

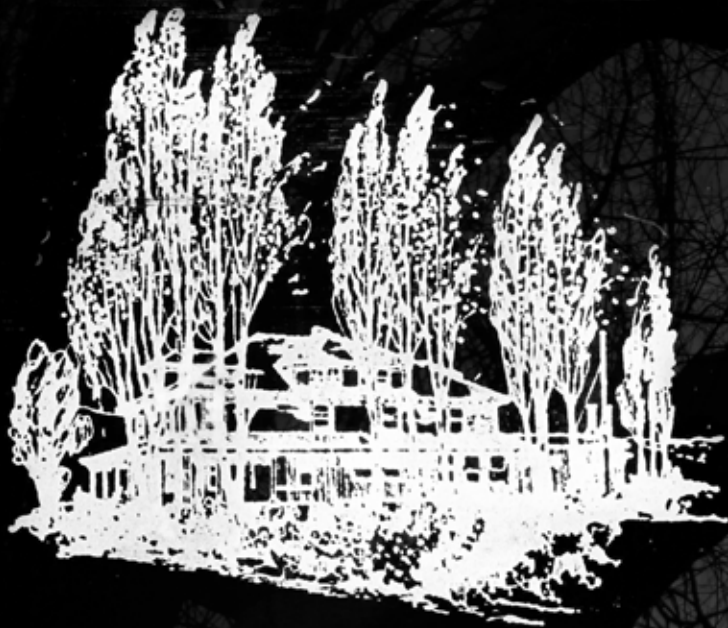
Volume 25 Number 2

Casino Collectible News

Brought to you by The Casino Chip and Gaming Token Collectors Club, Inc.



Story of **THE WILLOWS**



RENO'S GRAND RESORT



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Check out the Reference Center, where you will find useful information on the hobby of casino chip and gaming token collecting. There are articles for the beginning collector and detailed reference materials for the more experienced collector.

Log on to the club message board. Ask questions, get answers and meet other people interested in the same collectibles as you!



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Story of
**THE
WILLOWS**

By Westen Charles



RENO'S GRAND RESORT

CASINO CHIP COLLECTING

I enjoy reading old-time stories of early casino chip collectors going to great lengths to blend in and sneak out coveted chips for their collection. Whether by accident or for a clever keepsake, this practice has been happening since chips were used on tables. From the palatial game rooms of Monte Carlo to the weekly poker night at the local cigar shop; gambling chips, also known as “checks” have gone un-cashed for one reason or another and made their way out of the clubs and into a purgatory of sorts.

The afterlife of these little pieces of clay is uncertain. Perhaps, a chip is stashed into a jewelry box at first, then after being tossed away for years, it gets down graded to a junk drawer dweller. It spends what seems to be an eternity hoping to see the light of day. After decades, the chip is eventually rescued by an early-bird estate sale hunter looking for a tasty worm to feast on. Within hours the chip is scanned and listed for sale online for the world to see. Many of these finds represent all that is left from a once legendary establishment and the sellers don’t have a clue of their collectability. The allure of making a wager and beating house odds is universally shared among players, and for a few old-time players, taking a piece of the game home with them allows a new generation of collectors the chance to revisit the action of the past.

BUYING CHIPS ONLINE

The online giant (ebay) has become the central market place for everything that is for sale both new and old, casino chips included. I’ve noticed that most of the casino chip listings on ebay are from sellers who seem to know the approximate value of what they are selling. It is tough to get a good deal on an item when the seller begins their auctions with an opening bid that follows the published pricing guides. There are exceptions when a seller lists an item that they are not very knowledgeable about; however, if they use the regular auction format, collectors will bid the item up to what they are willing to pay. This method of selling will usually bring a reasonable sale price given that the item is listed in the appropriate category. When true chip rarities are offered for auction on ebay, it is the deep pockets that prevail.

