

You are about to read one of the best "Illegal Of The Day" posts ever posted. Ed Hertel recalls a very special (to both of us) chip show held in 1998. He also tells us about a very special relationship he had with one of the Biloxi illegal operators for years after the show. He also mentions Greg Susong who also attended the show.

I intend to stay out of this one. No "My Notes" needed. At the end I will have a few things to say and a "Greg story" from the show.

GO Ed Go:

This week's IOTD is another which originated from something personal. It doesn't seem possible that it has been 15 years since Bob Gabel put on the "Blast from the Past" show at the President's Broadwater Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi. There, in November 1998, we had a small chip show with a theme surrounding illegal gambling. It was an appropriate setting for a city with a notorious past. Bob invited an old gambler named Rip Poulos (associated with such places as , Gus Stevens' Club, the Fiesta and 406 Club) and former commissioner Verta Lee who worked against the gamblers back in the day. These two on opposite sides of the law gave a talk and answered questions, followed by Rip selling some of his chips. It was a good time.

Some of us just couldn't resist asking Rip to sign one of his chips:



Key Club1att2

On the second day of the show, I was sitting behind the table I was sharing with Greg Susong when a short, older gentleman came looking through my books of illegal chips. I asked him if there was something I could help him find and he said that he was looking for chips from a club he used to own. My ears perked up and I said, "Which club?" "It was called the Key Club here in Biloxi." I hadn't heard of it and told him sorry. Just as he was about to walk away, another guy walked up to my table and said, "The guy in the front said you were the person to try to help me identify this chip." He handed me a pinkish chip with the initials "JR" on it which, unfortunately, meant nothing to me (this was before the Jones' records were available). Suddenly, the old gambler interrupted and said, "Hey, that's one of my chips! That's JR for me, John Romeo."



Key Club2att2

Ok... now let's just wait a second here. I was born, but not yesterday. What are the odds that two random guys who don't know each other are going to have this conversation right in front of my table? Knowing full well that I was being hustled, I asked the question, "Where did you find them?" He pulled a couple out from his pocket. "I picked these up off the street the morning after Hurricane Camille tore through town." John perked up again, "Yeah. I'll never forget that day. That was the end of the Key Club."

"Interesting," I smiled, still not sure what to think. "You looking to sell them?" The guy handed one to John Romeo and the other to me. "You can have them. They've been sitting in a drawer for almost 30 years and I was just curious. Thanks," and walked off.

So there I was left with this guy named John Romeo and one of his supposed chips. It seemed to me there was a lot more I needed to know. Over the next year we would strike up a friendship. I would call him every now and then (always before 7am, because that was when he left for the riverboat casinos to play poker) and he would talk about the old days. Our conversations prompted him to dig through his attic and find old chips and other memorabilia which I consider some of my most prized memorabilia.

And then there was the story of the Key Club, which can't be gleaned from newspaper article alone. It was the personal story and it's one that I feel like needs to be shared. Special thanks also goes out to Tom Henderson in Mississippi who found in the Biloxi Public Library an eight page autobiography written by Romeo himself. So, what follows is a little unusual for an IOTD in that it comes mostly from the source himself.

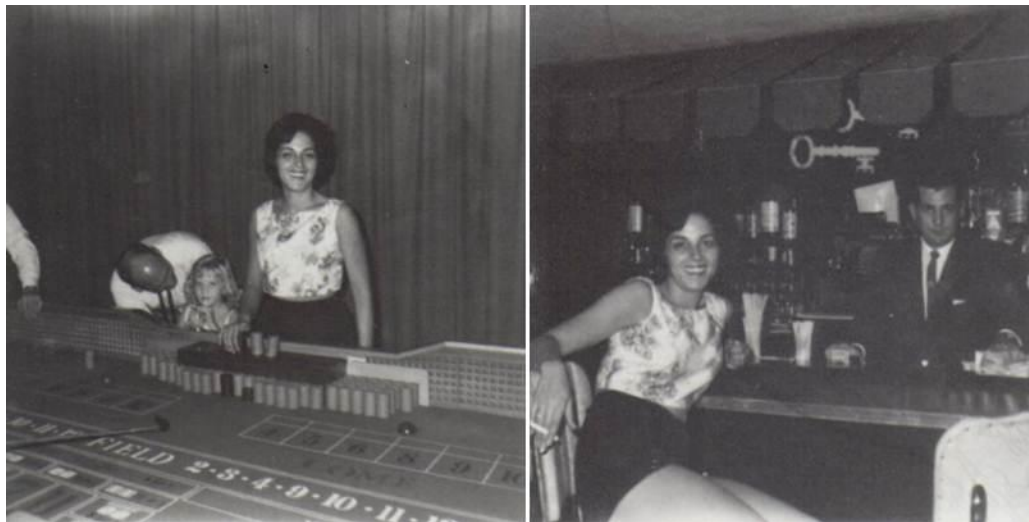
John E. Romeo was born in 1931, a mere half block down the road from the Union and 406 Clubs. There he grew up fast and by the time he was fifteen years old he was already a veteran dealer. He had honed his skills at Jennie Lynne's Bar and Pool Hall and the Gulf View Inn Bar and Grill and was now splitting his time between playing high school football and dealing blackjack at the Mickey McCool's Union Bar. (In the very small amount of spare time he also raised fighting gamecocks.)

