

# APACHE HOTEL

The Megaresort of Its Time

by John Yee



*Photograph Courtesy of: Glenn Davis Collection University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library*

*The Kiva Bar and Casino was separate from the Kiva Club at the Hotel Apache (c. 1942)*

## Introduction

Similar to a modern day “Grand Opening” of a megaresort on the strip, Las Vegans with their excitement and glory, came out to welcome the newest, most modern, and plush-est hotel west of the Mississippi in March of 1932. The building erected in less than a year would stand the test of time and house the Hotel Apache but probably better know to

modern gamblers as the El Dorado Club or, for the last forty two years, as Binion’s Horseshoe. During the past 70 years, the Hotel Apache and its gambling establishments have changed ownership or names fifteen times. In addition, the Hotel Apache was referred to synonymously as the Apache Hotel.

In 1905, the Union Pacific Railroad routed its trains through the

Las Vegas area. The railroad depot was at the beginning of Fremont Street, just behind the present day Plaza Hotel. With the railroad came growth and Las Vegas became an incorporated city adopting its first charter on March 16, 1911. At that time there were less than 800 residents in Las Vegas and 3,321 residents within Clark County. However, the downtown area of Fremont Street was the hub for gam-

ing establishments and seedy activity. By the 1930s, Las Vegas grew to 5,165. The three things that would forever change Las Vegas occurred in the early '30s were the legalization of gambling, the Boulder Dam project, and the relaxation of divorce laws.

### P.O. Silvagni purchases property for \$60,000

Amidst the Great Depression, 1931 saw an influx of workers for the nearby Boulder Canyon project. Seeking an opportunity on May 14, 1931, Dr. Roy W. Martin, a respected and well-known citizen of Las Vegas, sold the corner lot on Second and Fremont Streets to P.O. Silvagni of Price, Utah for \$60,000. The site, with a frontage of 75 feet facing Fremont Street and 130 feet on Second, was made with a first payment of \$30,000. A. Lacy Worswick, an architect transplanted from San Francisco, was the original architect for the building. Worswick would go on to design many future casinos and public buildings throughout Las Vegas. Originally the modernistic style of architecture of brick construction with steel supporting frames rose three floors with the possibility of an additional two stories at a future date, had a projected cost of \$125,000-150,000. Construction began immediately during the middle of the summer of 1931 and amidst an economic depression.

On January 6, 1932, a gaming license was issued to the Apache for a roulette wheel, however, subsequent licenses were added to include slots, 21, craps, chuck-a-luck and keno. Although records from the license board do not identify who filed for the license, it is believed to be from the Apache Hotel Corporation. Even though the hotel and the gaming to follow would not open for another two months it was not uncommon to

*Jan. 6, 1932*

The following statement of Expenses incurred by the District Attorney in the suit Entitled, SIX COMPANIES, Inc, Plaintiff, Vs F.C.DEVINNEY, County Assessor, ET AL Defendants.

CASH RECEIVED FROM THE COUNTY,	\$150.00
Filing Papers with Clerk of Federal Court,	10.00
Stenographer hire	10.00
Railroad and Pullman	108.00
Room and Meals	27.75
Copy of contract and specifications	
Hoover Dam from U.S.Reclamation Service	5.00
Total	\$160.00

Balance due District Attorney \$10.75

Respectively Submitted, Harley A.Harmon, District Attorney.

A resolution from the State Board of Stock Commissioners fixing the tax rate on Horses, Cattle, Hogs, Poultry and Miscellaneous live stock was read to the Board, and after being approved was ordered filed for future references.

A letter from the State Apiary Commission, fixing the rate of tax for each stand of bees within the State, at \$.12¢ was read to the board, and after being approved, same was ordered filed with the clerk for future references.

The hour being 11 O'clock A.M. a recess was declared until the hour of 11.30 A.M. for the purpose of having a meeting of the License Board.

ATTEST, *W.M. Davidson*  
Clerk of the board.

APPROVED, *E.G. McGriff*  
Chairman.

