

Stumbling Upon a Great Hobby

by David Hench

Like many chip collectors, I got started kind of by accident, keeping a few "souvenir" chips here and there from various casino towns. First was Reno, next was Las Vegas, then Tunica, Biloxi, and Atlantic City. At each stop, if I thought of it, I'd keep a chip or two, and then when I got home, I'd throw them in a drawer and forget all about them. Every once in a while, I'd root them out of the drawer and admire them a little and wonder why in the world I was saving them.

The first of these trips was from my old Kentucky home to Reno, Nevada, in the early 1980's. I was visiting a friend of mine who had moved out there to play poker full time. His favorite joint was Harrah's, and I spent most of my stay in Reno playing poker there. I noticed that Harrah's had odd brass-type chips. I didn't think I liked those chips at the time, for playing with that is, because they were so heavy and different from what I was used to. But the Harrah's chips, being so distinctive, sort of awakened me to the idea that there were all different kinds of chips "out there." In the wee hours of the last night of my trip, all of a sudden I wanted to know what other kinds of chips were around town. So there I went, stumbling through the streets of Reno at 1:00 or 2:00 O'clock in the morning, exhausted, gathering \$1 chips from all the casinos. I made the mistake of playing at most of the joints I stopped in, so I ended up paying a premium for those first chips. When I arrived home in Kentucky after a long flight the next day, I had my first 20 or so "souvenirs."

A few months later I did the same thing on a trip to Las Vegas, going up and down the strip getting a few chips from each casino – only this time without playing. It was quicker and cheaper that way. I remember most of the cashier girl's reactions were the same: "You want them for what?" Undeterred, I filled my fanny pack with chips from most all of the strip hotels. I got my first taste of just how far it is between neighboring properties on the strip, because a lot of the trams and moving sidewalks that are there now weren't around then. I had a bunch of chips and some blisters on my toes to show for my days work. My biggest mistake was when, realizing I had missed a casino, I walked from the Imperial Palace to the Tropicana looking for the Stardust. I knew I'd be coming up on it any time. But by the time I got to the Tropicana, I was out of hotels – and there was no sign of the Stardust. Slowly, knowing I couldn't have made that mistake, I turned around and focused my tourist brand binoculars on the other end of the strip. Oh, no! Coming out of the Imperial Palace I had zigged when I should have zagged, and I ended up on the wrong end of the strip. I'll tell you, that wasn't the last time I didn't know where I was at in Vegas, just the first!

My blisters were really aching by then, and there was no way I was walking all the way back. I promptly hailed a taxi, and on the ride back, I asked the driver when they had moved the Stardust to the other end of the strip. He stared into the rear view mirror at me like cabbies do when they're sizing up their fare. Then he pulled over to the curb and

insisted I show him some cash, I'm sure thinking I was a lunatic or something. But I was flush with cash from the Union Plaza's pot-limit Omaha game the night before, and just dumb enough to show him. So I did. Back into traffic he merged, and it seemed like we must have gone around that Interstate 15 about twelve times before we finally pulled up to the Stardust. I got my Stardust vintage 1985 chip, which I still display proudly today.

When I got home from that trip I had about 40 total \$1 chips from Reno and Las Vegas, and gleefully figured I "probably had them all." I threw them loose in a drawer somewhere and forgot about them for about 10 years. I added a few Tunica and AC chips and threw them in the drawer and forgot about them for about another five years. Occasionally, I'd root around and find them and admire them again. All told now I had 52 chips, which was odd because that's always been a lucky number for me.

Those chips stayed unceremoniously in a remote drawer for the better part of those 15 years. Then sometime in 1999, I picked up a friend at the airport on his return trip from Las Vegas. For my trouble, he gave me a few \$1 chips from the newer Las Vegas hotels, which he still had in his pocket from the trip. "Cool," I said "I don't have these." Surprised at how much I liked them, he said "I've got some more at home. You can have them too when you drop me off." When we got to his place and got his luggage unloaded, we went out in his garage and he

started looking through a bunch of chests and boxes in search of the chips. I tried to get him to stop looking, thinking we'd never find them – but he insisted. Eventually, he found them in an old trunk and laid them on me. They were a couple of dozen or so very different looking fractional and \$1 chips from the Aladdin, the Dunes, the Flamingo, the Riviera, the California Club, Binion's Horseshoe, The International, and others.



