

A GAMING HISTORY OF Wells NEVADA

by Gene and Peg Kaplan

Submitted on behalf of the Wells Society for the Preservation of Western Heritage.

Introduction

Wells, Nevada, is a wild west town with a well-deserved reputation for “showing visitors a good time since Christmas 1869.” Saloons and gaming were an integral part of its economy in the old west, and still are. Wells in its scale and surrounding landscape would still be recognizable to early pioneers as would be buildings of Front Street. You walk in the footsteps of mountain men, railroad builders, ranchers, rustlers, bullwhackers, gamblers, when you visit Wells, Nevada, junction of I-80 & U.S. 93. Here Shoshone, mountain men, and overland wagon trains replenished at the Humboldt Wells. Then in 1869 came the Central Pacific. The railhead packed Front Street honky-tonks and making Wells the hub for freight wagons and stagecoaches bound for regional mines.

Wells is undergoing a historic revival to breathe life into its authentic wild west commercial district where trains still rumble by stirring up ghosts in the old buildings. For virtual Old Town Front Street Walking Tour click onto <http://www.wellsnevada.com> and click onto the “Old Town Wells” link on the right. Looking for a movie location? Click onto “Wells Wants Movie Makers” for more local scenes.

The Emigrant Trail Interpretive Center is co-located with the Visitor’s Center & Chamber of Commerce (775) 752-3540 at 395 6th Street. Learn about wagon trail sites, nearby Metropolis ghost town, and ATV trails that thread through Sprucemont ghost towns 38 miles south. One of the State’s biggest car shows, the Senior Pro Rodeo, chariot races, and trap shoots combine with



Cattle King Colonel E.P. Hardesty (left) with saloon proprietor Al Fisher (right) in Fisher’s Saloon in the 1890’s. The Fisher Saloon later became the Capitol Club.

an airport, nine-hole golf course, and restaurants to keep Wells lively, and casinos still welcome travelers.

The Bulls Head Gaming begins in 1869

The future of Humboldt Wells (as it was then known) was bright when it became a freight division point and helper station where the Central Pacific coupled-up additional locomotives to pull trains over the Pequop Mountains. On Christmas Eve, 1869 the fledgling community celebrated the grand opening of its first commercial building when the Bulls Head Saloon welcomed a blend of teamsters, railroaders and cowboys. That



Wells, Nevada. 1892

clientele supported the popular saloon for over 100 years. Constructed from discarded railroad ties, the original Bulls Head later gave way to an elegant structure built in 1887 that still stands today.

Rail connections to the meat-hungry East greatly benefited northeastern Nevada making it the last of the open-range cattle empires. So many herds trailed up from Texas and into Nevada that observers described Elko County as a sea of cattle, and with the cattle came cowboys, cattle rustlers, law officers, ranchers, and gamblers to give Wells and vicinity a colorful, fascinating, cast of colorful characters and events. Wells became the transportation hub where railroad-shipped goods were broken down for transshipment by freight wagons connecting mining camps to the railhead while Clover Valley and Starr Valley ranchers grew the fodder to “fuel” the teams. Spruce Mountain mining activity dates back to 1869, the same year the Bulls Head Saloon opened in Wells and the history of Wells and the Spruce Mountain mining camps are intertwined. Hardy teamsters who operated out of Wells braved extreme weather and armed robbers to connect Cherry Creek, Contact, and Ely to the railhead with twenty-mule teams. Freight teamsters and cowpokes who drove in stock camped by the stock corrals and walked across the tracks to Front Street to gamble. For its first seventeen years Wells liquor was poured and cards were dealt in saloon-casinos that were false front one-story frame buildings thrown together in typical cow town style. Then in 1887 J.B. “Ben” Fitch who had been the first Elko County Sheriff partnered with cattle king Colonel E.P. Hardesty to replace the primitive Bulls Head with a first-class saloon and hotel. Marked by a grand open-



Wells, Nevada railroad depot about 1898 or soon thereafter. The Bulls Head Saloon on the corner to the left still stands.

ing with revelers arriving on a special train, that fine building was damaged in an 1893 fire that left only half of the building serviceable and only half the damage covered by insurance. Fitch had to cut his losses and move on, leaving Colonel Hardesty to renovate what remained.