OFFICE OF THE CLERK OF CLARK COUNTY  
STATE OF NEVADA, January 6th 1932

At a regular meeting of the Clark County License board held on this 6th day of January 1932, at the hour of 11.00 A.M.

Present, Joe Keate, Chairman, E.G.McGriff, A.L.Jones, E.F.Davidson, Harley A Harmon, and the clerk.

Meeting called to order by the Chairmen.

An application from the Apache Club, located at 2nd and Fremont Streets, for the operation of one ROULETTE WHEEL was read to the board, and upon motion duly made, seconded, and carried, a license was granted.

An application from MORGANS PLACE, located at 108 North 1st Street, for a license to operate one only, (TWENTY ONE GAME) was read to the board, and upon motion duly made, seconded and carried, a license was granted.

An application from T.J.Mooney, located 12 miles south on the Boulder Highway for a license to operate one Only, (POKER GAME) was read to the board, and upon motion duly made, seconded and carried, a license was granted.

request and be granted a license prior to a physical building's completion.

### The building dimensions and layout

The hotel was colorful and comfortable with a decor of the old west. Windows were draped, hand carved divans and arm chairs were randomly placed throughout the hotel.

Deep carpets covered the floor and there were rich oil paintings and unique chandeliers with an Indian motif throughout the hotel. Originally the main entrance to the hotel was on Second Street, somewhere near where the gift shop currently sits.

On the ground floor, one would enter the hotel from the main entrance

on Second Street or through any of the five shops or coffee room. The lobby was a spacious 38 by 48 feet, lofty and ceiled area. Walking three steps westward through a draped arch led you into the casino and to the ascending stairway to the upper floors. Silvagni often slept and conducted business from a room on the second floor which had a terrace overlooking Second Street. Beyond the stairway, a corridor connected the coffee shop and various stores in the building. The first elevator in town was also on the North side of the building that opened up to carpeted hallways on the upper levels.

The casino, extremely small by today's standards, was located in the rear of the stores and west of the hotel lobby.

The downstairs basement housed the heating and ventilation plant, storage rooms, and the banquet hall that had hardwood floors and was the

magnet for dinner dance parties, bridge luncheons and private functions. The 50' x 75' hall could comfortably feed 300 people and claimed to have the ability to feed 500 when in a pinch. Interestingly, there was also an entrance from Second Street.

The hotel had 56 rooms including 12 suites. Each room had a bath; 25 rooms with both a shower and bath; 7 rooms with a shower and toilet; and 24 rooms with just a tub. Obviously, the bath was very important back in 1932 because the newspapers described the amenities in detail. Some say the Hotel Apache was only second to the Riverside Hotel in Reno for modern amenities and character.



### Background of P.O. Silvagni

P.O. Silvagni, although sometimes incorrectly identified as Pietro Orlando Silvagni, was actually named Pietro Ottavio Silvagni as corrected by his granddaughter, Maria Wadsworth. Somehow, a writer incorrectly used the wrong name and future newspapers and books from there on out referred to P.O. as Pietro Orlando.

P.O. as his friends called him, came to the U.S. from Italy in 1904 and was the father of six children. However, two children passed away early on and the other siblings, Michele, Victor, Lena, and Olga moved to Las Vegas shortly after construction of the hotel began.

In a newspaper article dated February 24, 1933, P.O. Silvagni applied for and was granted a gaming permit for a crap game at the Apache Hotel Casino. This is the first time that Silvagni's name has been associated with obtaining a license and not just the Apache Hotel Corporation.



*Photograph Courtesy of: Glenn Davis Collection University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library  
The Café was located at the corner of Second and Fremont*



Las Vegas Age, March 19, 1932

**The “Grand Opening”**

On March 19, 1932, 5 o'clock p.m., the hotel officially opened to the public. Mayor E.W. Cragin opened the doors to the new hotel and thus began the largest party Las Vegas had ever seen up to that point. The first registered guests of the hotel were P.O. Silvagni along with Mrs. Robert Russell, wife of the secretary and treasure of the Apache Hotel Corporation. The Indian Princess, Rose Marie a beautiful Apache girl acted as the hostess for the evening.