The majority of seasoned ebay sellers are trying to turn a profit on items that they have bought for resale and they will deal in just about anything if they can make a return on it. Newbie ebay sellers may just be cleaning out their clutter and not be savvy as to the best way to list an item for maximum profit. When listing items for sale you have a choice to use the auction format (typical auction) or you can also add a “buy it now” option that guarantees a set price and profit from the listing if it sells. When you are offering a rare item, it is best to use the regular auction format, because if you get two hard heads that are gunning for the same target, you may see a very profitable bidding war take place.

When I search for casino collectibles on ebay, I browse the

“newly listed” items; this strategy helps when looking for the best deals. Every now and then there are opportunities to capitalize on the right combination of a rarity that is being offered for sale with a low “buy it now” price. If you get lucky and stumble across this scenario, you have to be fast enough to pull the trigger and seal the deal before someone else beats you to it.

IDENTIFYING CHIPS

One night I came across a pair of interesting (crest and seal) chips that had just been listed on ebay with a (buy it now) price of \$2,000 for the pair. These beautiful antique poker chips were made by the United States Playing Card Company in 1930, for Francis Victor du Pont. He used them on his yacht “Tech Jr.”, named after his alma mater Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rich Hanover had an example of the chip displayed in his collection at (oldpokerchips.com); however, the auction that I was eyeing had different colors from the chip that was shown.



Rich Hanover’s Tech Jr. Crest and Seal samples from his website www.oldpokerchips.com

The “buy it now” price for these chips was way out of my price range, but I figured I’d watch the auction to see if anyone else bit. I sent Rich an email to let him know about the chips for auction, as he had been generous with me more than once in the past. The next day I browsed the auction to see if anyone had bought the pair for the inflated price, but they were still for sale. While checking my email I noticed that Rich had replied back, thanking me and noting “Looks like my site added some value to them”. Rich had also sent me a second email saying that the seller had some other chips for sale as well that were being offered at a buy it now price. I hadn’t seen any other chips being offered so I figured that the seller had recently added more chips. I immediately returned to the seller’s auction page.

While scanning to see what had been added, I noticed some

other c&s chips, but they were pretty common. There was one chip in particular that caught my eye. I’d never seen it before. The item description was not much help, “Willows Casino Poker Chip \$1 Very Good Condition”. At this point, I look down to see the visitor counter on the auction and it read 001. “Wow”, I thought, “I’m the first person to view the auction page.” The seller must have listed it seconds before I got there. This chip was fresh to the market and for sale with a “buy it now” price of \$100. I said to myself, “first things first, could this be a rare chip?” I didn’t know yet, but I knew that I didn’t have a lot of time to do research. If a chip is rare, it is usually gone in a snap.



Screen capture of the ebay auction for the Willows chip

Because the chip appeared to be a crest & seal (plain mold), I went to Rich Hanover’s comprehensive website for research. I remembered that there is an alphabetical reference for his entire collection and I quickly find the W’s and scroll down the list to see West End Club... Wilbur Clark’s... WKL... No Willows! Then back to the auction page and enlarged the single photo shown, it showed a bold black gothic font “The Willows” bridging over a centered 1.00 at the bottom. At this point the chip has just about sold me, but I knew I’m taking a gamble when spending \$100 on a chip that I know nothing about. I pulled out my Campiglia/ Wells chip price guide and did a quick flip through the Las Vegas section; When I didn’t find anything, I continued through to Reno and “voila”, there it is was at the end of the list.

“(Willows) Reno 1953-56” Then it notes, “(This club should not be confused with The Willows- the plush dinner club which had gaming before legalization until 1932- when a fire burned it to the ground. The post cards you see are from this original old club showing the “Chinese Room”. Located several miles away on Old Verdi Road. Were chips ever made for this early swank club?)”

