

THE LIFE OF Lew Hymers

by John Moore



Self portrait at drawing table from *Stock Cuts*, 1947

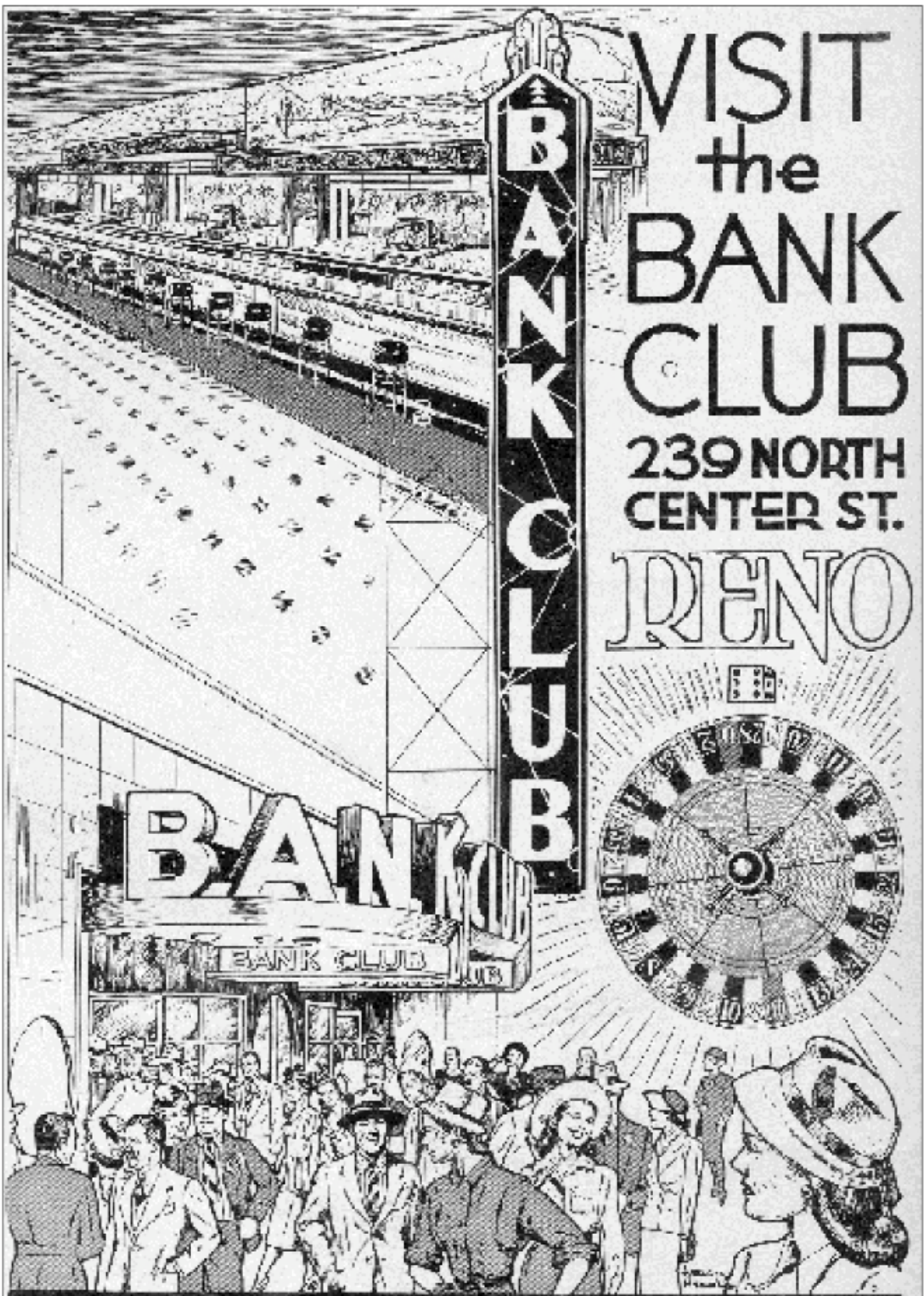
The life and times of Lew Hymers are as unique and diverse as the legacy of artwork he left behind. Born in Reno in May, 1892, Lew was, even at this early date, a third generation Renoite. His grandfather settled in Reno shortly after the town site had been laid out, in 1868.