**The major players**

P.O. Silvagni built the building and leased the hotel, coffee shop, casino, and the downstairs banquet hall, also referred to as the café in several



Intersection of 2<sup>nd</sup> and Fremont Streets. The Oasis Café sign on the left was the first neon sign in Las Vegas built in 1929 followed by the Las Vegas Club sign in 1930. Thomas Young Sr., founder of Yesco had a temporary office at the Hotel Apache

newspaper articles. The coffee shop whose purpose was to satisfy the general public and hotel patrons sat on the South East corner of Second and Fremont, with the means of transferring food down below to the hall via a private stairway.

The operating corporation for the hotel was named the Apache Hotel Corporation and its board consisted of Sydney Smith, president and hotel manager, William A. Brown, vice president, and Robert R. Russell, secretary and treasurer. The Apache Casino, sometimes called just the

“Apache”, was leased to Charlie E. Mason and Jack Doyle.

It was not all too uncommon in Las Vegas for a hotel and a casino of a different name to cohabitate on the same premises. Examples of this cohabitation include the Sal Sagev Hotel and Golden Gate Casino. In this case, the “Apache” could refer to the hotel, bar, casino, or the banquet hall. And to mix it up even more, the Apache Drug Store, owned by Frank Crookston opened up May 10, 1932 in one of the storefronts.



P.O. Silvagni



William Brown



Sydney Smith



Colonel Robert Russel



Charles E. Mason

(Continued from Preceding Page)

houses and the great streams of water gushing from the valve houses, making it the most beautiful sight of its kind in the U. S.

At approximately the same height as Niagara Falls, the water from the valve houses falls with great clouds of mist. It is one of the most beautiful sights to be found in the world today—Boulder Dam.

This project is located thirty miles from Las Vegas, Nevada, beautiful little desert city, broad-minded in its ideas and affording many interesting diversions.

LAS VEGAS NEVADA

Center of the scenic Southwest Gateway to Boulder Dam, Death Valley, Valley of Fire, Last City, 7,000 National Park, Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, North Rim Grand Canyon. Full a Frontier Town, unsurpassed climate, excellent hunting and fishing. Reached by semi-monthly or less over paved highways; high-speed air-conditioned train—Main Line Union Pacific; World's finest Airplanes, shown each way on daily schedule—Western Air Express Co. Grand Canyon Air Lines daily operate bi-motored planes over the Dam, Lake Mead, to the Grand Canyon Hotel. Also special boat trips down Grand Canyon with overnight accommodations on floor of Grand Canyon. Information at hotels. Automobile Clubs office, Porter Service, Cook's Tavern.



LAS VEGAS AFTER DARK

**APACHE HOTEL**  
AIR COOLED THROUGHOUT  
ONE HUNDRED PER CENT BATHS

**RATES**

Single	.....	\$3.50
Double	.....	\$4.00 and \$5.00
Twin Bed Rooms	.....	\$6.00

Monthly Rates on Request

**LAS VEGAS**  
NEVADA  
GATEWAY TO BOULDER DAM

AIR COOLED  
**APACHE**  
HOTEL  
*Every Comfort*



**MR. AND MRS. R. R. RUSSELL**  
MANAGING LESSEES  
*The Interesting Story of Boulder Dam*

William Brown was a seasoned restaurateur, having operated cafés in Arizona and in California. In addition to being the vice president of the corporation, Brown managed the café and the banquet hall with the most modern equipment. Lavishly furnished as the rest of the beautiful new Apache Hotel, modern amenities included an electrical dishwasher

Sydney Smith was a veteran hotel man who was in charge of the hotel. However, it was Colonel Robert Russell who had all the fame and glory.

