

PHIL'S FORAYS
RANTING AND RAVING IN RENO
by Phil Jensen

I knew the first time I saw Reno that some day I would return to live there. That was in 1962 when I, as a teenager, and my folks passed through on a trip to California.

My first recollection of life in Reno was Alan Bible campaigning for re-election to the United State Senate. He was standing in the back of a pick-up truck, going up and down Virginia Street and holding a Bible in his hand. He kept repeating "Remember the Good Book." I guess in those days the voting populace spent as much time downtown as the tourists. Nevertheless, I thought it was a tacky attempt at name recognition.

Many of the casinos on Virginia Street had open air fronts with slot machines extending practically to the sidewalk. I remember peering into Harold's Club and longing to go inside. Down the street at the Mapes, large picture windows offered a glimpse of the action inside and I was able to get within inches of my father playing a slot machine, even though I was out side on the sidewalk.

By the summer of 1965 I was living at Tahoe and making frequent trips to Reno. Having turned twenty-one I regularly visited the casinos but had not yet started to collect chips. By the Fall of 1965 I had joined the Naval Reserve in Reno to avoid being drafted.

I had to spend one weekend a month attending meetings in Reno and I always stayed at the Overland Hotel. It was my favorite place in Reno and for some strange reason always got room 501. It was a small cubicle on the fifth floor with a bed, dresser, and a sink in the corner. The bathroom was down the hall like a lot of the old-time hotels. There also was a window that opened onto a ledge that ran all around the top (5th) floor. One night, as the snow was falling, I crawled out and walked around. It's a wonder I didn't fall off and land on Commercial Row below, but being young and foolish it was something I had to do.

My March of 1966 so much snow had fallen at Tahoe I decided to move to Las Vegas where the climate was more bearable.

I kept thinking of Reno though, and after being discharged from the Navy in 1969 I returned. I needed a job and the first place I went was the Overland Hotel. Now, all the dice dealers were old men and I felt out of place applying but to my surprise I got hired. As it turned out I stayed for four years.

By now, I had started to collect chips in earnest. I was inspired by the collection at Harvey's and a friend who also collected. Other than that, though, I was pretty much on my own and a little embarrassed to admit to anyone by passion for chips.

Anyway, working at the Overland was great fun. There were lots of local characters who hung out there and we had a good time kidding with them. We also employed pensioners as shills at the tables and I spent a lot of time talking to them about the old days of Reno. One guy, his name was Benny, was an old prospector. A couple of times he took me out into the hills and showed me the ropes of prospecting. I also spent a lot of time bugging the owner, Pick Hobson, for

old chips. He had preciously owned the Frontier Club on Virginia Street and I eventually got quite a few from him.

Most of the twenty-one dealers were older ladies who had started their careers at Harolds Club. I was surprised to learn that most of them could deal craps and it was rumored that a few had Harolds Club tattoos. (That's a JOKE)

One night I mentioned to one of them that I needed some Harlem Club chips for my collection but was a little apprehensive about going down there alone. The place was a block from the Overland across Lake Street, behind the New China Club. Anyway, Marion was her name, said we'd run down on our next break which we did. By this time the Harlem Club was called the Soul Club but they still used Harlem Club chips. The place was jumping when we got there and I bought four five dollar chips off the twenty-one table. I think they were the old BC Wills mold and they had a picture of a boot, the significance of which I never did find out. There were also some purple fifty-cent hot stamp chips which I bought. Some had the Club Harlem name on them but others had only NB/50¢. I later learned that the NB stood for the original two owners, Norval and Bailey.

Anyway, back at the Overland, I normally spent my breaks in a small room in the basement. From this room were doors to the coin room, Pick's office, and a mysterious room where all the old slot machines from the Frontier Club were stored. A rather permanent barrier of chicken wire had been nailed up around them but were still visible from the break area. I always longed to have one--surely Pick would never have missed it. Beyond that was a long tunnel which seemed to disappear into nowhere. One night I got the shift boss to take me on a tour of it. The tunnel actually ran the full length of Commercial Row, the street on which the Overland was located and was extremely dark. It was illuminated by a few dim bulbs which had been mounted on a block long wire. After going about 40 or 50 feet we came upon a tub-style crap table that had been stored in a little alcove to the side and on it was a cardboard box that contained about 15 or 20 boxes of chips. My heart was pounding as I grabbed at the treasure before me. As it turned out, they were all chips from Bill's Corner Bar which was the business on the corner of Commercial Row and Lake St. I gathered up a few each of the 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, \$1 and \$5 denominations and on the bottom of the box was a lone \$25 chip which I added to my windfall. Apparently, someone (maybe Bill) kept all the twenty-fives so I figured I really had a rare one. Anyway, my adventure in the tunnel was one I'll never forget. Later, I remember talking to an old Chinese Keno writer at Harolds Club and she told me about a Chinese casino called the Star which was located on Lake Street in the 1930's. She said there were tunnels that ran underneath the club that were used as Opium dens. Supposedly, there was access to these tunnels along the banks of the nearby Truckee River.