Born in Kentucky, Colonel Hardesty came west when he fought in the U.S. War with Mexico, then pioneered in Colorado and Montana. In the 1860’s he engaged in freighting from Salt Lake City to different points in Montana. Coming to Nevada in 1872 with a large herd of cattle, his holdings grew and he came to be named in Thomas Wren’s History of the State of Nevada as “one of the cattle kings of the state.” Colonel Hardesty was six foot four inches tall and habitually wore a six gallon hat, high heeled cowboy boots, and carried at the very least a horn-handled walking stick and silver hip flask. As a cattleman he survived rustlers, blizzards and droughts and was used to meeting adversity head on.

By 1898 business was good enough to rebuild the Bulls Head

east wing, remodel the west wing to match, and fix up the bar room. With a luxurious dining room to attract railroad passengers during meal stops it was just good business to engage such patrons in a game of chance before the conductor shouted “All aboard!” The upscale saloon also had billiard tables and card tables to accommodate patrons with a few hours to kill. Here John L. Sullivan shook hands with fight fans while his train changed engines, Allen Fisher had a famous curio shop, and Jack Dempsey duked it out with amateur pugilists for bets and beer. The Wild Bunch operated in this county when Hank Vaughan and Tom McCarty were running stolen horses, so there’s no telling who you could have met back then in a Front Street bar.

Origins of Charlie Quilici’s San Marin Hotel and the City Club

In its early days gaming was so natural a component of the ebb and flow of commerce that to specifically mention it was to state the obvious. No income taxes were paid, few business records were kept. However it is known that as early as 1888 members of the Quilici family were



Front Street soon after the turn of the 20th century. The Elite Saloon is to the right of Fisher's Saloon and is now a discount grocery store dubbed "The Bargain Barn."

operating saloons in Wells, as reflected by the November 19, 1888 sale of Lot 9, Block E in Wells (current site of the San Marin Hotel) with all its contents by Cherubino Quilici to Sebastian Quilici. The family included railroad workers, merchants, ranchers, bronc busters, saloon keepers and when Sebastian Quilici bought that saloon in 1888 evidence of customer preferences was preserved for history because of an inventory filed with the sale. The transfer of saloon property included a pool table, bar counter, bar mirror, 2 stoves, 18 arm chairs, water pump, 6 cords wood, 10 gallons claret wine, 11 gallons California brandies, 15 gallons rum, 21.5 gallons blackberry brandy, just over 30 gallons whiskey, 12.5 gallons gin, 6 gallons sherry wine, 12 bottles California champagne, 2 cases smoking tobacco, 2 cases chewing tobacco, 3000 cigars, 10 gross playing cards, three card tables. According to local legend, locals used two of the tables for poker games, while itinerant gamblers paid the house to use the third table to run a faro game.

A few years later Charles Quilici added a general store to that location and did well enough to outgrow his one-story store with living quarters to the rear. In 1899 Quilici built the San Marin Hotel and offered furnished

rooms at monthly rates. All the while the brick walls were going up Charles stayed open for business, the work going on around and above him. The Nevada State Herald for December 8, 1899 reported "the rooms are artistically papered and grained; large, well lighted and ventilated and furnished in the very latest style. The building is frost proof, and Charley guarantees that no one will suffer from the cold in his house."

On the ground floor of his new hotel Quilici still ran his mercantile store and rented space for the San Marin restaurant. In the days before railroad dining cars the San Marin and other eateries were packed while the trains stopped to add an engine to

get over the Pequop Mountains or whenever a train was "sided" due to a wreck or derailment along the line. That was often. Whatever the reasons track delays meant trainloads of passengers had hours to kill walking Front Street looking for diversion.

Dining cars adopted in the early twentieth century cut into the restaurant trade so Duke Quilici, who by then owned the San Marin, converted the ground floor into the City Club Casino. Those who remember him describe the Duke as a man with movie star good looks who always wore a dark suit and tie. In later years Duke moved to San Francisco to take a management job with the Palace Hotel and the Saviozzi brothers took over the City Club. The Saviozzi's also operated the Coffee Cup Café on Sixth Street that offered gaming and expanded that into the Cosmo Club.