At the turn of the century, Lew was an eight year old in one of the last frontier towns of the Wild West. The Truckee River ran untamed two

blocks south of his home, and the railroad was a few blocks to the north. The small town had already achieved notoriety for its around the clock drinking, whoring and lawlessness. Although the boom times resulting from the nearby Comstock Lode were over, the renewed prosperity to be generated from the Tonopah, Goldfield and other bonanzas were just around the corner. Ranching and sheepherding provided a constant flow of newly arrived cow pokes and

ranch hands ready to hoo-rah the town.

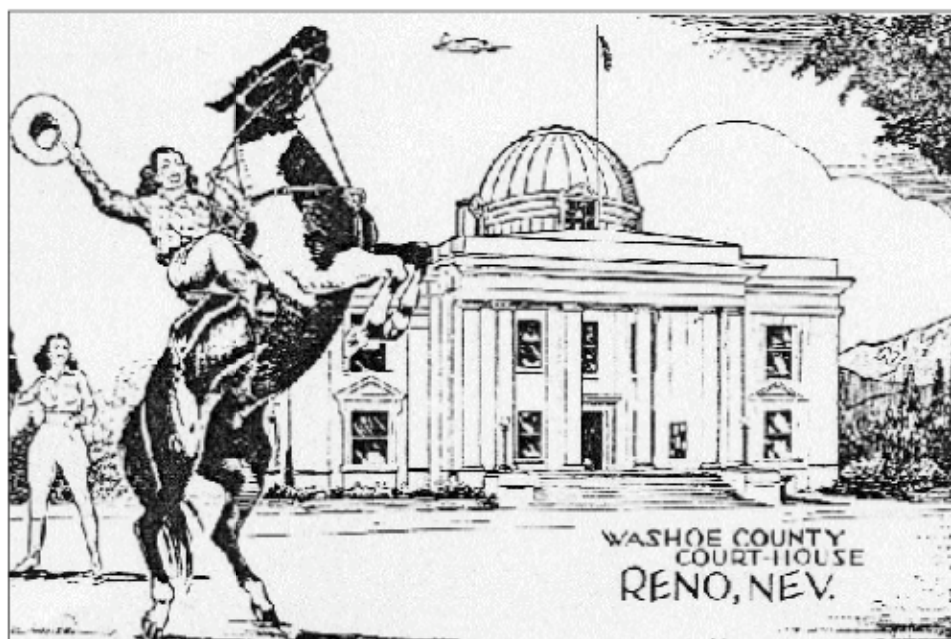
The larger than life images of cowboys, miners, gamblers, ne'er-do-wells, as well as merchants and common townspeople were fodder for his active young mind and all were to serve him well in his years to come as a caricaturist, cartoonist, master of pen and ink drawing and, with all these skills combined, a superb commercial artist.



Lew was an indifferent student, preferring to sketch his teachers and fellow students than to pursue a serious education. Apparently family friends and teachers recognized his passion for pen and ink and, in 1912, at the age of twenty; he departed Reno to join the staff of the San Francisco Chronicle. At the Chronicle, he worked alongside Robert Ripley who would go on to syndicate "Ripley's Believe it or Not" and John Terry, the eventual creator of the "Terrytoons" cartoon series.

In 1913, Hymers departed San Francisco for Europe to pursue formal art schooling. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he fled to a nearly deserted Paris. As the Germans approached Paris, Hymers joined thousands of other American refugees, all desperate to avoid the oncoming Huns. Lew left Paris for Havre in a railroad cattle car. His ten day passage back to the states was in an overcrowded, filthy and poorly-manned French steamer.

