

Once again Ed Hertel takes us to the murky, down and dirty world of the Texas illegal's. I had 301 different Texas illegal chips and 302 arrived a couple weeks ago, thank you to John Z, but not the one in this article .

Ed is off to Napa, for a week of wine tasting. \*vbg\*

Take it away Ed.

Sometimes we are lucky to get anything when we start to look into the history of these old casino chips as it was usually in the best interest of the owners to keep their activities on the down-low. Sure it makes researching more difficult, but half the fun is in the hunt. To be able to find little clues and follow them through different sources is part of the game... part of the fun.

Every once in a while however, you find one that is completely the opposite. The below chip is one of those that the flood gate opens and you end up drinking from a fire hose of information. Even after eliminating many sources of duplicate info, I still went through 92 newspaper articles to put this together. Sometimes a little mystery is a good thing.



Knick1

The Mason card for this chip shows it to be a large order of just under 4000 chips.

Knickerbocker Club

El Paso, TX

1935 -3,950 chips

My note: Still 3,949 chips out there. Cough it up if you have a trader, \*vbg\*

For those of you not familiar with the great Republic of Texas, El Paso is its most western point bordering New Mexico to the north and Juarez, Mexico south. If you've ever driven through it, it's the end of the long trip through a bunch of nothing. West Texas is known for its small oil towns, but little else.

My note: I drove east to west across Texas back in the 1960's. It was sometimes beautiful and sometimes desolate. \*vbg\*

The story of gambling at the Knickerbocker Club starts back in 1931. It was in August when police first raided the club in the basement of the Hotel Fisher at 203 South El Paso St. They hauled away gambling equipment including one blackjack table and two poker tables. The operator, Dave Lawson, was fined and the equipment was fuel for a bonfire. This raid would be the opening shot in a war between the Knickerbocker Club and the city of El Paso. Let the battle begin!



Knick2

It wasn't even a week later that the papers were reporting that the Knickerbocker, and its gambling, was back in action. Although it claimed the dice tables and horse betting were temporarily closed, poker was still in action. It was pretty brazen of them to advertise in the open, but when the convention for the American Legion came through the next week, the club was quick to show that they were open for business.

This was obviously not going to sit well with the city officials, so the mayor and police chief sent undercover agents in to gather evidence against the club. On September 11, 1931, Dave Lawson was charged with using the club for habitual gambling and the Knickerbocker was ordered padlocked. Seeing the severity of the situation, Dave Lawson hired a lawyer, one with experience with defending gamblers, and pleaded for its existence. The city and the club came to an agreement that no longer would the six iron-barred doors leading to the back room ever be closed. If the police wanted to inspect the club, they would have open access. The attorney told police there had not been gambling for some time "and there will be no more."

The next year, 1932, would prove to be a tough one for the Knickerbocker Club, as well as the other El Paso casinos. The city was in full political swing as elections were warming up and the candidates wanted to show that they were strong against vice. A couple more raids on the Knickerbocker turned up some minor gambling, but more disturbing was a grand jury investigation involving the payment of protection money to city officials. It was claimed by smaller clubs, feeling the squeeze of the popular Knickerbocker, that it paid big money in protection and special favors. The heat was rising in El Paso, and the gamblers were feeling it.

As the politicians increased the volume, the gamblers closed the doors on the El Paso clubs and moved south over the border. Juarez, Mexico, was a little less concerned with gambling (or any other vice) and people like Dave Lawson and his partner Frank Gowan starting operating gambling clubs while Texas debated their issues. This movement of Texans into Mexico must have hit a nerve with the local gamblers (Remember the Alamo!) as a small turf war was threatened to explode. The El Paso boys needed some help and enlisted the intimidation of the ruthless Purple Gang out of Detroit who brought both their bankroll and their muscle. For the next few tense months, everyone flexed, but nobody swung.