In 1951 he met and married Beverly Dubaz, his future life partner, and she followed him through two years of navy life during the Korean War. After his service was done, Romeo returned to Biloxi where he and his father opened the Magnolia Liquor Company where they supplied alcoholic beverages in a dry county. Even the high payouts weren't enough to keep the heat off his back and they were subjected to multiple raids which eventually caused them to shut the doors.

John Romeo's first attempts at gambling were unsuccessful as a poker and blackjack game at the Magic Door Lounge in central Biloxi closed due the raids and the bankroll at his bookie joint on West Howard Avenue absconded to Las Vegas one night. He next found a partner and they opened the "Rock A While" Club which offered live music in the front and gambling in the back. This too was raided and shut down.

After all these false starts, Romeo finally broke out in April 1958 and opened the Beach Club, which was soon changed to the Key Club. The Key Club, located on the southside of Highway 90 on West Beach, was a family affair for the Romeo's. Beverly helped work the nightclub/bar/casino alongside John. Even the birth of their daughter wasn't enough to keep them from putting everything they had into its operations. If they got busy, cocktail waitresses and croupiers made good temporary babysitters.

John sent me these personal pictures from inside the club (copies on file at the Biloxi Public Library). One is Beverly and daughter by the craps table and the other is Beverly and John (dark, shadowy figure in the back) at the bar.



Key Club3att2

The front of the club was the social area with the "Gold Key Lounge" in the back. This lounge contained the five poker tables, two blackjack, two craps tables and the twelve slot machines. John believed that everyone should have a good time and always gave freed drinks to those gambling (something unusual in those days) as well as a roll of nickels for the ladies to play the slot machines.

Below are two different wooden nickels Romeo used to give to patrons:



Key Club4att2

The place was an immediate success and popular with both celebrities and invited guests. John Romeo lived a life not unlike Forrest Gump for his run-in's with history. He claimed that Jayne Mansfield, fresh from her performance at Gus Steven's Club, and her boyfriend played blackjack at his club only an hour before dying in a car crash on their way to New Orleans. And then there was a night in November 1963 when a friend of his cocktail waitress enjoyed the club and Romeo's conversation for an evening. Romeo was surprised three weeks later when he watched this same guy gun down the president. Days before, Romeo had found a jacket left in the club with the name "L. H. Oswald" in it. He had regretted donating it to the Salvation Army. (Side note, he also claims the cocktail waitress who introduced him "left her job at the club for no known reason".)

When I asked if his games were all on the up-and-up, he got serious and said, "I don't believe in crooked games. What are you going to end up with? A \$2 bill and a bad reputation." For him, reputation in the business was important, and the Key Club prospered because of it.



Key Club5att2



Invoice No.	Date Sold	Total Qty.	Type	No. Ea. Color	Color	Stamp
A 638	3/13/61	700	JBSS	400	Grey	50¢
				300	Lavender	\$5.00
Special Stamp outline of a key with KEY CLUB in the center of the outline on one side with different denomination on the other side in gold.						
				50¢	KEY CLUB	

JOHN ROMEO

Biloxi, Miss.

Key Club6att2

However, pressure in 1962 was starting to heat up. Along with gambling, the sale of anything stronger than 3.2 percent beer was strictly illegal as Mississippi was one of the last states to let go of the antiquated Prohibition laws. Governor Ross Barnett sent a message to the Biloxi casinos that they had better clean up, or he would do something about it. He was ignored.

In June 1962, the Governor unleashed the National Guard who raided three Biloxi clubs; the Spot, the Gay Paree and the Key Club. Using an axe to gain entry, they chopped their way into the clubs and destroyed \$25,000 worth of equipment. When asked why the Key Club locked their doors to axe wielding National Guards they explained that they mistook the guards for thieves and thought they were going to be robbed.