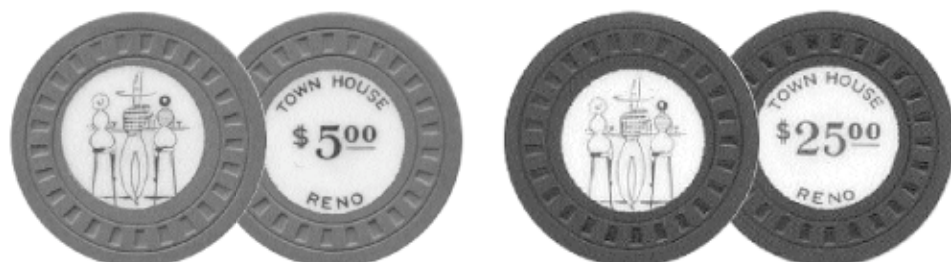
Reno, as it would several more times in his career, drew Hymers back to its more familiar and laid back environment. For the next several years Lew free lanced, producing art work for a variety of clients. In 1917, he joined the Evening Gazette as staff artist. His position was flexible: he did cartoons, illustrations and caricatures of local personages as needed, and commenced in the subtle ways of a gifted artist, to include opinion and criticism of many aspects of the City of Reno's "status quo." He particularly used his skill as caricaturist in illustrating the members of Nevada's legislature and their many lobbyists. Hymer's sharpest darts (pen pricks?) were delivered with finesse, wit and subtlety. Hymer's work must have immediately drawn attention, as within less than a year he was invited to