Anyway, next to the Overland on Center Street was the old Greyhound Bus depot. There was a small casino in it called the Oak Room which had a twenty-one table and some slots. The owner was a man by the name of Al Figoni who also owned several other drinking and gambling establishments in the downtown area. I used to go over to the Oak Room on my breaks and eventually became friends with him. One night after buying some of the Oak Room chips, Al took me into the

basement. Among all the junk down there were chips from Colbrandt's Flamingo Room - a joint located on Virginia Street in the 1950's. They were all fifty and hundred dollar denominations and were scattered all over the floor. I gathered all that were in sight. That Al sure was a great guy.



This shot shows Commercial Row in July of 1970 all of which was owned by Pick Hobson. Not shown on the left was Bill's Corner Bar and the Cosmo Club next to the SP Club. All three were eventually combined into the Cosmo Club owned by Pick. The Dormio was the sight of a filming of an episode of "Then Came Bronson". Aggies Bar was to the right of the Depot Bar. Next to that was a pawn shop that was converted to restaurant in the Overland. Clearly visible is the fifth floor ledge of the Overland where I took a walk one Winter's night. One the extreme left is the second half of my truck. The infamous tunnel ran the full length of this block.



This picture was shot in July of 1970. It shows some of the bars on East Second Street between Center and Lake Street. In the center building, on the alley, is Al's bar owned by my friend Al Figoni. Also visible is the Star Hotel.



Shown here is the Columbo and Toscano Hotel on Lake Street. Basin Street was a strip joint and I remember a Barboot game there. Before that it was the Mint Club and before that the China Mint. One day the owner gave me a handful of the obsolete Mint Club chips. I also got a five dollar China Mint off the "Do not take" board in the cashier's cage at the Overland.

When the new Holiday Inn on Sixth Street opened in 1975 it contained a small casino that was fairly well hidden from the public. One entered through a door toward the rear of the hotel lobby and there was a small, cramped room with a couple tables and some slot machines. It made me think of an illegal joint somewhere back during prohibition.

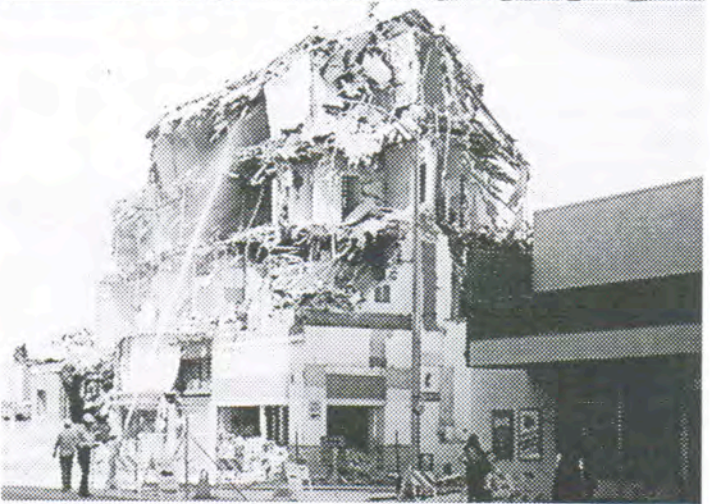
Anyway, the man dealing the dice game was a gentleman by the name of Howard McMullen who owned Mac's Club on South Virginia Street during the 1950's. I told him I was a dice dealer at the Overland and we hit it off right away. He told me during the heyday of Mac's Club that Bill Harrah was in the process of building up business at his downtown casino and was a regular customer there. He would come into Mac's and take a seat at the bar. After getting the attention of the bartender he would put his index finger under his chin and wag it back and forth. This was a signal to set up the bar and announce to all that they were drinking on Bill Harrah. Apparently, this was a tactic that Bill used in many of the bars around Reno and I guess it worked judging from the success of Harrah's. Funny what it takes to become successful. Later, Mac gave me several of his old chips plus some plastic drink tokens that were used at his place.

Another of my good friends was Karl Berge at the Silver Club in Sparks. I remember the original Silver Club as being a small operation with a paycheck wheel and five or six slot machines. Karl originally had three partners but eventually bought them out. Later he expanded and was always on the casino floor promoting business. "Hey, Hey, Hey, It's jackpot time at the Silver Club", he would chant as he walked the slot area greeting customers. He was a real hustler and it paid off.

Anyway, Karl used to work at the old Sahati's Country Club at Lake Tahoe and he had a box full of old chips from there that he kept in a back room at the Silver Club. Periodically, he would take me back there and shake the box.

Then he would reach in a grab a chip or two and give them to me. It would drive me nuts that he wouldn't let me look in the box but I was happy to get a new addition to my collection, nevertheless.

Over the years I made many friends in Reno and acquired many chips. It was a great time in my life and I'll always remember the old clubs and the great times I had.



THE DEMISE OF THE OVERLAND: I took this series of photographs as the Overland was being demolished in 1977. As a crowd gathered I remember a couple of old ladies reminiscing as the bricks fell. It was a sad time and a piece of me was destroyed along with the old building.