Although hurt from the loss of gambling equipment and liquor stock, the clubs didn't stay closed for long.



**THEY DIDN'T NEED A KEY
BY SHERIFF'S ORDER**

Coast Nightclubs Back In Business

BILOXI, Miss. (AP) — Night clubs along Mississippi's tourist-conscious Gulf Coast resumed near normal operations Thursday night, only 24 hours after a gambling raid by ax-wielding National Guardsmen.

Sheriff Curtis Dedeaux ordered the coast's nightclubs to resume normal operations at 1 p.m., just 13 hours after he shut them following the raid.

"These places were closed for their own protection," said Dedeaux, who was not advised of the National Guard raid, ordered by Gov. Ross Barnett, until after their completion.

Barnett warned that raids would continue unless gambling ceased.

The guardsmen, led by State Adj. Gen. William T. Wilson, arrested five persons in raids on three clubs Wednesday night. An estimated \$25,000 worth of liquor and gambling equipment was destroyed.

Alcohol stronger than 3.2 beer and gambling are illegal in Mississippi—the only state in the

Union with prohibition—but the coast has flouted the law for many years, despite occasional crackdowns.

James L. Porter, 60, one of the five arrested in the raid, pleaded guilty Thursday in justice of the peace court to charges of possessing gambling equipment and illegal possession of intoxicating liquor. He was fined \$125 and costs—the minimum prescribed by state law.

Porter, owner of the Spot Club in Mississippi City, told Justice John S. Morris that the activities of his establishment were known by everyone.

"There's no use in fighting it," Porter added.

Roger D'Angelo, 31, an employe of the Spot, entered a plea of innocent. A hearing was tentatively set for Saturday.

The other three, B. A. Blaize, 51, owner of the Gay Paree Club; John Romeo, 29, owner of the Key Club; and Jack N. S. Dennis, 61, arrested at the Key, face hear-
ing Tuesday before Justice of the Peace Anthony Anglado.

John Romeo and the other club owners would pay their gambling fines and build their clubs back up, much to the chagrin of Governor Barnett who heard from the grapevine that the clubs were back in action.

In August 1963, the governor sent a telegram to five Biloxi clubs ordering them to shut down or face the consequences. The telegram read like this:

"I have had an investigation made recently of alleged gambling activities on the Gulf Coast. I have certain people observing your place of business.

"Immediately upon receipt of this telegram, you must cause to be ceased all forms of gambling, activities that may be in operation in, your place of business.

"This is to advise that by nightfall of this date (August 31) you will have caused, to be removed from your place of business any and all forms of gambling devices or gambling equipment that may be at your place of business.

"You are to consider this a mandatory order from this office and you are to consider it a continuing order.

"I mean business and there will be no further warning to you in regard to gambling. You must close and remain closed upon receipt of this telegram. You must be closed by nightfall and continue to remain closed.

"I am prepared and ready to act forcibly in any and all instances where there is failure to comply with this order. All gambling on the coast must cease."

Later that day, newspapers reported that the owners cleared out their equipment from the Key club, Gay Paree, the Spot, Fiesta Club and the Sa When Club. They weren't about to call the governors bluff and none of them wanted a repair bill like the one they had last year. They would let things cool down for a while.

Romeo explained that ordering new chips was just one of those expenses of doing business. Each time his club was raided and the chips confiscated, he had to order more chips. Both the Taylor and Jones records are a testament to his continued problems.

The Taylor records for "BCI" (Beach Club, Inc) and "KBC" (Key Beach Club) below show this change. I have never seen these chips and Romeo was unable to produce any. The raids were usually pretty thorough.


Invoice No.	Date Sold	Total Qty.	Type	No. Ea. Color	Color	Stamp
A 200	9/12/60	150	JBSS	50	Lavender	\$1.00
			Regular	50	Yellow	.25
			Weight	50	White	.50
		50	JBSS	50	Grey	\$5.00
			Heavy		with	
			With		three	
			Three		Green	
			Green		Tracers	
			Tracers			
Monogram "K B C" on one side with different denomination on other side in gold. BEACH CLUB INC. c/o Mr. J. E. Romeo Biloxi, Miss.						

Invoice No.	Date Sold	Total Qty.	Type	No. Ea. Color	Color	Stamp
10344	2/17/60	500	JBSS	300	Orange	\$1.00
				200	Dk. Blue	\$5.00
Monogram: " B C I " on one side with different denominations on other side in gold.						
BEACH CLUB INC. c/o Mr. J. E. Romeo Biloxi, Miss.						