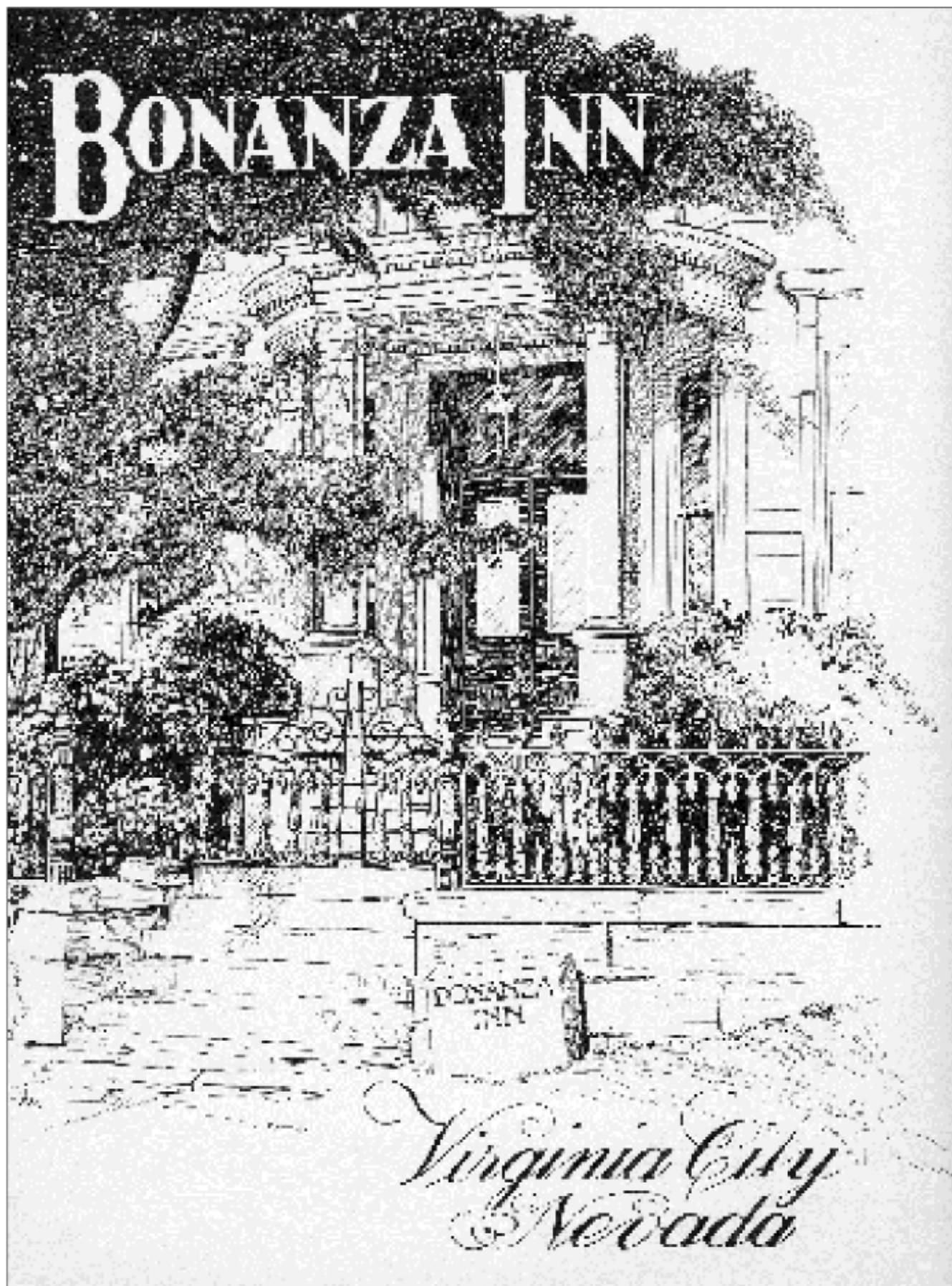
Washoe County Court House

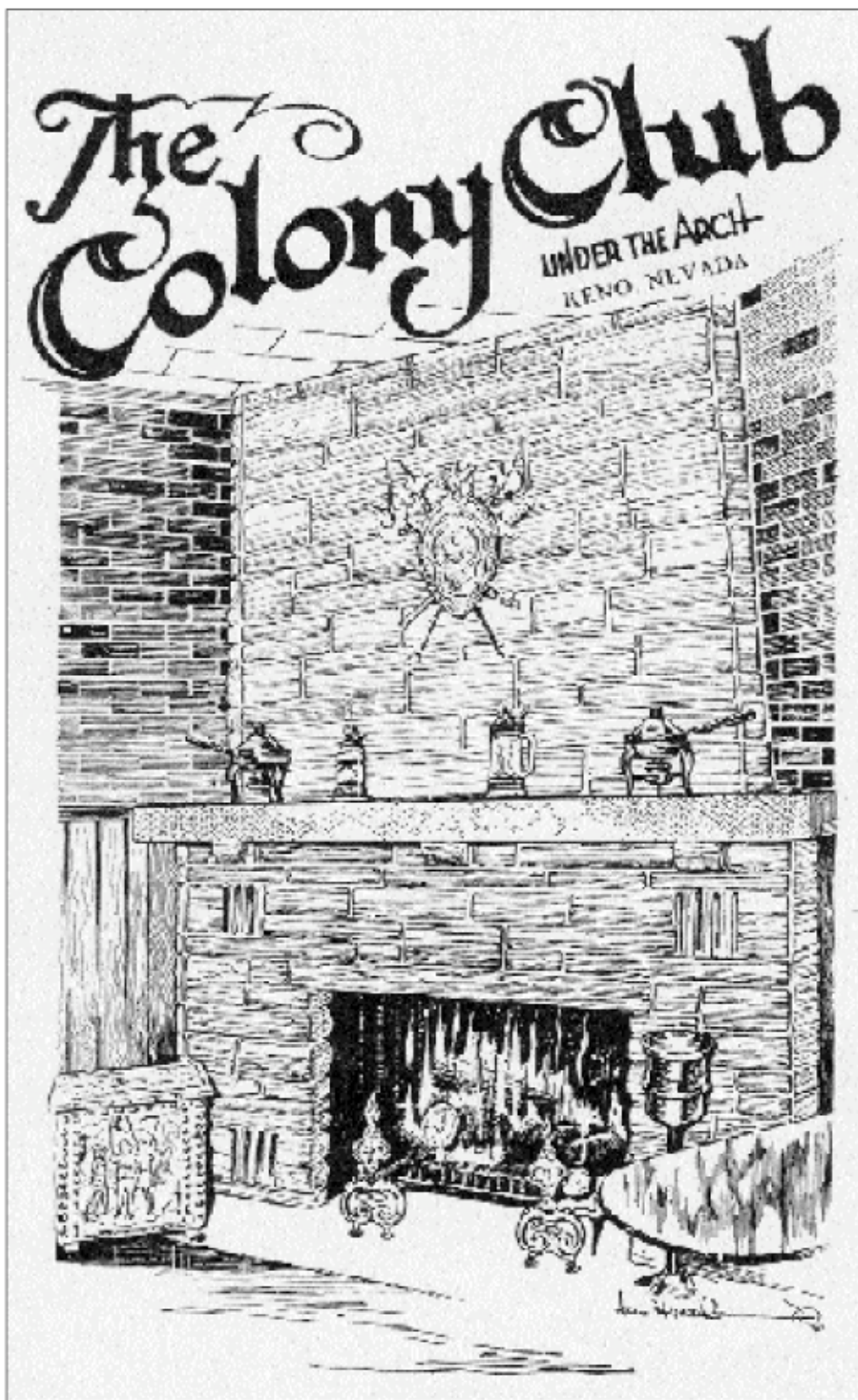


Hall's Shell Service



\$5.00 and \$25.00 chips for The Town House in Reno, Nevada





The Colony Club, Reno, Nevada

join the Washington Post, where he prospered and was soon appointed Art Director. Hymers and his wife tired of the East and after a three year hitch at the Post, returned, again, to

