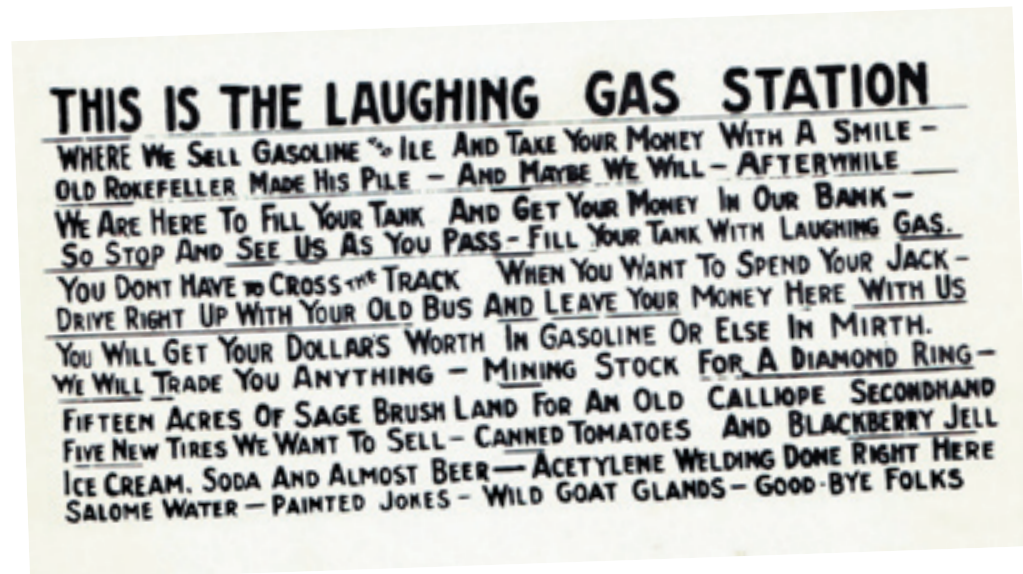
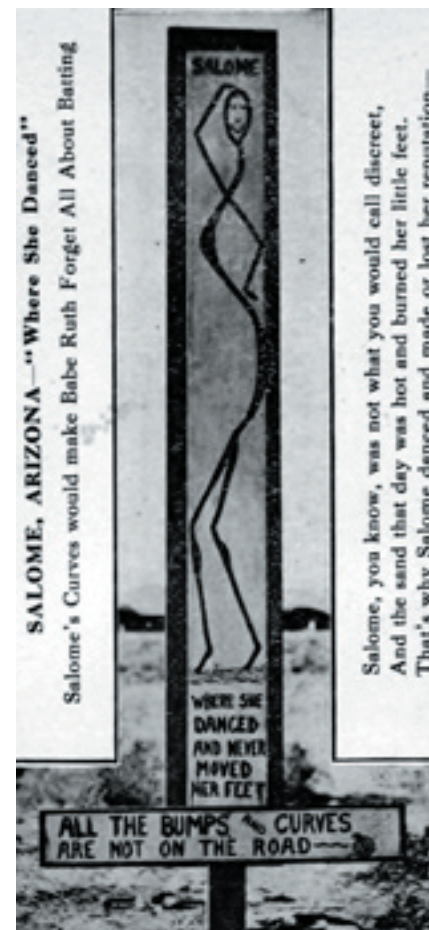


Shenanigans on the Sunkist Trail

Unless you're a snowbird searching for a bucolic trailer park to pass the winter, there's little reason to linger in the western Arizona hamlet of Salome. The sleepy Sonoran desert town of roughly 1,500 residents was once, however, an electrifying, round-the-clock destination for highway travelers. Mentioned by Jack Kerouac in his novel, *On the Road*, it was the epicenter of an astounding tale that unfolds like a film noir suspense thriller.

