



Salome, Baby

Southern Californians flocked to a western Arizona town for quickie marriages and backroom gambling in the 1930s until a failed statewide gambling referendum gave the house edge to Las Vegas.

IF YOU'RE NOT A SNOWBIRD searching for a bucolic trailer park to pass the winter, there's little reason to linger in Salome. A funky, forgotten hamlet of 1,690, it sits about 60 miles off the California border like a serene retiree bundled up against the desert winds. There are no department stores or tourist haunts, and absolutely nothing to suggest that Salome once briefly challenged Las Vegas as the gambling capital of the West.

If Maricopa County interests hadn't vigorously campaigned against a statewide proposition to legalize gambling more than 70 years ago, fate might have picked this

town to carry the "Sin City" mantle. Harquahala Road would be a ritzy thoroughfare clogged by taxi cabs and bright casino lights, and Elvis Presley would have crooned "Viva Salome" instead of "Viva Las Vegas."

Salome is located on U.S. Highway 60, which was the main drag between Phoenix and Los Angeles until the 1970s, when the federally-funded I-10 interstate exchange choked it dry. "Back then, there was a constant stream of traffic on Highway 60," says longtime resident Thomas Davis. "To service all the vehicles, there were a dozen gas stations along the road within 10 miles of town."

The town was founded in 1904 by Dick

Wick Hall, a humorist whose columns were syndicated in newspapers across the country. Perhaps unwittingly, Hall mapped out Salome's future by naming it after the biblical femme fatale and promoting the town with road signs depicting a sinuous temptress 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.

Impatient lovebirds tying the knot were the first wave of visitors in the 1930s. California required an interminable three-day waiting period for marriages, while Arizona did not. Just 63 miles from the California border, Salome became a marriage mecca. The town's false-front Justice Court advertised folksy slogans like "No Waiting No Delay! Get Married Here To-Day." In the days before "Vegas-style" drive-thru weddings, Salome enticed visitors with such service-oriented signage as "Day Time Just Walk In" and "Nite Time Just Ring the Bell."

"The newlyweds' honeymoon would often start next door at the adjacent motel," says local historian Sharon Rubin. A 1949 *Arizona Highways* article notes that Justice of the Peace John A. Provorse lived in the building, performing 3,022 ceremonies in ten years in a community of 300 residents.

Salome also seduced Californians looking for outlawed pleasures. Gambling was illegal in the Golden State, but clever entrepreneurs devised a way to get around the edict in 1928 by anchoring gambling ships beyond state jurisdiction. A fleet of floating casinos opened for business three miles off Long Beach and Santa Monica, packed with customers ferried in by small boats. In *The Memoirs of Earl Warren*, the former Supreme Court Justice notes the casinos produced handsome profits for their mob owners, and the two Los Angeles-based brothers who supplied the slot machines: Russell "Bus" and William "Bill" Sheffler.

In 1939, Warren – then California's attorney general – declared the gambling ships a public nuisance and shut them down. So the Shefflers relocated to Salome and created a gambling resort to satiate Californians' demand for drinks, dice and dolls.

Although gambling was legal in Nevada, Las Vegas was a long drive from major population centers, and The Flamingo wasn't yet a glint in Bugsy Siegel's eye. To improve Salome's amenities, the brothers constructed the stylish Sheffler's Motel and purchased an eatery called Van's Café, which they renamed after themselves. Bus Sheffler focused on these businesses while Bill, an

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avid ornithologist, provided the town with a unique roadside attraction: a quarter-acre aviary featuring 800 tropical birds.

But the new amenities were mere side shows. What really hooked the California crowd were backroom gambling and prostitution – illegal enticements that flourished due to complicit 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, according to the book *McMullen Valley* by E.W. Kutner and Sharon Rubin. Newman never found any evidence since the gambling paraphernalia was shuffled off to a secret tunnel, Davis says.

Realizing the huge payoff of legitimizing their operation, the Shefflers pushed to legalize gambling in Arizona in 1940. They enlisted John L. Sullivan, former and fu-

ture Arizona Attorney General, to promote the idea. Initiative Petition No. 302, aka 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 was vigorously opposed by the Committee Against Legalized Gambling, a Phoenix-based group that counted Barry Goldwater among its leaders. Committee chairman P.D.L. McLaurin said in the *Arizona Republic*, "Contrary to the belief that many tourists would be attracted, many of the present tourists would go elsewhere and a new group would come in – a less desirable group – and bring with them an aftermath of crime, pickpockets, burglars, confidence men, dope peddlers, and the like."

The initiative lost by a vote of 70,154 to 43,564. While the proposition came close to winning in Yuma County, only 37 percent of voters in Maricopa County voted yes. But the defeat didn't cripple Salome immediately. Camp Bouse was established nearby in 1942 and brought thousands of World War II troops on liberty to Salome. But southern Californian gamblers veered northeast to Las Vegas, where gaming halls – legalized in 1931 – welcomed their patronage in neon lights. Bugsy Siegel and the famed Las Vegas Strip would not be far behind.

—Douglas Towne

Military Spotlight

DURING WORLD WAR II, the remote western Arizona desert proved an ideal place for the U.S. Army to test a bizarre weapon designed to blind and baffle the enemy. Camp Bouse was a top secret base established in 1943 as part of the California-Arizona Maneuver Area to prepare tanks and troops for the war in Europe. Commanded by General

George Patton, the base accommodated 5,000 soldiers and was located 30 miles northwest of Bouse in the McMullen Valley. The troops trained using a secret weapon invented by the British. Nicknamed "the Gizmo," the device was a tank-mounted, 13-million-candlelight arc beam with shutters and colored filters – essentially a giant mobile strobe light – that would theoretically confuse the enemy during night attacks. The concept proved successful in training exercises, but Allied commanders couldn't decide how to employ the weapon in combat. Consequently, Gizmos were used only to provide light for security and construction purposes. Camp Bouse was decommissioned in 1945; only scattered foundations bear testament to what may have been the military's first attempt at a "shock and awe" campaign.

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