Reno.

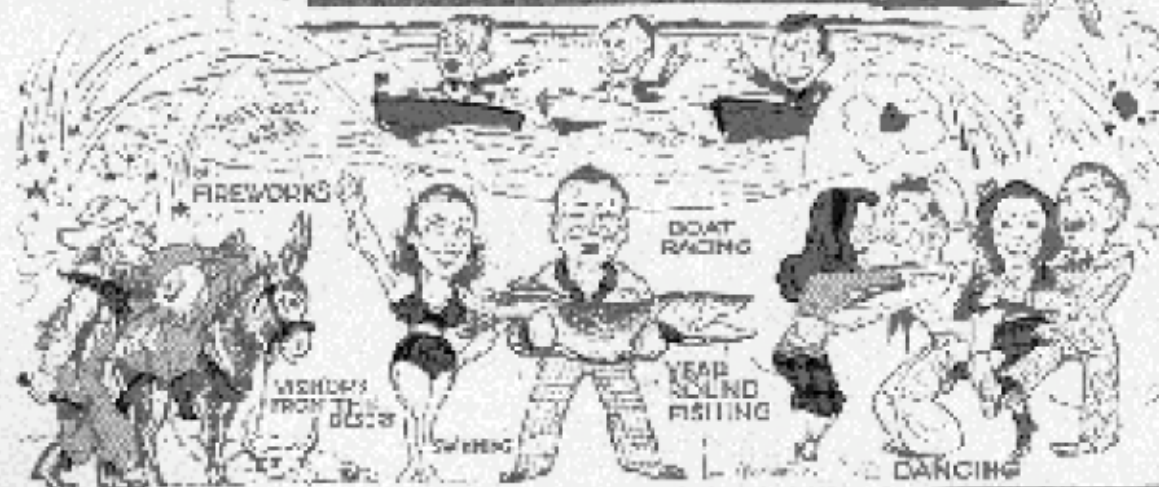
The Hymers were soon on the move again, however. Lew was intrigued by a new process called "animated film", in which the car-

toons actually came to life with movement and expression. The year 1920 found the Hymers in Los Angeles, with Lew working for a young fellow named Walt Disney. The arrangement did not last too long as Lew found his new boss to be somewhat of a tyrant, who insisted on taking all creative credit while failing to share in the financial rewards. Hymers spent the next twelve years in Southern California, perfecting his craft through freelancing and direct employment with many national firms.

