

B. C. WILLS & COMPANY



ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF MODERN AMERICAN GAMING

by Howard W. Herz



In 1960 I met Mr. Joe Klise, salesman for the B.C. Wills Co. of Detroit, Michigan. At the time I was beginning Harvey's collection of gaming checks and chips for Harvey Gross. Mr. Klise was an "old timer" in the gaming industry having spent a good portion of his life selling gaming supplies. He had started with the Joe Treybal company and had been its manager. When Treybal failed in the late 1940's, Joe went to work for Rigdon & Co. After a short time with Taylor & Co. he was hired, in 1957, by B.C. Wills and worked out of Reno, Nevada as their salesman.

Between 1960 and 1964 when Joe retired, I enjoyed seeing him and frequently he would provide us with drilled samples of checks from closed casinos [never open houses!]. Joe taught me the terminology used in the industry and expanded my knowledge of gaming.

In November, 1994, I contacted the Weinbrenners, former owners of B.C. Wills, and was given a detailed story of the company. What follows is the story of a man and a company

primarily from my interviews with the Weinbrenners who's father founded B.C. Wills & Company and was a pioneer in the gaming industry.

George P. Weinbrenner (Jr.) was one of three children born to George P. Weinbrenner of St. Louis, Mo. "Grandfather" George Sr. became the sheriff in St. Louis. George P. Weinbrenner [Jr.] was born in St. Louis in 1891. He grew up with neighborhood friends Lincoln Fitzgerald and Danny Sullivan. The three men would later "migrate" to Michigan in the 1920's where things were "wide open".



Young George attended the University of Missouri and received an engineering degree. As a student, George became interested in the crap games that seemed to thrive in the alleys of St. Louis.

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One of George's first gaming ventures was to stencil a billiard cloth to formalize the betting in the games. Thus he entered the gaming industry.

George and his two boyhood friends found the lure of Detroit too enticing and moved there in the 1920's. One of Detroit's papers dubbed him "St. Louis Dutch". Together with Danny Sullivan and Lincoln Fitzgerald, George opened a club. Uncertain of what to name it, the three agreed to settle on the name of the cigarettes that George smoked and the Chesterfield Club came into being.



In Detroit, Weinbrenner, Lincoln Fitzgerald and Danny Sullivan each owned 1/3 interest in the Chesterfield Club in East Detroit. The club closed in the late 1920's [1928-29]. Weinbrenner disagreed with Fitz on the club's operations and sold out his interest.

In the early days of street gaming "craps" began as a dice game played on a blanket with "drug store" or "alley" dice. The imprecise shape of the cubes lended themselves to "loading" and various types of irregularities. Weinbrenner was determined to develop a "square" cube. The development of new materials was just occurring and George experimented with celluloid. The material appeared to lend itself to the manufacture of dice but was not stable.

George went to the Dupont Company and was told that the mate-

rial could not be stabilized. Nothing motivated Weinbrenner more than a challenge and being told that his idea was impossible provided the incentive. Continued experiments (primarily in their house) proved that the dice could be "aged" and would "case harden" on the surface. George invented a process of vacuum heating that "cured" the material. Although the dice continued to be slightly unstable in the long run, the process slowed their deterioration. George Weinbrenner's discovery led to the development of "precision" dice cubes that could be manufactured to exceeding small tolerances.

After Weinbrenner's experiments with dice material were successful he decided to move his operation from the basement of their home to a more suitable location. He procured the services of a real estate broker to find a location for a manufacturing operation. He found a location that had been a tool and die company operated by a gentleman by the name of B.C. Wills & Co..



Wills had recently died and his widow was selling the business. On the door of the location was painted the name "B.C. Wills & Co.". Weinbrenner asked the widow if she intended to use the name. She did not, but asked why Weinbrenner was



interested in using it. "Weinbrenner" is too long to fit on the door", he replied - he also would not have to get a new sign painted!

The B.C. Wills Co. developed a reputation for the best dice available. As business continued, the company added a division for layouts and gaming furniture. In 1930-31 the B.C. Wills & Co. under the leadership of Weinbrenner and the Mason Co. headed by Col. Drake got into a "dice war". Cutting prices and using every business technique, the two battled until the Mason Co. lost the war. By 1935 the B.C. Wills & Co. was offering a complete line of quality club-room equipment. As the company grew they gained a reputation for quality. They considered their products as the "Cadillac" of gaming equipment. Ironically their phone number at 666 E. Columbia St, Detroit Michigan was "Cadillac 5974".

George P. Weinbrenner had two boys, George and Paul who would follow him into the business.



In the late 1940's the Kevfauver committee launched a drive against

“unlicensed” gaming by using the transportation of interstate shipments as a basis for a U.S. Senate investigation. To the credit of the B.C. Wills & Co. policy, the company was not asked to testify before the committee while other gaming suppliers questioned. One of the results of the Kefauver committee was a stricter enforcement of interstate shipment of “gaming devices”. With increasing pressure from the FBI on gaming shipments, B.C. Wills & Co. decided to open a factory in Nevada in 1955-56 to supply their growing customer base.



The Nevada operation started with the manufacture of dice and eventually included cabinets and layouts. Around 1968 the casino products division was moved back to Michigan where B.C. Wills & Co. had tool and die and fiberglass operations. In the 1980’s the gaming supply division was sold to Clay Hathaway. In a move to make his newly purchased company more efficient, Hathaway took the old files to the Reno city dump.

