that was Mike always good for a laugh.

The next time I got to Winnemucca Mike was gone. Someone said he had moved to Oregon and was working as a box boy in a grocery store. I made me feel real bad. When I heard he died a few years after that I remember thinking I hoped he was playing poker or roulette. Gambling was the thing Mike loved most.

My favorite hangout in Winnemucca was the Humboldt Hotel. I remember it from my first trip in 1966. It was a grand old building with large windows in the casino which occupied most of the ground floor. There were a couple of "21" tables and a crap game where you could bet 23¢ chips. Also, there was a Keno game and plenty of old Mills Hightop slot machines.

Now the owner of the Humboldt was a grouchy old man named Gus Knezevitch and he drove a yellow Cadillac with personalized license plates KNEZ. They were the first I had seen of this new fad in Nevada. Anyway, one day I asked him if he had any old chips from the Humboldt. He mumbled something and walked away. Pretty soon he came back with a couple of Aerodie hotstamps. They were \$5 one blue and one black. He said if I wanted them I'd have to give him \$10 which, of course, I did. Never the less I was underwhelmed by his generosity.

By 1973 I had moved to Las Vegas and was working downtown. One day I was driving to work when a news report came over the radio that the historic Humboldt Hotel in Winnemucca had burned. I was shocked to learn that my favorite haunt was gone and made a trip there a few weeks later. Sure enough, there she stood all boarded up. The fire had been caused by an employee living in one of the rooms upstairs.

The building remained for over a year and there was some talk of removing the top floors and re-opening the casino. But it was finally torn down and replaced with a mini-mall. The ceramic HH that was imbedded in the sidewalk was retained and placed in a monument on the original site where it remains to this day.

Another character I liked was a guy by the name of Charlie Norris. He worked for a time at the Model T where he designed the reverse of their 1969 dollar gaming token showing a man landing on the moon. His signature is on the moonscape. Charlie was obsessed with the event and had an official document drawn up at the Humboldt County Courthouse claiming ownership of one square mile of the moon with the American Flag marking the center. He made copies and gave them to anyone who would listen to him.

When I met Charlie he was working as a shill at the Dirty Bird casino. Mostly he would shill at the bar with a can of Miller High Life and a salt shaker. Every time he took a drink he would shake some salt in to the can.

One day Charlie gave me a token showing the moonscape design from the Model T gaming token on one side and a manger scene on the other. He claimed the moon landing and the Birth of Christ were the two greatest events in the history of Mankind. Charlie was quite a character alright.

In those days Joe Mackies Star Broiler was the main joint in town. Joe also owned the Winners Inn and a couple of other businesses in town prompting some of the locals to refer to the place as Winne-Mackie.

Anyway, there was a guy who worked at the Star by the name of Lou Carey. Lou was a midget who stood about 3 foot-

nothing and acted as greeter, poker dealer, show emcee, and just about anything else Joe could think of for him to do. I met him one day when he was dealing poker and it was funny to watch him push the chips around with a little wooden rake they had made for him. I sat down at the table and asked him if I could buy one of the five dollar chips, a TK Specialty depicting a guy cooking a steak over a barbeque - one of my favorites. He obliged and we wound up striking up quite a friendship.

He told me to come back later that evening to watch the show that he was in. It was the only place in town that had a showroom so I agreed. Anyway Lou cracked some jokes and played his horn. I don't remember if the jokes were funny or not but just watching this midget running around on stage sure was.

Pretty soon Lou introduces an exotic dancer who performed using one of those candles-in-a-bowl that sat on all the cocktail tables. As she shimmied around the stage, the wax began to melt and as the show ended she leaned backwards and poured the hot wax all over herself. The audience gasped and the curtain came down. I figured she worked up enough sweat so she didn't get burned but I'll never forget showtime in Winnemucca.

The last time I saw Lou he was working as a slot carousel barker at the Gem Casino in Reno. He was just the guy to do such a job too. I was surprised to see him and we reminisced about the good old days in Winnemucca.

I still get back to Winnemucca on occasion but the town has really changed and all the neat old places are gone - along with the old timers. I really miss the good times I had and will always cherish the memories.