The economic downturn of the depression devastated the advertising business and 1932 saw the Hymers returning once again to the Reno area. Lew established a studio and along with a prodigious inventory of his previous works and his ongoing production of drawings, was able to provide clients, locally and nationwide, with "off the shelf" sketches of a vast assortment of subjects: animals, insects, people in all aspects of human endeavor. His catalogues allowed advertisers to choose just the "right" presentation to adorn match-book covers, newspaper advertisements, menus and yellow page ads, etc., all of which appeared to have been drawn specifically for that particular need. The cost in 1933: one dollar per drawing, or ten dollars per dozen. His studio also created specific works as required by his clients. The "Riding Lesson" chip and related Townhouse Casino items with that theme originated in this era and is representative of how Lew's studio could work with business owners to tailor advertising to fit their needs.

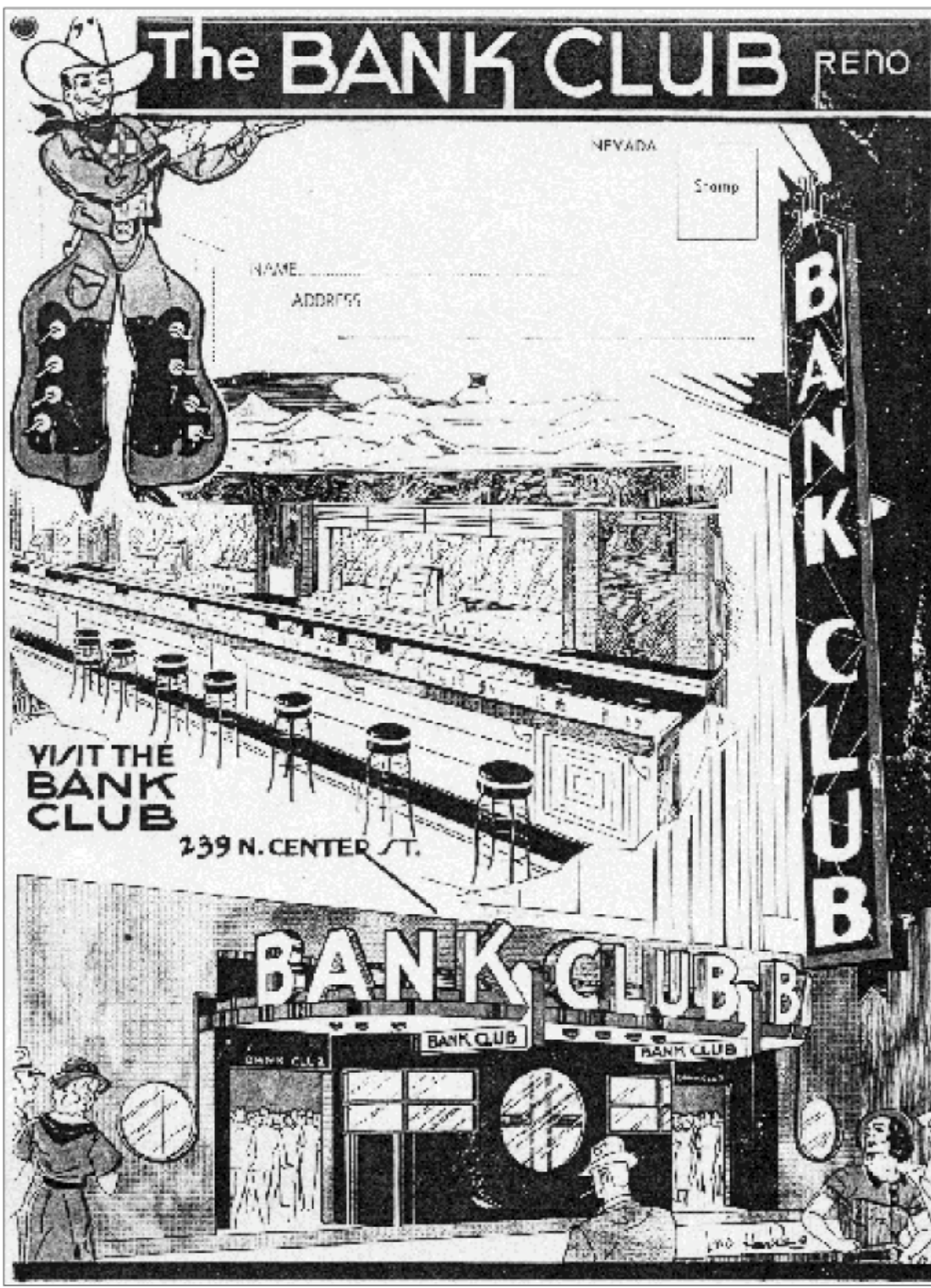
In 1938, Hymers again began an affiliation with the Evening Gazette. Each Saturday for the following six years his Seen About Town feature