Salome's hidden notoriety begins with events that occur far away in the Pacific Ocean and careen eastward along a citrus-inspired highway, interweaving in its volatile plotline a future U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice, mobsters, impatient nuptials, surplus slot machines, a complacent sheriff, a hidden passageway for illicit activities, and the country's largest private

collection of exotic birds. These intriguing clues build to an impressive crescendo: Salome almost became the gambling capital of the Southwest. If Arizona voters had passed a statewide proposition to legalize gambling over 70 years ago, there's a chance that this desert town 100 miles west of Phoenix would be illuminated by bright casino lights and Elvis Presley would have sung, "Viva Salome" instead of "Viva Las Vegas."



The Arizona town that just missed the jackpot was founded in 1904 by Dick Wick Hall, a businessman and humorist who wrote tall tales about the desert and its inhabitants. Hall became a partner in the "Laughing Gas Station" and, around 1920, began distributing his single-sheet, *Salome Sun*, which stated its goal on the masthead: "To make you smile for half a mile." Eventually, Hall's tales became syndicated in various publications and he was even, over exuberantly, called the "Mark Twain of the Southwest." Hall's writings allegedly made Salome, which in the 1920s had a double-digit population, the "most widely-advertised town of its size in the world," according to a 1960 *Arizona Highways* article.

Hall tirelessly campaigned to upgrade the rough road through Salome even distributing handbills that stated in red lettering: "DANGER! Tourists are warned not to attempt to go to Los Angeles by way of Yuma—100 miles out of the way and through terrible sand dunes that drift like snow, where planks, brush and boards, are used for miles to keep cars from being buried. Go by Blythe [and Salome], the shortest and best route."

An improved road through Salome was also on the minds of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, whose members visited Phoenix in 1922 to organize a campaign to build a "Blythe Cutoff" to better connect the two cities. At the time, motorists driving west from Phoenix could either wait to take a ferry across the Colorado River, dip south to Yuma to the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge built in 1915, or head north to Topock to the Old Trails Bridge built in 1916.

In 1928, a five-span bridge was completed at the site of the Blythe-Ehrenburg ferry crossing which completed U.S. Highway 60 between Phoenix and Los Angeles via Salome. The route, which would be completely paved by 1937,

was dubbed the Sunkist Trail since it connected two citrus regions. The trail also offered access to the Grand Canyon via an alternative route that branched north at Wickenburg, Arizona.

Hall's death in 1926 deprived him of witnessing the blossoming of the Sunkist Trail. Perhaps unwittingly though, he mapped out Salome's future by naming it after the biblical femme fatale and promoting the town with road signs depicting a sinuous lady with the caption, "All the bumps and curves are not on the road." Soon, Salome would be transformed into an irresistible beacon, drawing southern Californians for both honorable—and tawdry—reasons.

The first eastbound motorists along the Sunkist Trail were often impulsive lovebirds looking to tie the knot. California marriages required a three-day wait while Arizona had no such interminable delay for love-struck couples. Just 63 miles from the California border, Salome became a round-the-clock marriage mecca. The town's false-front Justice Court advertised folksy slogans such as "No Waiting No Delay! Get Married Here To-Day." In the days before "Vegas-style" drive-thru weddings, there were instructions to "Day Time Just Walk In" and "Nite Time Just Ring the Bell." A 1949 *Arizona Highways* article notes that Justice of the Peace John A. Provorse lived in the rear of the building and performed 3,022 ceremonies over 10 years in a community of 300 residents.

Images (all author's collection):

- Sign for Dick Wick Hall's Laughing Gas Station in Salome in the 1920s.
- Roadside sign in Salome in the 1920s.
- 1930 Sunkist Trail Map.

But like the biblical temptress, Salome would seduce not only the matrimonially inclined but those Californians looking for outlawed pleasures. Gambling was illegal in the Golden State but in 1928, clever entrepreneurs devised a way to get around the law by anchoring gambling ships in the Pacific Ocean beyond state jurisdiction. A fleet of floating casinos was soon positioned three miles off Long Beach and Santa Monica, packed with customers ferried in by small boats. The casinos produced handsome profits for their mob owners as well as two brothers who supplied the slot machines. Russell “Bus” and William “Bill” Sheffler owned a Los Angeles vending machine company that also manufactured the one-armed bandits in use on the floating casinos.