The Famous Saloon of Al Fisher

By the 1890's Fisher's Saloon was nationally famous for its collection of animal horns displayed on both its interior and exterior. Tremendous numbers of coast to coast railroad travelers stopped in Wells while engines were changed.



Front Street looking west just after 1911. The San Marin Hotel was later the home of the City Club.

The hungry flocked to the Bulls Head or San Marin Restaurant to eat while many of the curious and thirsty made a beeline to Al Fisher's Saloon. One of the best known westerners of his day, Fisher was an excellent raconteur and knew the history of every article in his museum.

His saloon sign promised "Buffalo, Elk, Mountain Sheep, Antelope Heads and Horns, Mineral Specimens, Curiosities and Indian Relics." Inside on the walls and in glass cases were heads and horns of wild animals and mounted birds from all parts of the world. The mineral cabinet contained thousands of specimens of rich ore and rock from every mineral producing state and territory in the Union. Given today's gold prices the melt value alone would be somewhere between \$100,000 to \$500,000.

It was a good place to get into a billiard game or poker game with delayed railroad passengers and local ranchers, rather than the cowhands and railroaders who frequented the honky tonks. Colonel E.P. Hardesty was a frequent patron and a good friend of Fisher who in turn would often visit the Colonel's Bulls Head Saloon.

The oak bar and back bar were ornate and beautiful, but the one poker table which still survives was carpenter-built from scrap lumber, a fact that wasn't obvious beneath its green felt covering.

The Mint Saloon, later the Reno Club

The false-front wood frame Mint Saloon didn't look like much but it gave sweaty, work-dirty thirsty cowhands, railroad workers, teamsters, miners a place to drink undis-

turbed while better-heeled travelers and businessmen enjoyed the high-tone hospitality of Al Fisher's Saloon or Colonel Hardesty's Bulls Head Saloon.

Because the railroad established a major maintenance and refueling depot in Wells, railroaders packed the bars for ninety years. Ranch hands, railroaders, and passengers looking for diversion in Front Street's honky-tonk saloons made every Saturday night a street carnival. Gambling was part of the show and Twenty-one began to edge out poker and faro because as with a slot machine a player could step up, bet, then, win or lose, walk away without the social entanglements involved in a "friendly" poker game.

Twenty-one was also a good way to shake a buck out of railroad passengers who would wager a bet or two during a meal stop while waiting for the call "All aboard." Thus the Mint was less likely to offer a labor intensive game like craps that needed two men to run the table on a busy night, or Roulette which required a sizeable initial investment for expensive equipment. A Twenty-one table also took up a lot less space than a Craps or Roulette table.

Anti-Gaming Legislation Strikes

After the turn of the 20th century gaming began to attract legislative attention in Nevada, from those who wanted to tax it and also those who wanted to prohibit it. In 1905 there was recognition of nickel-in-the-slot machines. In 1907 a reapportionment of revenues gave each county all the revenue, except those from slot machines which went to the state. Then in 1909 a wave of anti-gambling sentiment took hold and a measure to stop gambling was passed. In

1910 operation of gambling games became a felony.

The Reluctant Arm of the Law

In July 1911, a well-publicized raid took place in Elko, the county seat of Elko County. Sheriff Joseph Harris (who served from 1910 to 1936) and District Attorney James Dysart yielded to public sentiment -- at least some sectors of public sentiment -- and raided the Commercial Hotel. The Commercial still stands in downtown Elko as a popular restaurant & casino but the difference is today gaming is legal, and then it wasn't. With 17,000 square miles of Elko County to cover it may be Sheriff Harris hadn't noticed that gambling was going on every night within sight of his county courthouse office. Or it may be gaming wasn't really a law enforcement concern until public pressure generated a demand something be done.