Hawthorne's *own* 2nd Annual NAVY DAY *Celebration* ★ OCTOBER 23-24 1945



SOUVENIR PROGRAM





The BANK CLUB RENO

NEVADA

Stamp

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____

VISIT THE
BANK
CLUB

239 N. CENTER ST.

BANK CLUB

BANK CLUB

BANK CLUB



**"We'll See You
at the
PALACE
CLUB
during
the
RENO
RODEO"**

THE WAGON WHEEL

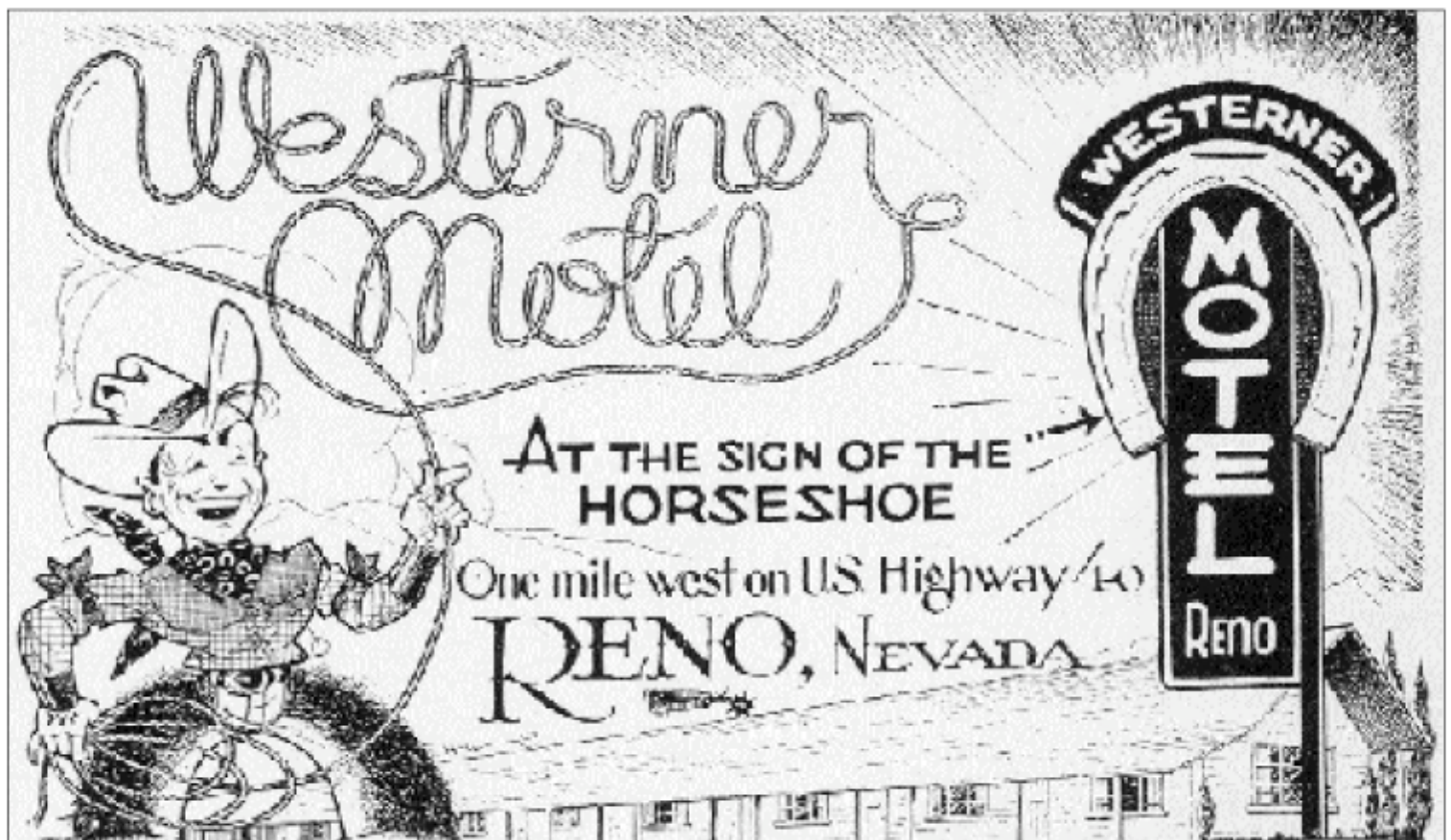
FLAMING FOREST!

136 E. COMMERCIAL ROW * RENO, NEV.



was a mainstay in the publication. Each week eight citizens were caricatured. The cartoon included name, occupation and generally some typical comment or humorous statement that rounded out that person's role in the community. Hymers did not limit his subjects to politicians and the socially prominent: milk man, gas station attendant, housewife or barber shared equal space with cattle baron, judge or mayor. These works, taken in their totality, captured the spirit and essence of the people of Reno and all of Northern Nevada in their era, far better than today's newspapers with their digital photography and computerized presses are capable of doing.

Low Hymers' advertising work dominated the Reno and Northern Nevada market for two decades. Many of his ads worked so well they became permanent symbols of the businesses represented. The Nevada Club became personified by Hymers simple drawing of the State of





Nevada outline, wearing cowboy hat, boots and chaps, that it was used as the club's logo until the club's closure. The Sportsman, a Reno sporting goods store still incorporates the caricatures of owners Chet and Link Piazzo in their advertising, over fifty years since it was first used.

The post World War Two era brought many changes to Reno and to the newspaper and advertising business. The "Biggest Little City" was



rapidly becoming a Big City. For Lew Hymers the small town charm was rapidly eroding. He no longer could stroll Virginia Street and greet each passerby by name. Pen and ink artwork in newspapers was replaced with photography. Advertising had become "slick" and scientific, the use of cartoonlike "cuts" was seen as dated and old fashioned. In 1948 Hymers moved his studio from downtown to his home "out in the country" on Plumb Lane, and eventually retired to the sunny climes of Southern California. Lew Hymers died February 4, 1953, at his home in Tujunga, California.

Chip scans courtesy Larry Hollibaugh
Advertising Courtesy Howard W. Herz,
Gaming Archaeology

