

The Town House

by John Moore



The Town House operated in Reno at 39 West First St., from 1932 through 1955. Shortly after it's opening it soon became one of the most upscale clubs in town. Although the cuisine was French, the club's decor was rustic with a western flavor highlighted with interior walls of pine logs and murals of horses and western scenes. The club slogan at the time was: "You may have your country home, but make this your Town House."

Perhaps the Town House benefited more than any other establishment in Reno at that time by recently passed legislation in Carson City. In 1931 the Nevada legislature approved legalized gambling and also shortened the residency requirement for divorce from six months to six weeks. These strong measures were taken as a means to help Nevada's devastated economy. The days of the Comstock, the Tonopah and Goldfield bonanzas were over. The depression had wiped out any chance of making a profit by running cattle or sheep. Nevada had little else to offer. The state had nothing to lose, it was already known nationwide as unruly, corrupt and

"wide open" due to legalized prize-fighting, prostitution, widespread illegal gambling and a lingering "old west" mentality. For example, it is said the old mining town of Pioche, in Southern Nevada buried 35 men who died a violent end before a burial took place which resulted from natural causes.

The legalization of gambling was surely a boon to many businessmen throughout the state. In Reno, dozens of small fly by night operators

opened seedy, poorly lit and illy heated saloons, which typically got by with a couple of slot machines and at most one or two table games. No carpet joints were these. The sawdust covered floors were not to make for smoother dancing, but to absorb the spit, phlegm and terbacky juice. And no, these places did not provide fancy, custom designed gaming chips, and most probably got by with pocket change, and the silver dollar was the ideal medium for a big bettor. (As a kid too young to legally gamble, I

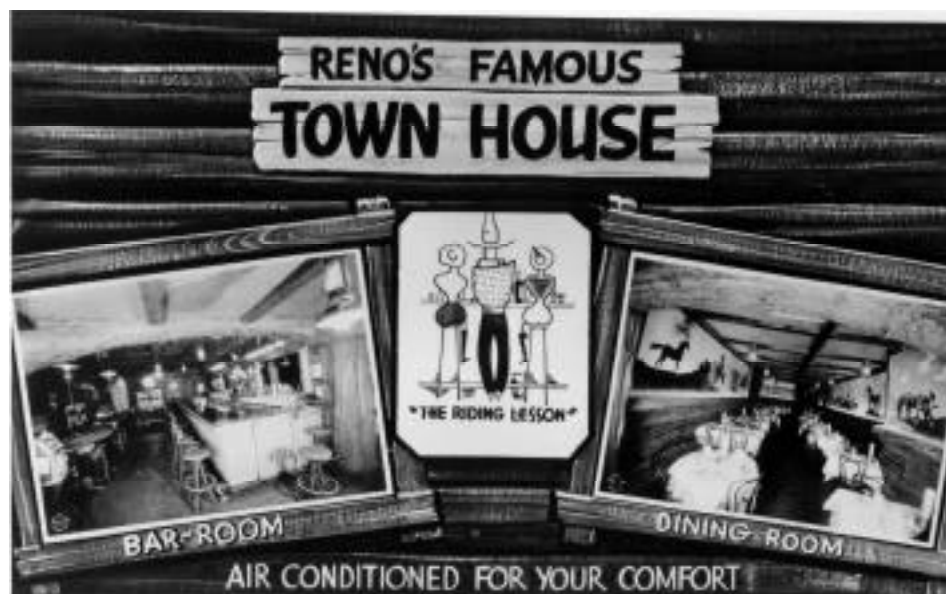


Photo courtesy Nevada Historical Society

played poker, blackjack and craps in the 1960's in Lovelock's Pershing Hotel and don't recall ever seeing a chip in use. Davins had a poker game in the back, but no chips. Felix of course was big time and had chips, but he, with more to loose, also checked ID's.)

The liberalized divorce laws soon created a major industry in Nevada's otherwise crippled economy, particularly Reno. The six week residency requirement was of no benefit to the majority of Americans at that time. In spite of the depression, there was still a large monied class that could afford to send a spouse to Reno to quickly dissolve the marriage. Some of the costs were: travel, legal fees, proper attire, hotel or dude ranch accommodations, meals and entertainment.



The Town House owners were amongst the first to recognize that a "carpet joint" would surely prosper by catering to these rich and lonely women waiting out their six week obligation to gain their freedom. Surely many of these ladies were anxious to experiment with their newly found freedom even before the decree had been granted. If one could attract these well-to-do women with the luxury they were accustomed, the local cowboys, bankers, lawyers and businessmen would surely follow. Early on, the Town House unofficially let it be known that it was to be called the "Dude Ranch Town House."