The fateful day -- or fateful evening -- came Friday, July 28, 1911. It was known there was gambling at the Commercial Hotel and the Sheriff was informed by District Attorney Dysart there would be a raid. The door to the rooms where the games were carried on was kept locked and it required a certain number of raps to gain admission, but by that evening the Sheriff had broken the code. Waiting until about 10 p.m. when the Hotel put on one of its famous outdoor badger fights which reduced the crowd in the casino area to controllable proportions, Sheriff Harris and his assistants walked in the back way and softly tried the door only to find it was locked. The sheriff rapped softly twice, the door flew open, and the officers walked in to the astonishment of the dealers, who then realized that a raid was in progress. Two

games were running, a roulette wheel and a faro bank. Play ceased at once.

“Gentlemen, you must stop this. You are all under arrest,” said Sheriff Harris, telling the men “Cash in your checks and come with me.” The astonished men complied without protest. One man pushed over a stack of chips and the dealer at the roulette wheel handed over \$40. Three other men who were playing faro were paid cash money for their chips, one receiving \$6 and another \$5. In the meantime the District Attorney took the names of those present and secured evidence. The sheriff walked behind the faro table to seize the contents in the cash drawer, then marched his prisoners out of the room.

L.L. Bradley, the proprietor of the hotel was hastily called and put up \$250 cash bail for each person arrested. Since nine men were arrested Bradley shelled out \$2250.

Those snared in the crackdown were later named by the Elko Free Press as “Jack Maher, roulette operator, George Foregor, faro dealer, M. Johnson, far lookout; Ah Jim, a chinaman; Sim, a chinaman; Walter Smith, a stranger, George Monroe, a stranger, Frank Maloney, stranger, R.J. Bonmar, stranger”.

The next day the Elko Free Press for Saturday evening, July 29, 1911, headlined the story “Gambling House is Raided, Sheriff Harris and Deputies and District Attorney Dysart Arrest Players and Dealers”. The newspaper account of the raid also said:

“In an interview with the sheriff this morning he asked that the public be notified that all gambling, of whatever character, must cease at once, as

he would tolerate no game, however small. That it had come to his notice that numerous games in different sections of the county were run for money, and that hereafter he would at once investigate all reports and arrests would follow.”

“The people elected me to enforce the laws,” Sheriff Harris said, “and I intend to do it irrespective of the parties implicated.” The District Attorney James Dysart said, “Never did a raid on a gambling house result so favorably. Not only did we catch the men gambling, but after they were placed under arrest, the dealers paid the players money for the chips, which was undisputable evidence that they were playing for money and not pastime. This case will be prosecuted and no partiality shown to anyone. Gambling must cease in Elko...” Gambling must stop in Nevada. The people at the polls said so. The time has passed when every town was wide open, and Nevada had a national reputation as the only state in the union that permitted gambling. Sheriff Harris and District Attorney Dysart have the people back of them in their actions last night in arresting the men who were breaking the law.

The newspaper’s presumption that the District Attorney had the support of the people could more accurately have been written to say “some people.” Church folks, prohibitionists, and some businessmen wanted to end the “wide open town” image Elko was then famous for. Little did they realize that another shift in public opinion in the 1930’s would capitalize on exactly the image the gambling raid was designed to change.

Impact of the 1911 Raid

The 1911 raid didn’t stop gaming in Elko County but it did drive it out

of sight in the county seat. Meanwhile, in Wells, just a little over 50 miles away you could still buy a drink and still make a bet, although the only folks who knew where to go were everyone in town, every cow-hand, miner, and railroader in the county, and every passenger who stepped down from a transcontinental train to stretch his legs on Front Street.

Impact of Prohibition

After the First World War came National Prohibition; another law generally ignored on Nevada’s north-eastern frontier. A little something to illustrate how practical westerners coped with laws that got in the way of a good time appeared in the Elko Free Press for January 21, 1929, which reported the thirty-two “soft drink” parlors in the City of Elko required a “maximum of police supervision,” and would be placed on the list of establishments paying \$60 for a quarterly license pursuant to a city ordinance that “such business houses” pay an additional fee. That brought in additional revenue for the City of Elko and made it clear local authorities weren’t paying a lot of attention to National Prohibition. Be it noted that “soft drink” parlors usually operated back-rooms that offered gaming in addition to liquid refreshment.