TRIGGER HAPPY

Did I read that right? Now my blood was pumping. Could this be a chip from the older casino called (The Willows)? I’m ready to bite. I return to the auction page and click the “buy it now” link. Anxiously, I wait for the next web page to load in. While the curser spins, I expect the next page to allow me to “confirm your bid”. Instead, I’m redirected to my paypal account, Please “Sign In”, Huh? I haven’t won the auction yet, but I need to sign into my paypal? Time is ticking away and it’s taking way too long to get the deal done. All of the countless hours that I have spent mulling

around on ebay have prepared me for this moment. The page finally loads in, “Confirm your purchase” (Click) “Congratulations you have won this item!” Yes! I got it. Awesome! Easing down from my consumer rush, I thought to myself, so what did I just buy?



1932 ad for the Willows

THE HUNT IS ON

I began by doing web searches for “the willows” to see if I could locate any information on the club, but there are too many red herrings. I tried “The Willows Reno” and I eventually found a lead, a vintage photo postcard from Mark Englebretson’s website dedicated to casino collectibles (The Nevada Casino Ashtray Project). The classic black and white photo peers down onto a dramatically lit roulette table. Five elegant ladies wearing evening gowns are positioned around the table. The women are adorned with orchid corsages and have stacks of chips in front of them. The interior is exquisite. Panel walls are set in a Far East motif. Dark wood pilasters divide glowing medallion sconces. Filigree lighting illuminates the tables from above. The interior is very unusual; however, it somehow looks familiar. The caption at the bottom of the card reads, “Roulette at the Willows”.



March 31, 1931 photo of the Willows



Postcard from Mark Englebretson’s website www.nevadacasinoashtrays.org

I have seen this interior before. I recognize it from an old photograph that I added to my collection years back. The photo came from an archive of published newspaper images that were being broken up and sold off. When I bought it I didn’t know anything about where the picture was taken. What are the odds? After doing some digging through my files, I found it. The photo shows a very similar scene to the postcard online, this is definitely the same interior of “The Willows” in Reno. The subject is a (chuck-a-luck) table with the same dramatic lighting as the postcard. Three ladies are seated at the table; however, they share different fates. The woman closest to us looks away from the game with dismay as the others across from her celebrate their good fortune. An ominous shadow from the overhead lamp obscures the dealer’s face. On the back of the photo is a “use” date stamped in blue, March 31, 1931. I would later find out that this date was exactly one month before the club’s official opening. The pictures must have been staged publicity shots made to promote the club’s opening.

WOMEN’S INTUITION

Telling your wife that you just spent \$100 on an obsolete \$1 poker chip is akin to a “magic bean” tale. After providing my wife with the few pieces of evidence that I had gathered, she was not convinced that there was anything magical about the chip. Her comments to me were, “If you could actually see the chip in the photos, I’d be a believer”. Yes, there is no way to make out an individual chip in the photos. (I thought of that approach already but had no luck with it.) As I continued my online research, I heard a scream from the other room “I see it! That’s the chip!” Apparently my better half had gotten her loop out and was able to see what I had missed. I was sure she was pulling my leg until she handed me the loop

and I realigned the photo. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Just below the dealer on the (chuck-a-luck) table there were chips with the same design as the chip I had just won! She was right! My wife smiled and said... “What else can I help you with?”



Enlargement of the above photo showing the Willows crest and seal chip

IN THE BEGINNING

The Story of The Willows Club in Reno begins long before its doors opened for legalized gambling in April of 1931. The story begins with a man named Rick DeBernardi who moved from San Francisco to Reno in 1906. Upon DeBernardi’s arrival in Reno he immediately purchased a fifty-acre tract of land west of the city and within a year he constructed a grand three-story resort that would go by the name “Rick’s Resort” or “Rick’s Roadhouse”. DeBernardi would live there with his wife Constance and their son. Rick’s was a popular destination for locals and passers-through wanting to unwind. The business was licensed as a hotel but it also had licenses for liquor and slot machines. Downstairs there was a long oak bar, a living room, and an entertainment area where local talents preformed. The back room was reserved for gambling. Upstairs there were five bedrooms and two sitting rooms. Accompanying the main house were twenty small cabins and a large barn, built on the north side of the property, housing horses used for carriage rides into town. In 1910 Reno hosted one of the America’s most controversial heavyweight boxing title fights. (Jack Johnson vs. Jim Jeffries) Rick’s Resort was made famous when Johnson and his crew used