Key Club8att2

From Tom Henderson's collection:



Invoice No.	Date Sold	Total Qty.	Type	No. Ea. Color	Color	Stamp
10487	4/19/60	340	JBSS	100	PINK	\$20.00
				120	Grass Green	\$5.00
				120	Red	\$1.00
Monogram: "BCI" on one side with different denominations on the other side in gold. \$5						
20.00  \$15						

BEACH CLUB INC., c/o Mr. J. E. Romeo
Biloxi, Miss.

17

Key Club9att2

But not even the threat of axe wielding guardsmen would keep John Romeo down for long. He was a businessman and gambler and it would take nothing less than an Act of God to put him out of business. Unfortunately, that Act would come on the night of August 17, 1969. Hurricane Camille was one of only three Category 5 hurricanes to hit the United States in the 20th century. Its force was immense and its devastation was complete. After the dust settled, all that was left of the Key Club was a pile of broken wood and glass. Nothing was salvaged. What remained of the piano from the front lobby was now on the roof of the neighboring bowling alley. All that was inside the Key Club, including his monogrammed "JR" chips was distributed throughout the city.



Key Club10att2

The Key Club was gone, but John Romeo would go on. He spent a few years in the Biloxi Fire Department, but an on the job injury ended that short career. He was almost 60 year old and retirement would be what I imagine it is for most gamblers – much like pre-retirement. He picked up poker games here and there and once the legal gambling made it to Biloxi, he found a whole new pastime of separating tourists from their money in the various poker rooms. A lifetime of gambling made it an unfair battle.

In reminiscing about his life he had no regrets. A deeply religious man, he had no difficulty in reconciling his beliefs with his career. When asked, he said “I have never seen in the Bible that Thou shalt not gamble – but I have read many times Thou shalt not steal.” He lived by these beliefs his entire life and that is certainly why he is admired and beloved by those he touched.

In the years after meeting John, our calls became more infrequent until they finally stopped all together. I got busy with my life and family and let many of my non-computer acquaintances fade away. I was sorry to learn that John Romeo had passed away in October 2011. He was 80 years old and I have no doubt he was still going strong up to his last days. I hope he had remembered me because I know I will never forget about him.

I want to thank Tom Henderson again for his help in researching. The info is out there, we just need to dig it out.

Ed Hertel.

My notes:

No 1, I need those Key club chips. Cough them up if you have a trader. *vbg* I have the wooden nickel.

At the same Biloxi show I met and had a special relationship with another Biloxi illegal operator, Rip Poulos . My 3 part article about Biloxi and Rip is posted here. Lots of scans of Biloxi chips are in them <http://www.marlowcasinochips.com/links/genetrimble/genetrimble.htm>

Rip came to Las Vegas a number of times to play in the WSOP after we met, We always managed a lunch. I went to visit him twice in Biloxi. His wife was a VP at one of the casino's and my suite was comped. Ed and I both made special friends at that chip show. Rip and his wife are pictured in the 1st Biloxi article at the above link,

One more bonus was a nephew of the Nason's (operators of the Arrowhead Inn in Branch Hill, OH) showed up. He had read the 4 part article in "Poker Player "magazine. He gave me a black "Inn" in an arrowhead chip. As far as I know it is still one of only two known in the hobby. We are still in touch today. His stories spawned "Part V" of the Arrowhead Inn articles.

As the chip show was closing on Saturday night, Greg Susong put together a roulette harvesting crew of 6 or 7 chippers. They intended to hit all the casinos each buying in for different colors and each would harvest a stack of 20 chips. Being a Las Vegas casino executive I could not afford to be caught stealing roulette chips. I joined the group. My job was to get everyone the cash value chips they wanted and to try and talk the poker rooms out of NCV chips. I knew a couple of the Biloxi poker room managers.

At the last casino of the night I noticed the entire harvesting gang heading up an escalator together, not just riding but hustling up the stairs. I watched them get off and 3 guards passed me on the way to the roulette tables. Exit stage right for me. *vbg*

Most of us were staying at an older motel that had a big porch. As I walked up the gang was sitting on the porch. We spent several hours trading chips, opining about the quest just finished, and past chip stories. It was a balmy "Gulf Coast" night with a few beers and good friends.

The "Blast From The Past" chip show was very special to everyone that attended. It was a different "time and place." IMO it will never be matched.

Rest easy Greg. You are missed by all that knew you.