Wells in the Roaring Twenties and the Capitol Club

The brothers John DiGrazia and Joe DiGrazia saw Prohibition as an opportunity. At the dawning of the 20th century John and Joe DiGrazia were working on the railroad. Joe’s job, for example, was laying track rails down by hand. With long hours and low pay Joe and John lived in a dismal cabin built with railroad ties,



The Capitol Club did good business. Front Street looking east in the 1930's.

carried water to nurture a small vegetable garden, ate jackrabbits to save on meal costs and built their nest egg. Then in 1917, John and Joe were in the Army for WWI. Back from the service the DiGrazia brothers again worked for the railroad until their hard-earned savings were enough to buy a saloon. It was in 1926 John DiGrazia bought Lot #13, Block E, “with the one story brick building and all other improvements thereon, said premises being known as the old Al Fisher place” for \$4,500. Joe DiGrazia was to have a half interest. Included with the building were a huge set of elk horns and a carpenter-built poker table soon to be joined by a craps table, roulette, and Twenty-one Table.

Joe’s son Sonny DiGrazia, s recollections of Wells date back to when horse-drawn wagons were interspersed with Model T Fords on Front Street. “Back then Front Street used to be a booming place,” Sonny recalled. “It used to be a free Saturday night show for us kids to sneak up on the balcony of the Bulls Head Bar & Hotel and watch the crowd. My father used to make wine and I used to fill bottles when I was just a little kid. The grapes came from California by rail. We’d run the grapes through a wringer and

the juice ran into a trough. I’ll never forget the center run of the wine. You could read a newspaper through a glass of that red wine, it was so clear,” Sonny said. “After repeal in 1933 Uncle John and my father expanded into a wholesale business. I was driving a beer truck at 14.”

Casino Owner Leo Quilici Gets his Start with the Elite

Leo Quilici – at one time the owner of four Wells establishments -- came to America as a teenager and got his start working on an uncle’s ranch that sold horses to the U.S. Cavalry. Soon Leo was helping out at his uncle’s mercantile store and tending bar in his uncle’s saloon. The Elite (pronounced ee-light) was a lively place that caught his eye. After front-line U.S. Army service in France, Leo came home from WWI and soon thereafter was able to buy the bar. Leo earned a reputation for running a saloon “on the square” and put out free bread, peanut butter, and jelly in winter to help the laid-off ranch hands and railroad workers gathered around his potbelly stove tough it out till spring when work picked up.

Leo went on to operate the Reno Club (which was originally the Mint

Saloon), bought the Bulls Head, built the Bulls Head Ballroom, then spared no expense to make his El Rancho one of the finest hotel-casinos in Nevada. (In 2000 discount grocer Pete Cahoon opened the Bargain Barn food store in what had been the Elite Bar and had its ornamental pressed tin ceiling lovingly restored. It’s worth a look.)

The Depression motivates tax-minded Legislators to admit “wide open” can be a good thing

The Great Depression motivated legislators to look around for revenue sources from any business that still could make a buck. Knowing that since its beginning as a territory in 1861, Nevada was characterized by its gambling, Assemblyman Philip Tobin, a Winnemucca ranch boy, sponsored a bill to legalize Nevada gambling, a bill which passed March 19, 1931.

Though not a gambler himself, Tobin saw the chance for increased tax revenue for the state coffers. As an added benefit the state could move to control the crooked games present in all the towns at that time. Nevada’s legalization of gambling in 1931 simply regulated an industry that had always been a state tradition.

The Elko Daily Free Press ran an editorial on March 18, 1931 that admitted anti-gaming laws were not being enforced, but was less than enthusiastic about legislation:

The bill to legalize gambling in Nevada passed by a large majority in the senate yesterday. It will soon be written into the law of Nevada and will be given a two year trial before it is up for consideration again. Apparently the legislature acted upon the desire of a majority of people, although there is naturally a doubt as

to how the question would have gone had it been put to a popular vote. Only the next two years will show just what effect the gambling law is going to have upon this state. Coupled with the divorce law it will naturally bring new people to the state as well as new money. Whether the benefit will be worth the price remains to be seen. Time will tell. There is no reason to doubt but that the reason the bill was passed is that most law-makers figured we should change our present system or enforce it. As the gambling law was not being enforced, the natural thought was to license it so that the state would get some benefit. This has been done and the show is on, let the chips fly where they will.