In 1939, California Attorney General (and future U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice) Earl Warren declared the gambling ships a public nuisance. Warren created a “navy” by commandeering state Fish and Game boats and shut down the floating casinos. The Shefflers, deprived of the lucrative offshore market for their slot machines, looked eastward to satiate the demand for drinks, dice, and dolls. The brothers headed east on the Sunkist Trail, relocating to Salome. There they built a destination gambling resort for southern Californians featuring the warehoused slot machines, according to the book, McMullen Valley. Although gambling was legal in Nevada, Las Vegas had only 8,000 residents and was not as convenient a drive. To

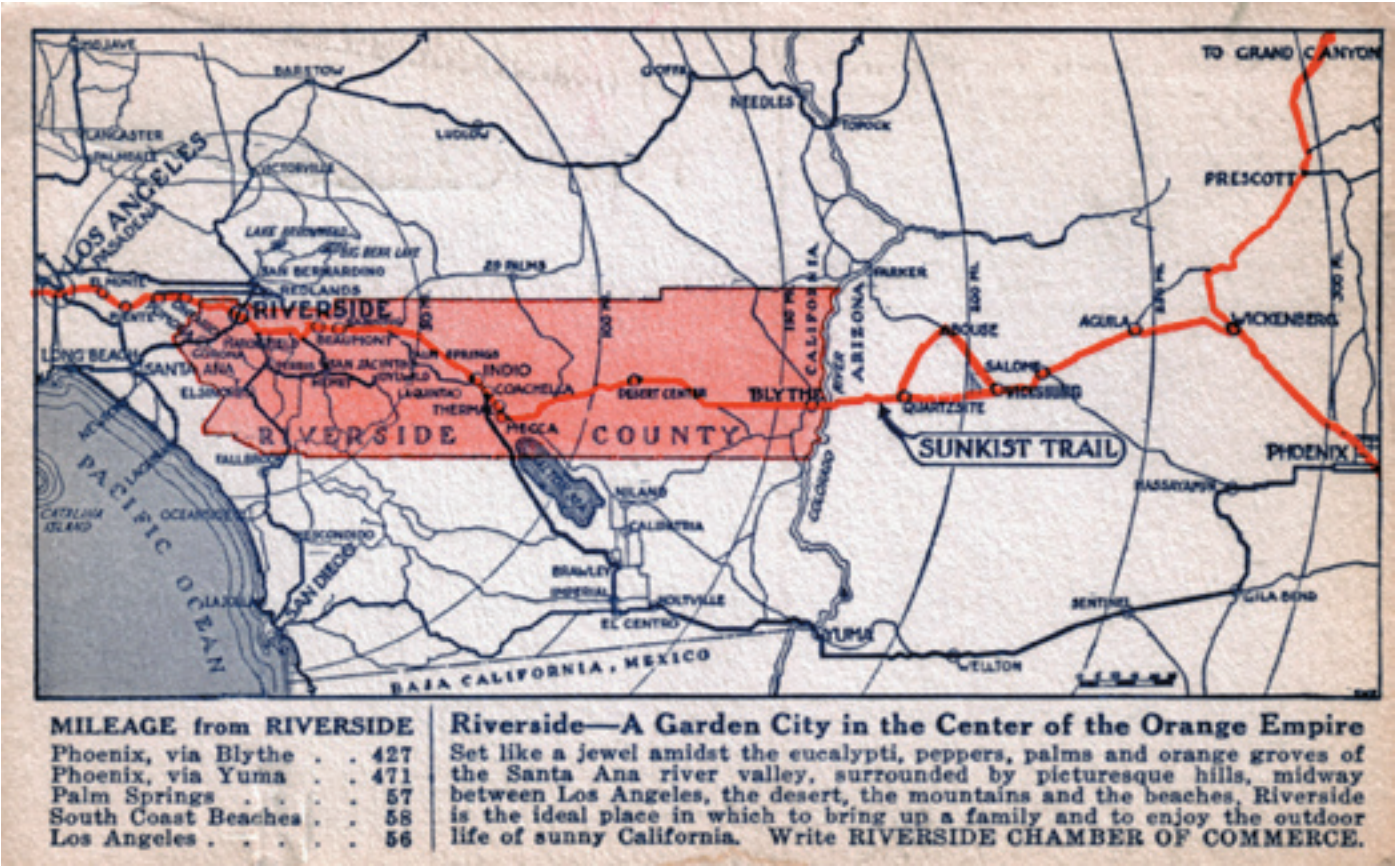
improve Salome’s amenities, the brothers constructed the stylish, art deco Sheffler’s Motel and improved Van’s (later renamed Sheffler’s) Café that also served as the town’s bus station. Bus Sheffler focused on these business interests while Bill Sheffler, an avid ornithologist, provided the town with a unique roadside attraction: a quarter-acre aviary featuring 800 tropical birds.