Colonel Robert Russell the self proclaimed “Biggest Liar in Nevada” had an honorary designation as “The

Colonel” and was know for his antics throughout town. Frank Wright, Las Vegas historian, talks about two specific publicity stunts that Colonel Russell was involved in. A widely distributed photo of an old miner with his mule registering at the Hotel Apache was sent out across the nation. In another photo opportunity, Colonel Russell is shown holding the first fish caught from the newly formed Lake Mead. Unfortunately, the fish had an uncanny resemblance to a barracuda and it was later divulged that indeed the fish had been purchased form the San Pedro Fish Market. Wright also described “Bob”, as he was also know, as always dressed in western garb, with long

flowing hair, handlebar moustache with a goatee a striking resemblance to Buffalo Bill Cody. In another story told by Ms. Wadsworth, she recalls a photo in her mother’s possessions of Bob on a horse in the lobby of the hotel. The creative and witty personality of Colonel Russell is one reason he was nominated for inclusion in “The First 100”, a historical book about the men and women who helped shape Las Vegas.

According to the newspapers, C.E. Mason was one of the most widely known casino managers of that time. However, other than a photograph, little else is known about Charles E. Mason or his counterpart, Jack Doyle, the men responsible for the casino and its management.

### History of the Clubs

Although the Hotel opened in March, 1932, the Management of the Apache Coffee Shop held a contest to rename the Apache Indian Village, located in the basement and announced the new name at it’s formal opening, June 25, 1932. Indian Princess Rose Marie, an employee of the hotel who dressed in Indian garb, awarded a cash prize of \$25 to Thomas Wilson for the new name, “Kiva Club”. The new cabaret below the Hotel Apache was a roaring success and a number of couples were turned away at the opening. The new club was designed as an Indian Village and the main activities included dining, dancing, and entertainment. Soon after, gaming would occur including keno. It is not know why but the Kiva Club would change it’s name to the Kiva Caberet by March of 1934 and then to the Apache Night Club by May of 1934. It is believed that the Apache Night Club was also referred to in later years as the ‘Pache Club.

The building on Fremont and Second has housed many gambling clubs but the physical address has not always been 128 E. Fremont. In fact in some telephone books, the Hotel is listed on Second Street. So whether the casinos are located at 128 E. Fremont or 124 E. Fremont is immaterial, the fact remains that gaming did occur at the Hotel Apache and under the same roof.

According to Harvey Fuller Index of Nevada Gambling Establishments, the following clubs, their ownerships and dates of operation are stated below.

**Downstairs:**

**Kiva Club**  
 124 Fremont  
 3/19/32 - 5/4/34  
 (Apache Indian Club,  
 Kiva Club, Kiva Caberet, Apache  
 Night Club a.k.a. 'Pache Club)

**Street Level:**

**Apache Casino (Apache Hotel  
 Corporation)**  
 124 Fremont  
 3/19/32 to 1941

**Western Casino**  
 124 Fremont  
 7/14/41 - 1/3/42

**New Western Casino**  
 124 Fremont  
 2/2/42 - ?

**S.S. Rex Club (Cornero, et al) -**  
 128 Fremont  
 3/3/45 - 6/7/45

**S.S. Rex Club (Silvagni)**  
 128 Fremont  
 6/27/45 - 7/21/45

**S.S. Rex Club (Guy McAfee) -**  
 128 Fremont  
 7/21/45 - 2/7/46

**Rex Club (Bernstein)**  
 128 Fremont  
 2/7/46 - 5/2/46



*Photograph Courtesy of: Manis Collection University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library*