A photo of Rick’s Resort, before the transformation to the Willows



Jack Johnson and his training crew on the steps of Rick’s

Rick’s as their training camp for the fight. Rick’s was the perfect location for Johnson’s crew because it was out of the way and catered to the party atmosphere that the crew enjoyed. For training, the horse barn was converted into a temporary gymnasium; however, it was said that Johnson and his crew did more partying and posing for photos than training. Johnson, the African American World Champion, was fighting the white World Champion, James Jeffries, who had come out of retirement in order to retake the title. This bout would later be coined “The Fight of the Century”. Jack Johnson won the fight in the 15th round when Jeffries threw in the towel. The result was said to spark a newly found respect for African Americans throughout the country.

THE TRANSFORMATION

DeBernardi would have a successful run with the popular speakeasy and casino; however, when prohibition was enacted in 1920 it wasn’t long before the pressures of operating became too much for him. Rick’s Resort was sold in 1922 to notorious gangsters



Bill Graham (L) and Jim McKay (R)

Bill Graham and James “Chich” McKay for a mere \$43,000. The partners had their hands in most of the action happening in Reno including The Bank Club, The Rex, Cal-Neva Lodge at Lake Tahoe and “The Stockade”, a city sanctioned whorehouse that lived up to its name. With the help of Reno’s legendary banker George Wingfield, Graham and McKay were able to secure more than a

\$150,000 to sink into their newly acquired investment property. After full renovations, the roadhouse would reopen with the name “The Willows”, which apparently referred to the white willow trees that lined both sides with entrance road leading to the resort.

Tex Hall, an associate of Gram and McKay, was brought into the project to oversee the remodeling and perfect the new décor. The main floor would now have a large ballroom, an entertainment area known as the “Blue Room”, and an elegant dining hall and a decadent casino area known as the “Chinese” room. Tex would spend thousands of dollars alone on machines that were used to stamp out delicate metal filigree that adorned lighting fixtures throughout the property. Before long the club would be transformed into one of the country’s most luxurious roadhouse casinos. George Hart, the popular piano player and crooner delighted the crowds nightly. As word got out about the club, its notoriety grew quickly. The once sleepy roadhouse had turned into a national hotspot where the social elite came to indulge in the pleasures of vice. It was said that nights at The Willows resembled star-studded Hollywood Premieres with the finest of entertainment, dining, dancing, and big-time gambling.

READY FOR BUSINESS

The Willows was poised to take advantage of the historic

Assembly Bill signed into law by Governor Fred Balzar on March 19, 1931. Bill 98 opened the state for legalized gambling. This allowed establishments like The Willows to conduct and promote business freely. The legislation would lead to the beginning of more modernized casinos being built. Reno was also becoming



recognized as the “Divorce Capital of the Country”. Eager women were flocking into town from east and west to take advantage of the relaxed 6 months residency requirement for granting divorce in the state. In 1931 this period was shortened even further to only six weeks and Reno’s hotels and resorts became filled with wealthy women that were said to be waiting to “take the cure”. George Wingfield was a savvy businessman and mindful of the economic potential represented by these women. It was Wingfield who was responsible for constructing the marketing plan for The Willows. The upscale roadhouse would cater to the divorce seekers. Wingfield branded The Willows with an advertising campaign that used dramatic black and white photos of sophisticated ladies at play in the lavish casino. The idea worked perfectly, but it would be short-lived.