In a flash of brilliance, the Town House hired a local commercial artist, Lew Hymers to design a logo for the club. The logo became the theme of the establishment, and the theme became the very essence of the club's being. The logo was a simple single line drawing of two women seated at

a bar, on stools, between them is standing a lanky, bow legged cowboy. The drawing was entitled "the riding lesson." This simple drawing embodied humor, sex, recognition of the divorce industry's impact on Reno, and of course an inference of drinking, dining and gambling, all

RENO





mainstays of the Town House' offerings. The logo was soon on virtually every piece of printed material pertaining to the club: matchbooks, postcards, stationery, business cards, etc. A large hand painted version of the "cartoon" was prominently displayed in the club. Racks of new H. C. Edwards (hub mold) chips were ordered with the drawing occupying one side of the chip. (More on the chip and Lew Hymers in the following article.)

Charles Rennie, the original builder, owner and operator of the Town House had the foresight to recognize the clientele would flock towards opulence and luxury. He took over the Deauville which was immediately next door and occupied the basement under his own establishment. The Deauville ownership was the first casino operation in Nevada to finance itself by a public stock offering. The Deauville's décor equaled any of the illegal gaming spas of the East coast, New Orleans and perhaps Europe. It had spiral staircases, crystal chandeliers, thick carpets, elegant draperies and huge flower arrangements adjacent to the ten gaming tables. Too much vision, too soon, probably doomed this pleasure palace to an early closure, which was also abetted by a rare summer rainstorm which flooded the premises. Opened on July 31, 1931, it was closed before the New Year.

courtesy Howard W. Herz, Gaming Archaeology



Deauville's

Photo courtesy Nevada Historical Society

Charles Rennie, after gobbling up the Deauville in 1933, also became a victim of his own vision of the future. With the Town House prospering in the early thirties, he opened yet another elegant and luxurious casino, the Country Club, in 1935. The Country Club burned the following year and dragged the Town House into bankruptcy and closure.

The chain of ownership of the club is lengthy, with many partners joining in for a year or two and then selling out and moving on. By 1941 the club was owned by George "Frenchy" Perry and Jack "Jelly" Blackman. Blackman shot a man to death on October 31, 1944, in the Bank Club. James Lanigan and Blackman had "words", resulting in an altercation in which Blackman suffered a broken nose and was knocked to the floor. While in a prone position he pulled his gun and fired six shots, three of which resulted in Lanigan's body heat dropping

to room temperature. Justice was served, Nevada style, with Blackman being found innocent of murder by way of self defense. I guess you had to be there.

The Town House' most profitable years were the post war era. At various times ownership grew to as many as seven partners. In 1945, Lou Vallin became sole owner and ran the club for three years. With the creation of the Nevada Tax Board (predecessor to the Gaming Commission) some housecleaning of the gambling industry was in order and in January, 1948, one of their first acts was to



revoke Vallin's license. You can bet it wasn't because he had been accused of singing too loud in church.

With the ascension of Bill Harrah and Harold Smith Sr., as well as others who had a new vision of what Reno and gambling could become,





DINE and DANCE

at Reno's Famous

TOWN HOUSE

39 West First Street

Opposite Granada Theatre

Luncheons — Entertainment

the Town House and other smaller clubs could not compete with these marketing geniuses, and these clubs began a slow decline.

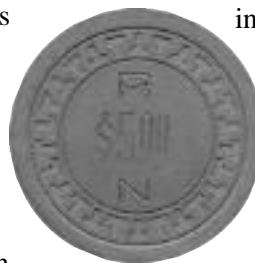
In 1953, Carl Amante took a 31% stake. A year later he was the sole proprietor. In August 1955, the landlord served Amante with an eviction notice effective January 1, 1956. On September 2, 1955 the Town House was destroyed by fire.

The two insurers denied payment of the claim, citing arson as the cause of the fire. The federal court agreed with the insurers, accused Amante of arson, and no payment was made. The local court system however, failed to find Amante guilty of arson.

One wonders if Amante was represented in court by the original "Dream Team."

The Town House and Deauville site was soon occupied by a J.C Penny's store and now is home to an antique mall.

The Town House used three chip issues in its 22 year existence. The first issue is widely believed to have been the yellow, dot mold, hot stamped five dollar chip. Within very few years the initial issue chip was supplanted with the classic "Riding Lesson", Lew Hymers designed chip, hub mold, \$5 orange and \$25 black, each with a white



inlay. In 1951, Roy Nelson obtained the gaming license for the club and brought in to play the hot stamped, RN, T mold chip issue.

Chip scans courtesy Larry Hollibaugh Advertising from the Nevada State Journal, Reno, Nevada, 1931, 1941, 1945. Courtesy Howard W. Herz, Gaming Archaeology

Ashtrays from the Mark Englebretson collection