World War II and Wells

The Skyline Restaurant & Casino at the northwest corner of Sixth Street & Clover Avenue enjoyed a booming business during the Second World War and persisted into the early 50's with guests including Bing Crosby and Rita Hayworth. Bill and Jennie Sallee managed the place.

Jennie Sallee wasn't expecting anything unusual at the Skyway Café & Casino in Wells one night in the 1940s. The pit boss had just finished racking chips to open the crap game when a railroader named "Cocky" Robins stepped up and put a dollar on the Pass Line. "I bet I make it," "Cocky" said.

"Bet you don't," said Bing Crosby, tossing a silver dollar onto the No Pass Line, and that kicked off one of the biggest crap games in Wells history. People crowded in to watch the stakes rise. Two contractors from Salt Lake City got in on the action and wagers really skyrocketed when the house took the usual limits off the table. The game was still going full



Celebrating July 4 on Front Street in 1934.

bore when the Skyway closed and the doors were locked, but those already at the table kept rolling the dice and the game didn't break up until two in the morning.

Anything but dull, Wells in the 1940s was a bustling railroad & ranching town that also served motorists passing through on U.S. 40. Jennie's sister-in-law had leased the Skyway Café & Casino and called asking for help to run the place. She soon learned the small town was teeming with activity.

When the government rushed to open Wendover Army Air Force Base to train heavy bombardment crews for World War II on the Utah-Nevada stateline about 58 miles away, building married personnel housing hadn't been the highest priority. The town of Wendover didn't have a lot of housing stock to offer, either. That meant wives, fiancées, sweethearts of fliers flocked to Wells and rented every room available to be close to base for a few precious hours together before their airmen went to war.

The Overland Hotel across Sixth Street, and the Allen Hotel across

Clover Avenue were both packed with Army wives who usually walked over to the Skyway for their meals. "They were a great crowd," Jennie recalls. "All very nice people," and even if their husbands couldn't join them for lunch they would sometimes drop to treetop level, buzzing the town so low you could read the numbers on huge B-17 and B-24 bombers wagging their wings by way of saying "hello." Of course that was against regulations and pilots were sternly warned low altitude flyovers were prohibited, and of course that didn't stop the pilots who would drive into Wells on a pass and ask "Could you see me? Did you see me?"

Quite a place, the Skyway Café had seating for 60, and a banquet room that could seat 100. Dances were held there, with many if not most of the men in uniform. There were also Saturday night dances for young people, no alcohol allowed. Sometimes there was a band, otherwise the jukebox; either way kids had a good time.

With crowds of thirsty patrons, Bill Sallee had to be innovative to keep liquor flowing despite wartime



Johnny's Club in the 1940's

rationing. Although wholesale price on a case of whiskey was \$25, demand far exceeded supply. To keep the place open Bill had to resort to buying on the black market, once calling other bar owners all around the State until he connected with a State Senator who owned several Carson City establishments and was willing to do Bill a favor by selling whiskey – at \$100 a case.

Ray King was Wells Constable and “He was fierce – he scared the daylight out of me,” Jennie recalls. “I was a little Mormon girl seeing all these things they didn’t have in Idaho, when one night our man John, who was running the crap table, caught a player running in crooked dice and got so mad he picked up the cheat and threw him out the front window.

“Call the law,” my husband Bill said, and Constable King came out. The cheater was in big trouble, but King also told Bill “You got the run

this place square, or I’ll close you up.” John tossing a crook through the window was seen as just doing his job.

1945 The Nevada Tax Commission was empowered to make rules and regulations governing the conduct in the state and to issue state licenses.

The Eagle Club, also known as Johnny’s

The Second World War had brought prosperity to Wells and convinced local businessmen to build for the future. The Capitol Club did well by adding a dance floor, and that gave John DiGrazia ideas.