The new amenities in town were mere sideshows, however. What really drew the California crowd were the unadvertised attractions: backroom gambling and prostitution. The latter enticements were illegal but flourished due to friendly law enforcement. Yuma County Sheriff T.H. “Pete” Newman had the courtesy to phone ahead before starting his three-hour drive from Yuma to investigate vice complaints. Not surprisingly, Newman never found any evidence, since the red lights had been extinguished and the gambling paraphernalia shuffled off to a secret tunnel that ran underneath the highway, connecting two cafes.

Realizing the huge payoff that legitimizing their operation would bring, the Shefflers pushed to legalize gambling in Arizona in 1940. They enlisted John L. Sullivan, former and future Arizona Attorney General, to promote the idea. Initiative Petition #302, known unofficially as the “Sullivan Act,” would license one casino per county. At the time, Yuma County formed most of the Arizona border with California. With the Shefflers positioned to operate its only

casino, the potential for revenue and growth in Salome was enormous. The proposition, however, was defeated, 70,154 to 43,564.

The election loss failed to cripple Salome. Camp Bouse was established nearby in 1942 as the result of World War II, and brought thousands of troops on liberty to Salome. But Southern Californians increasingly veered northeast to Las Vegas where legal gaming halls welcomed their patronage with neon lights and glitter. Gambling activity ebbed in Salome but cross-country motorists continued to stop for travel essentials until the 1970s when Interstate 10 was completed. Abandoned gas stations, cafes, and motels soon lined the bypassed stretch of U.S. Highway 60. Despite the loss of highway traffic, Salome would survive, forsaking its allure of 24-hour excitement to attract seasonal retirees drawn by its rustic atmosphere and balmy winters. ●



- Sunkist Trail postcard.
- U.S. Rex floating casino poster.
- Sunkist Trail brochure.
- Salome Justice Court.



U. S. HIGHWAY 60 MILEAGE CARD

| ALTITUDE | | MILES |
|--|-----------------------|----------|
| 293 | Los Angeles | 232 |
| 875 | Riverside | 174 |
| 1031 | San Bernardino | 175 |
| 2559 | Beaumont | 151 |
| 2318 | Banning | 145 |
| 500 | Palm Springs | 122 |
| —22 | Indio | 97 |
| 902 | Desert Center | 48 |
| 282 | BLYTHE, CALIF. | 0 |
| 800 | Quartzsite | 23 |
| 1580 | Salome | 62 |
| 2100 | Wickenburg | 117 |
| 1676 | Phoenix | 168 |
| 3508 | Globe | 262 |
| 5200 | Prescott | 170 |
| 3764 | El Paso | 595 |
| Los Angeles to Phoenix via Blythe | | 400 |
| Los Angeles to Grand Canyon via Blythe | | 540 |
| Blythe to San Diego via Julian | | 220 |



- Sheffler's Cafe.
- Sheffler's Motel.
- Route 60 mileage card.
- Former 60/70 Truck Stop, Salome.
- Former Amber Hills Motel, Salome.



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