My note: This is the 1st time I ever heard of the Purple Gang operating in Texas. They mostly operated in Detroit, Ohio, and eastern KY. If you read my Arrowhead Inn articles, Harold Nason was the only man to kill a Purple Gang member and live to tell about it. The shooting took place in eastern KY during prohibition over a shipment of "White Lightning." Harold's son Danny was my friend. I took care of him the last years of his life and still live in his house.

The Arrowhead Inn and the Nason's story here:

<http://www.marlowcasinochips.com/links/genetrimble/genetrimble.htm>

In May 1932, two months after the clubs shut their doors, it was time to get back to business in El Paso. The grand jury investigation ended with little to no reforms (big surprise) and slot machines, poker, dice, sports betting and the Chinese lottery reopened with much fanfare.

However, all had not been fiestas and margaritas for the Knickerbocker partners down in Mexico. When they returned, they were no longer in business together, and there was a definite animosity between the two. Dave Lawson continued as operator the Knickerbocker, but Frank F. "Ducky" Gowan was now at the helm of the Cactus Club at 109-11 South Oregon. On August 22, 1932, the fight spilled over on the front page of the newspapers.

It was reported that Gowan was given an ultimatum to close up "or else". When he refused, the Cactus Club was raided and Frank Gowan arrested. Despite the confusion involved in those arrested (below), everyone was immediately released.

Ten of the men arrested in the raid came near spending a night in jail because they forgot the names they gave officers.

When \$50 bonds were made out, and the prisoners were asked to sign, they could not unscramble the aliases. The difficulty was settled when they looked up their descriptions and ages on the police records and used the name that matched the description.

Knick3

It didn't take long for questions to arise about the raid. For instance, why had only the Cactus Club been raided when there were clearly so many other clubs in town? And then there was the unusual order by the mayor about the selection of the jury for the Gowan case to consider.

When asked by Gowan's lawyer about the jury selection, Police Chief Robey said, "Mayor R. E. Sherman told me he wanted a high class jury to try these cases. I went through the directory and telephone book and picked prominent business men."

The lawyer pressed on. "Do you always pick high class juries to try cases in police court?"

Robey replied, "No, we usually just send a policeman out on the street to summon anyone available."

It was obvious to everyone that Gowan had been targeted from the start and the court had no choice but to give him a small slap on the wrist (Gowan was fined \$20) and released. The mayor had been labeled as the Knickerbocker's pawn and it was time he showed he was owned by no one. From here on out, the heat was on.

I could go on and write another six pages documented all the trouble the Knickerbocker went through, but in the interest of brevity, I'll just give some of the highlights:

Oct-1932 – Knickerbocker raided when back door closed against the rules

Aug-1934 – Knickerbocker closed after Mayor warned gamblers of heavy crackdown

Dec-1934 – club raided on roaring New Year eve party, equipment seized and burned

May-1935 – club raided, equipment seized

July-1935 – city shut down while investigation of graft probed

July-1937 – club raided, but charges dropped when chief witness was found to be "out of town".

Jan-1938 – club raided and equipment smashed.