**Rex Club (Sedway)**  
 128 Fremont  
 5/2/46 - 6/46

**El Dorado Club (Sedway)**  
 128 Fremont  
 7/8/47 - 1/14/48

**El Dorado Club (Mack)**  
 128 Fremont  
 1/15/48 - 9/7/48

**El Dorado Club (Rozen)**  
 128 Fremont  
 9/8/48 - 1951

**Clover Club**  
 128 Fremont  
 1/1/51 - 8/51

**Binion's Horseshoe Club**  
 128 Fremont  
 8/15/51 - 1/8/58

**Joe Brown's Horseshoe Club**  
 128 Fremont  
 1/9/58 - 4/22/60

**Binion's Horseshoe**  
 128 Fremont  
 4/23/60 - current



*S.S. Rex Club 1945*

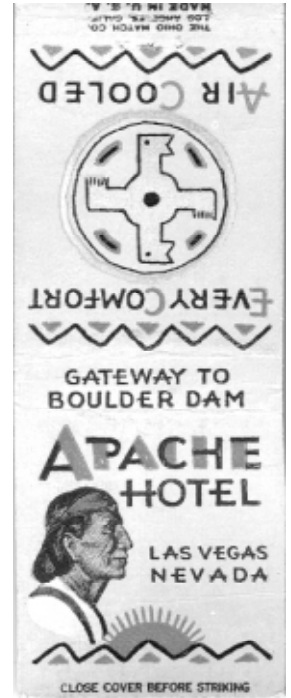
## Chips and other memorabilia found

Fellow collector and club member Rich Burgel, came across three chips, a napkin, matches, and a swizzle stick from the Apache from an ex-employee of the Apache Bar. The chips have been verified by the manufacturer, TR King and were delivered to the Apache Casino, Las Vegas in 1939. An order for 1,800 chips of various pastel colors was produced in a large crown mold and hot stamped "Apache Casino."



## Why this story is being told

Maria Wadsworth of Henderson, Nevada, granddaughter of the builder, P.O. Silvagni, recalls hanging out at the Hotel during the sweltering summer days when the temperature rose to over 100 degrees. She and her friends would hang-out, literally, at the coolest place in town. The cooling system was designed to keep the temperature nearly 25 degrees cooler than the outside temperature and help eliminate the installation of fans in every room. Maria shared with me that not only did the Hotel Apache have the first elevator in town, her grandfather also had the first electric refrigeration cooling system installed in 1941, the precursor to the modern air conditioner. During the '40s with the lack of gaming regulations and enforcement, Maria was able to walk freely between the bar, casino, and throughout the hotel. Her mother helped with the books of the hotel and her aunt worked at the café. It



was truly a family business. Though the original Silvagni property owner has passed on, Binion's Horseshoe still pays rent to the numerous trusts that once made up the Silvagni family.

I started writing this article because so few people know what downtown Fremont Street was like before the monumental strip. Standing in a modern casino you



Photograph Courtesy of: *Manis Collection* University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library

don't know whether you're in Paris, Italy, or New York. Each casino looks, smells, and sounds like the next one. The loss of identity and novelty has slowly eroded to corporate businesses that design casinos with a cookie cutter mentality, making each casino homogenous with the next. With the exception of the façade, it's all a mirage. Although with 56 rooms, the hotel could not be considered a modern megaresort, it was the swankiest place for its time.

But why should anyone care about a building that was built over 70 years ago and few remnants remain from the original building. The Hotel Apache is one of the few remaining original buildings from the early part of the Las Vegas downtown. The preservation of buildings and its history is vital for future generations to know, understand, and appreciate what came before the neon glitter of the "Strip" and what all others think they know about Las Vegas. This small block of real estate is where it all started. Las Vegas was different. It was a small town that didn't have the world-wide recognition it now holds.

Although I was able to highlight one particular building, many more stories can be told of the Beckley Building, the Thomas Building, and of casinos that lined Fremont Street like the Northern Club, Arizona Club, and Boulder Club. As original patrons of these '30s clubs grow older and die, so do their first hand accounts of daily life, colorful history, and memories that will forever disappear.

### References and Thank You's

I'd like to thank the following individuals who helped contribute to this article: Daryl Fossier for sharing your scans of memorabilia; Frank



Photograph Courtesy of: **Glenn Davis Collection** University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library  
Notice the gun on the crap table

Wright, historian for sharing your intimate knowledge and research; Maria Wadsworth, granddaughter of P.O. Silvagni for your first hand accounts of the hotel, bar, café, and casino; Kathy War, UNLV librarian for obtaining many of the older photographs; Russ, Doug and Pam for your support; Harvey J. Fuller for the countless hours of research and the

selfless enthusiasm to share that information. And a special thank you to Howard Herz for lighting a match under my feet, conducting research, and the tireless effort of publishing this work. Without your help this article would never have been published.



Photograph Courtesy of: **Gladys Frazier Collection** University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library