"How long have you had these?" I asked him.

"About 30 or 40 years," he said.

"They might be worth something," I said.

"Good," he said, "they're yours now."

I searched on the internet that night to see if there were any casino chip related sites. I found the CC>CC site, ChipGuide.com, and several dealer sites. I couldn't believe what the chips he had given me were listed for. As much as I hated to, I took them back to him the next day and told him he couldn't give them to me; they were too valuable. I told him what I had found out, that there were price-guide books about chips and everything, and that apparently it was a burgeoning hobby. He just said "The chips are yours."

I posted on Greg Susong's ChipBoard the next night and couldn't believe some of the offers I was getting for little \$1 face value pieces of clay. I almost let them go, but I managed to resist and hold on to them. I became an official collector right then. When I saw what they were worth and how cool the chip collecting hobby was (as described on the ChipBoard), something I had flirted with for years became a passion. Now considering collecting as an active hobby and having learned a little, I held my breath hoping I might have access to a stash of Landmark chips (a friend of mine had dealt and played there for years and lived right across town from me). It never panned out. But just that it was a possibility combined with the 1960's vintage classics that were dropped in my hand, were what ignited my interest in Las Vegas

obsoletes. I was hooked.

I joined CC>CC from the internet site within a few weeks, and began to get much more actively involved in chip collecting. Basically I just tried to get \$1 chips from anywhere I could for a while, but then in February of 2000, I saw a Groundhog Day LE come out. Now, I've heard the Groundhog Day issues besmirched considerably on the ChipBoard.com, and I didn't appreciate it. That's my birthday, and more than any other chip, it was the one that launched my interest in an LE collection. So when I heard people saying they're gonna quit collecting LEs if they see one more Groundhog Day chip, I got a little ruffled. But I forgive them for their lack of appreciation of this major holiday, and don't hold it against them – though I did for a while. It was hard to believe someone in my own club would be so disagreeable they would knock a harmless groundhog. But it happened, and I've still got the link to prove it.



After I shook that off, I embarked on an LE collection for about a year, and greatly enjoyed it. Cheques in the Mail was my main supplier, and they did a great job. But the whole time, I had my eye on the Las Vegas \$1 obsolescents, and the strange horse head, arrow die, HCE, die-swirled, and scalloped chips that my buddy had dropped in my hand. They just looked different, and they quickly became my preferred specialty. They were colorful and intricately detailed,

not so ubiquitous as the modern chips, and they just smacked of old Vegas in their design and appearance. I had never seen chips like that before. I wanted some more.

Eventually I sold off my LE collection, though it was tough to part with. (For anyone selling off a collection or a segment of it, I recommend photocopying it so you still have a "hard copy" of the collection. I didn't do this, and later wished I had.)

Now I was ready to seriously pursue a Las Vegas \$1 obsolete collection. I started hunting them down – from dealers, at shows, from Vegas travelers who had kept souvenirs. I wasn't looking to the future for chips such as with LEs, but to the past. I liked that aspect of it and also the finite nature of it – as compared to the ever-expanding LE market. At times, LEs can give the impression that you can never "catch up," whereas with obsoletes you always feel you are gaining on it. I preferred a less vast and cumbersome collection. These are just personal preferences in collecting; there's a thousand different ways to go. All of them, for sure, are a blast for the chip lover.

So the \$1 Las Vegas obsolescents have become my favorite specialty. I envy collectors who can hit the trail and physically roam the Nevada countryside for obsolete chips, but that doesn't work in Kentucky. My "trail" has been more the "e-trail." Some of my suppliers for obsolescents have been James Campiglia, Joe Shaw, Terry Lazarus, Scott Hartman, Josh Shore, Andy Hughes, Steve Piccolo, various ebay auctions, and many booths at the convention, including prominently, a Cheques In The Mail consignment sale at the 2001 Convention. Just like with LEs, I acquired new favorites to replace old ones continuously.