John DiGrazia saw opportunity in a vacant turn-of-the-century store on Front Street half a block east from the Capitol Club. After a 1901 fire leveled the lot, Domenico, Amadeo, and Sebastino Quilici bought it and built a fine brick building for their Quilici Mercantile Store. The store did a

brisk business and in 1926 enjoyed a brief moment of wire service fame after displaying three human skulls in the store window found after a respected Wells woman had a dream that revealed their location. By the mid 1940’s the building was vacant so John DiGrazia bought it and with partner Charles Nannini converted it into the Eagle Club, a casino-bar with a dance hall extending to the alley which they opened in mid-1946. Everyone called it Johnny’s. Although packed in the 1940’s and still doing a good business into the 50’s, DiGrazia believed the future was where U.S. 93 and U.S. 40 intersected and sold the building after he and Nannini bought the 4-Way Café & Casino.

U.S. 40 Influence

While John DiGrazia bet on the 4-Way location, other casino operators were doing a good business on Sixth Street which was where U.S. 40 passed through town. After the Saviozzi Brothers bought the Coffee Cup gaming was expanded into the Cosmo Club. Today the building houses the Soap Box Laundromat.

Herman W. Supp built the Pequop Hotel in 1946. Herman ran a hardware store and knew firsthand how hard it was to get building materials during and after the war so he scavenged bricks, wood, anything he could use from Metropolis ghost town to get the materials to make his dream of owning his own hotel a reality. Supp leased the building to Rod Knight, a Salt Lake City businessman and sports figure who ran the place under his name and dubbed his bar the Elbo Room. Among other games, the Elbo Room operated a Bingo Parlor.

By the 1970’s the hotel had changed hands and was renamed the



The Monte Carlo Club on Sixth Street looking west in the 1940's. The Wagon Wheel can be seen in the distance.

Old West Inn. When Don Cooper became proprietor he began a tradition of trading an occasional drink for ranch gear, railroad tools, early automotive memorabilia, and amassed a fascinating collection of western memorabilia that still adorns the saloon walls. After Cooper passed, in 2001 his heirs sold the place but it's still going strong although its gaming is currently reduced to slot machines.

In the early 50's Bill and Jennie Sallee took over the Wagon Wheel Restaurant & Casino, also on Sixth Street in Wells, which they operated until the 1960's. Jennie and Bill could see there was real money in combining food service with gaming. The Wagon Wheel had been a popular eating place and casino since the 1940s. It was owned by the McDaniel family, then in the 1950s Rod Knight who had leased the Hotel Pequop to operate his Elbo bar and casino, bought the Wagon Wheel. Knight and his partner devoted his energy to building and operating a modern motel. That gave Jennie & Bill the opportunity to lease the Wagon Wheel Restaurant-Casino where they took over food service and ran an estab-

lishment that featured roulette, craps, Twenty-one, and slot machines. The Café could seat 90, the dining room could seat 100, and behind the Wagon Wheel restaurant-casino was an outdoor barbeque and motel rooms. Running a family style restaurant, Jennie supervised staff, but also made homemade cinnamon rolls.

"Every year we had a barbeque for deer hunters, and every room in town was filled," Jennie said recalling that you never knew who might walk in the door. Tennessee Ernie Ford patronized the Wagon Wheel as did Jimmy Stewart, who at the time owned the Winecup Ranch north of Wells. Actor Joel McRea was in town a lot to shop like most of his Ruby Valley neighbors who often bought tractor parts from the Quilici's General Merchandise

Then in September 1963 Bill Sallee died Jennie left the Wagon Wheel in December of the year Bill passed on, believing she'd learned the key to running a successful casino-restaurant is to treat patrons square, and to take care of the help.

Also on Sixth Street was the Shamrock Café & Casino which still offers slots operating as Luther's. Anyone who loves microbrewery sampling will love Luthers which serves huge glasses of Ruby Mountain Brewery Amber Ale, made about eight miles south of Wells in Clover Valley. The brew is fabulous, and even better on tap.