AN EARLY ENDING

The Willows met an early fate on June 14, 1932 when it burned to the ground in less than an hour’s time. Workmen had been busy that morning putting the final touches on the second major renovation started back in January. At noon the workers were taking a break, when flames broke out. The fire spread throughout the interior so quickly that the workers couldn’t even reach the house telephone. They raced to a neighboring ranch in order to call in the alarm. As a gentle summer breeze fanned the flames, the county fire engine hurried out to the resort. Thick black smoke could be seen rising high into the sky from miles away. Even before the fire engine arrived people from the area knew there was trouble out at The Willows. News of the fire spread throughout Reno and hundreds of cars began making their way out on old Verdi road to see the event. In two hours time the fire was near over and all that could be recognized of the resort was the brick fireplace leaning precariously on the smoldering remains of the twisted metalwork. The club had been scheduled for its Grand Reopening in just four days.

There was very little saved from the blaze. When the fire engine arrived, the men drafted water from a ditch across the road but the fire proved to be too strong for the single engine. James McKay and Tex Hall arrived on scene shortly after the fire fighters responded, they could only stand back and watch their club go up in smoke. Insurance on the Willows totaled \$70,500 but that would not come close to covering the partner’s investment. According to the fire department, the furnace room was the cause of the fire and that may have been true because although much attention was paid to the outward appearance of the club, the infrastructure had been neglected. There was talk of rebuilding the resort at the same location but this would never come to pass. As Reno dealt with the expansion of gambling and other illicit behavior, the city pushed for a centralized district in order to have better control of the activities. Nightclubs and gambling would now be directed down Virginia Street in the middle of town where a kind of “sin zone” was enacted.

Despite the total loss of The Willows, operations elsewhere were booming for McKay and Graham, that is, until everything changed when they were arrested for mail fraud in 1934. They would be tried twice in court over the next several years, but both trials ended in hung juries. Their third trial would result in a conviction for both men and carried a sentence of nine years in federal prison. They would enter prison in 1939 after exhausting all of their delays and appeals. After serving less than six of those years at Leavenworth Penitentiary the partners were granted full pardons with the aid of Senator Pat McCarran and President Harry S. Truman. Following their release, the pair returned to Reno in an attempt to reclaim their holdings and influence, but the landscape had changed while they were gone.

The 1950’s began a new reign of organized crime syndicates from places like Chicago, Los Angeles, Cleveland and Kansas City. These groups flexed their muscle, investing millions of dollars in over-the-top hotel/casinos in Las Vegas. Institutional bank lending was loosened by Mob persuasion, helping to finance hotels such as the Flamingo, the Thunderbird, the Dunes, the Sands and the Sahara. Las Vegas would rise to eclipse its competition for gaming and would become the new capital of gambling in the country. Back in Reno, Graham and McKay struggled to piece together the remnants of their past, eventually they faded from the scene.

Memories of The Willows are all but faded now, but the legendary mystique of such a place lives on through the telling of its tale. Since the roadhouse caught fire when it was closed to the public and because the casino’s run was short lived, you can figure that most of everything in the place was lost to the flames. Licensed gambling was only officially offered for nine months and nine days, so there was not much time for chips to make their way out of the club. It is a mystery how this \$1 chip avoided that fateful day. Maybe it was pocketed as a keepsake or good luck charm; it was a lucky chip indeed.

The Willows casino chips were most likely ordered from the US Playing Card Company around 1930; however, they are not included in their known archived sample books that display many of the Crest and Seal chips that were made during this time period. In the photograph where the \$1 chip can be seen in the rack on the (chuck-a-luck) table, it appears that only the \$1 denomination crest and seal chip is in use along with coins and what looks like a hot stamped chip on the far right of the tray.

Seen on the roulette table are stacks of chips that appear to be different colors and a different inlay design than the \$1 chip. The design on these chips is in the shape of the letter Y, but does not look like a generic letter Y chip. Could this be a picture of a loan



willow tree? Maybe there are some of these chips out there in the world waiting to be discovered. Views of the original willow trails that led up the roadhouse can still be seen near the Oxbow park area.

Special thanks to John Evanoff and Rich Hanover



1931 ad for the Willows