After several years of operation under Hathaway the company was



combined with other gaming supplier companies that Hathaway had purchased. Shortly after the mergers, the company had financial difficulty and went into bankruptcy.



Besides his ownership in a gaming supply business, Weinbrenner had various interests in gaming and his contributions to gaming history were significant. Most of the gambling (unlicensed) was conducted in what gamblers called “road house” operations.

These were small clubs that featured a limited menu of excellent food, entertainment by some of the most popular stars of the day and a game room. The Michigan road houses featured the best bands of the day and greats like Sophie Tucker. The clubs were frequently located on the outskirts of the major metropolitan areas. In the early 1920’s, the barber shop at 21 W. Elizabeth was a pick up point for the road houses. The 7 passenger Packards would pick up players and chauffeur them to the clubs located on the edge of the city. Clubs in the Detroit area included those on Jefferson Avenue in St. Claire, Michigan such as the Blossom Heath, the Edgewater Club and the Club Royal on Gratiot Ave. located on the Detroit city limit.

Around 1932, Weinbrenner owned an interest in a road house club in the area of Kansas City called The Green

Hills. Following this short venture, around 1934 he became a partner in the Beach and Tennis Club located in a mansion on the beach in Miami Beach. Weinbrenner’s partners in the Beach and Tennis Club were Mert Wortheimer and Ruby Mathis. Both Wortheimer and Mathis would later become partners of Lincoln Fitzgerald in the Nevada Club in Reno for a short period of time before going to The Mapes and The Riverside.

In 1937 George Weinbrenner built The Christiania in Sun Valley, Idaho. This posh club featured top name entertainment and a game room. Operating in the winter season only, eventually it also became a summer attraction to the beautiful area.



During World War II, Sun Valley was used by the Navy as a recuperating area for wounded sailors. At one point in the history of the Christiania, an Admiral from Washington asked Weinbrenner if the Navy could lease the facility for an enlisted men and officer’s club. Weinbrenner declined the offer. When the Admiral questioned Weinbrenner’s patriotism, George replied “If you wanted this place for an enlisted men’s club or for an officer’s club I would lease it to you for a dollar a year. But if you want it for both, the only way that an enlisted man will get in here is on the end of a mop!” “As for my patriotism, I have two sons in the war and one is presently MIA behind enemy lines”. The Admiral didn’t get his club.



In 1949, George Weinbrenner died of a heart attack at age 58. His passing marked the departure of a gaming pioneer whose accomplishments earned him a position in gaming history. His two sons, George and Paul continued with the business. Paul continued to operate the B.C. Wills Co. and his older brother George continued to keep an active interest in it.

B.C. Wills & Company's first mold was the small Grecian Key design introduced in the 1920's. It was designated as Mold # 100



For a brief period of time B.C. Wills tried "printing" on chips. Referred to as "printing" and not silk screening - the experiment did not work out. This mold was designated as Mold # 187



The logo was "printed" on the chips and then they were given a protective coating. This process proved to be unsatisfactory.



Metal wafer inlays were used in the late 1940 to early 1950 period also as an experimental design.



In March of 1964 B.C. Wills & Co. introduced a large Grecian Border Design. This was called Mold #364



Following the purchase of the company by Hathaway and its subsequent bankruptcy, all of the B.C. Wills molds became generic property of the Burt Company and then Atlantic Molding.

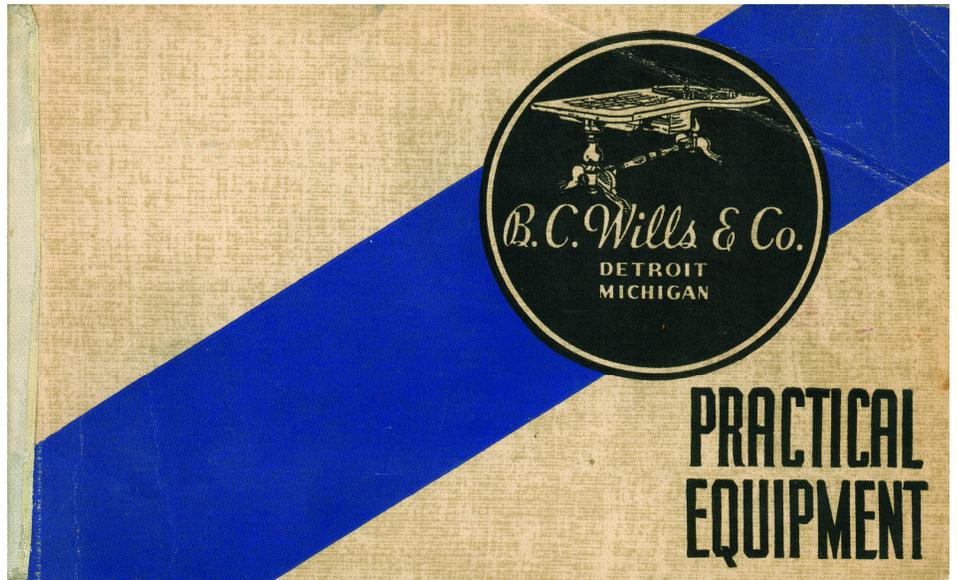
A number of interesting samples combine the large Grecian key mold with a metal center. These were produced in the 1970's when metal centers were being considered.



Only a few casinos put these to use.



From dice to layouts and gaming checks, B.C. Wills & Co. left a legacy of both quality and integrity. Their products are now some of the most prized possessions of collectors.



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