The El Rancho

Hard-working Leo Quilici saved enough to buy the Elite Bar. When his bar showed a profit he re-invested his earnings in Wells, buying the Reno Club (also known as the Mint Saloon) and the Bullshead Bar & Hotel. Built in 1887 the Bullshead was a grand place in its day but couldn't hide its age. Leo wanted to show his pride in Wells and spent over \$200,000 in 1949 dollars to make the El Rancho one of the finest casino-hotels in the Silver State. That same year you could buy a brand new Ford pickup at Supp Motor Company in Wells for \$1556.

The El Rancho marks the transition of Wells from frontier outpost to a modern community with permanence. Unlike the Nevada Hotel, San Marin Hotel, and Bullshead that were built in the kerosene-lit era before electricity came to town, the El Rancho boasted structural steel reinforcement and was designed to be illuminated by electricity.

The original hardwood bar and mirrored back bar are rare examples of period furnishings that still remain in the casino for which they were made. Atop the El Rancho is a huge neon sign featuring a wrangler on an animated bucking horse. That early example of Nevada's neon advertising heritage is one of the few signs of its era that still adorns its original site.

The substantial construction and quality furnishings of the El Rancho made its July 1949 grand opening a regional event that heralded future prosperity. Instantly the El Rancho became a crowded, happening place. On weekends railroaders who lived in section houses along the line came into town to stock up on groceries, many congregating afterwards at the El Rancho to drink and party. So too did ranchers, cowboys, and miners come into Wells, standing shoulder to shoulder at the El Rancho bar to take a drink to cut the dust.

Gaming Control Board Dooms Small-time Operations

In 1955 the Gaming Control Board was created to act as the enforcement and investigative unit of the Tax Commission interjecting necessary formality and regulation into the industry but at the cost of squeezing hole-in-the-wall gaming parlors.

With the creation of Gov. Grant Sawyer's "hang tough" policy, inaugurated July 1, 1959, Sawyer insisted that Nevada stay clear of "mobs and syndicates." This policy led to the Gaming Control Board taking forceful action in 1960, placing Nevada casinos off limits to underworld figures. Two such individuals sued the state, some corporations and individuals charging that the ban was a violation of civil rights.

During the proceedings, Judge Walter L. Pope of the United States Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals gave his opinion with an analogy that

rings true especially today. "In view of the situation of peril which always surrounds gambling in Nevada, the trial court may well find that the plaintiff's entry upon gambling premises would present an emergency comparable to that presented by an animal running at large while suspected of being afflicted with the foot and mouth disease."

State revenue from gambling wins continued to rise, as did the cost of the background investigation for a gaming license, the cost of which was and is paid by the applicant. Gone were the days when a saloon operator could install a roulette wheel, or give a faro dealer a table for a cut of the profits, with no more investment than the cost of equipment. With that, small casinos and roadside stops with a few slots began to die out as their owners sold out or passed on. New places that opened were establishments operated by entrepreneurs who could afford to pay anywhere from \$50,000 to \$150,000 to process their gaming license.

By the mid-fifties there were signs that border town development would soon erode the customer base supporting Wells gaming, such as when on January 18, 1954 Boise, Idaho, financed Horseshu Inc. filed an application with the Nevada Tax Commission for an establishment to be built one mile south of the Idaho-Nevada stateline on Highway 93.

The modern and attractive Ranch House Hotel & Casino just where Sixth Street takes a bend in the road on its way east to the 4-Way intersection was impressive enough to draw gamblers from Idaho and Utah for many years. Because this fine establishment did a good business it could afford live music and top talent. It prospered by offering live gaming, slots, and good food to Utah folks, among others, but just as the emergence of Jackpot as a gambling town on the Nevada-Idaho border impacted Wells, so too did the emergence of West Wendover on the Nevada-Utah border skim off thousands of patrons who no longer felt the need to drive 58 miles further west to Wells, much to the regret of local residents. The Ranch House today stands vacant, a reminder of past glory with a For Sale sign on it.

Wells Today

Many of the buildings associated with Wells Gaming History still stand, some remodeled, some in various stages of rehabilitation still in search of a reason to justify their existence. Still a town that prides itself on showing visitors a good time, Wells is also a place where a slice of old west history is still affordable. We are glad folks collect our chips, postcards and other gambling memorabilia, but we will be even happier when a collector moves to Wells, reopens another of the old casinos, and throws away the key.