You gotta be careful though, because there is no end in sight once you get started. You can't get them all, that's for sure. Realizing this, I recently had a little lull in my enthusiasm for The Project. What project? Collecting every known Las Vegas \$1 chip. But right when I was wavering a little bit, I came across Joe Shaw's collection, which was becoming available. He had some beauties. Through email, Joe informed me he had originally had a similar intention as mine – to get them all (or as many as possible). I started thinking I could be a relay man in The Project – that I could carry it for a while and then pass it off to another chip lover down the road. Eventually maybe the complete known set will be accumulated and be in the hands of one collector, possibly to be donated to the CC>CC and displayed at the new club building. Of course I realize as long as there are chips in the set that are unique or near unique, it isn't really possible to collect them all. Which is fine, I wouldn't really want The Project to be over. All you can do is make a run at it, and then pass the baton to the next person in the relay. That would be the ultimate in collecting \$1 Las Vegas obsolescents.

But enough about The Project, I'm ignoring my other chips. From my former LE collection I have retained two areas of interest. One is Kentucky Derby chips and the other is joker chips. I've been lucky in both specialties.

Disappointed in both the amount and quality of Derby LEs being issued each year, in 2001 I approached Gene Trimble with the idea of doing a Secretariat commemorative Derby chip, and possibly

expanding that idea into a series of "Racing Legends" chips from The Palms. It seemed like a good idea, and I thought it might even sound good to Gene (with him being from Kentucky as well), but I thought it would be about a 100-to-1 shot that he would actually get busy immediately in producing the chips. Well he did. The man doesn't mess around when it comes to chips. The Palms ponied up for the rights and created an official chipping classic.



On the "joker" front, there are some great chips out there, but again, just not enough of them. Undeterred again, I had Debbie Harber and www.weddingchips.com design for me a custom-made joker chip as a promo for my poker humor column. It turned out great, and I was surprised that many collectors wanted one. That was fine with me. With no regard for what I might receive in return, I sent them off immediately to whoever asked. I was flattered that they wanted one and, since I know what it's like to want a chip, there's no way I was going to disappoint anyone.





Over the last few years, I've gone from regarding chips as souvenirs to be thrown in a drawer and forgotten, to considering them prized collectibles. But at first, as I delved more seriously into the hobby, I was a little skittish about fessin' up to my love for chip collecting. Maybe even embarrassed around certain people. I was always surprised when other poker players didn't share my interest

in collecting. Whenever I broached the subject of chip collecting with them (poker players are a notoriously salty bunch), I kept getting comments like: "Yeah, I collect them right here in front of me while I'm playing, and then I cash them out – you idiot." After a few comments like that, I became sort of a closet collector. I don't like being made fun of any more than the next guy, so I clammed up about chips around gamblers. When I related some of this to semi-celebrity chip collector Andy Hughes of Las Vegas, he said he had never encountered such an attitude from poker players, and that (and I quote) "Maybe it was something in the water in Kentucky." He said that to me in an email. (I still have a copy to prove it.) I must admit that Andy not scoffing at the idea of collecting probably helped me get over some of my initial "professional" embarrassment about it. But I got to thinking later on about that comment he made about the water in Kentucky, and it occurred to me: "Yeah, right. At least we've got our own water."

Although I've never collected anything else, chip collecting sort of got in my blood. I couldn't really say why. I know a guy who collects dinosaur bones, and I've often wondered what in the world for. I think I'll ask him, but I gotta catch him when he's winners or he'll just say "Shut up and deal." Whatever the reason he collects dinosaur bones is, I'm sure it must be the same reason we collect chips. Come to think of it, maybe it IS the same thing. Maybe I like these Las Vegas obsoletes because it was dinosaurs (the mobbed-up kind) that used to run the casinos in the '50's and '60's – back when Vegas was Vegas. I'll run that theory by the dinosaur collector one of these times when he's loser – and then duck. Gamblin' ain't exactly a social exercise when you're losing, as any chip could surely bear witness. The chips have seen it all. They're what makes the whole gambling world go 'round. You got to love 'em.