Mar-1941 – Texas Rangers seize equipment

Jan-1943 – Knickerbocker, now under Eddie Roberts, raided

Jul-1944 – now under George Wight, Knickerbocker raided and fined \$50

Aug-1944 – club raided, fined \$100

Oct-1945 – club raided, equipment seized

Dec-1945 – club raided

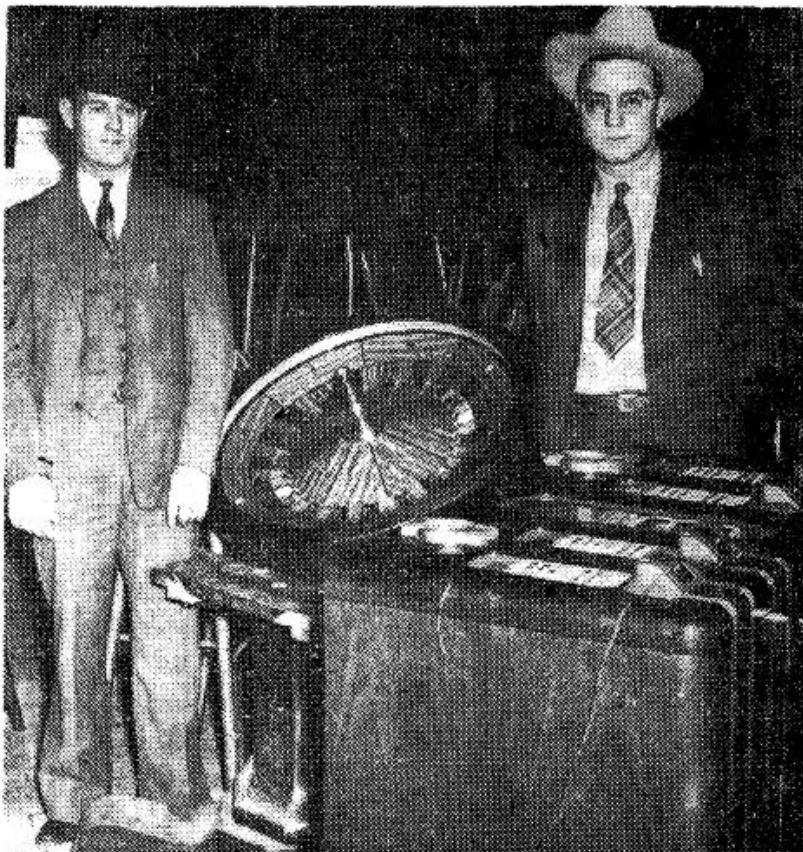
Jan-1947 – raided, equipment seized  
Apr-1947 – raided, equipment seized and “smashed”  
Apr-1948 – raided, Wight arrested  
Mar-1950 – raided, marble machines seized  
Oct-1950 – raided, six men arrested for playing poker

Get the idea?

The Knickerbocker Club had been declared a public nuisance and no matter how hard the city hammered, they kept on going. It should be noted that although the fines seem small, the financial hit for all that equipment being seized and destroyed must have been a burden for the club and its owners. Roulette wheels and slot machines were not cheap and replacing them each year must have been a hassle if nothing more.

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## Sheriff Hits Jackpot



An expensive machine, at the right, and two expensive roulette wheels, like the one shown, were seized in gambling raids. At the left is Deputy Sheriff Hargus and at the right Deputy Sheriff Hail.

Knick4

The mayor and city officials were being criticized for their inability to close the club. At one point, a city alderman accused Mayor Sherman of “persecuting rather than prosecuting the Knickerbocker Club by sporadic raids...” In 1937, City Attorney W. O. Hamilton said he would continue “until I wear them out or they wear me out.” (Over a decade later, only one of them was still going, and it wasn’t Hamilton.)

By 1951, everyone had had enough. Decades of raids and embarrassment culminated in the city finally declaring the club a public nuisance and ordered the building padlocked. George Wight, owner of the Knickerbocker for the better part of the last decade waved the white flag and gave up. He agreed to sell the club and leave the business.



**BAR LOCKED**—Sheriff's Lieut. Mike Sullivan tries the door of the Knickerbocker Club at 203 South El Paso street to be sure it is locked under a court order.

Knick5

The new owners, C.A. Johnson and J.R. Norris, applied for a new license and agreed to pay a bond to be held for one year. During that time, if any gambling was found the premises, the club would be re-

padlocked and the bond forfeited. The new owners kept their noses clean and the Knickerbocker was reborn as a legitimate dinner club.

And frankly, I'm relieved because at this point I am completely exhausted. Before I received the chip identification I knew nothing about the Knickerbocker. Now, after a couple of days of slugging through decades worth of material, I'm ready to put this one to bed. I think I need a nap.

My note: Knickerbocker Club and gambling 1931-1951. Twenty years. Rest in Peace. \*vbg\*  
Another great story for the "Illegal Of The Day" series, from Ed.