

An "Illegal Of The Day" team member found the MXC chips on ebay. Ed Hertel gives us the story of a beloved southwest rodeo champion, moonshiner, murder, bank robber and illegal club operator. IMO, quite a progression in a life story. *vbg*

Take it away Ed:

When you picture an illegal gambling man from New Mexico, you would probably quickly conjure up images of a cowboy who drank hard liquor, busted broncos and settled arguments with a fist or a warm 6-shooter. These stereotypes are the product of our imagination seeded from westerns and romantic dreams of a time we would know little about.

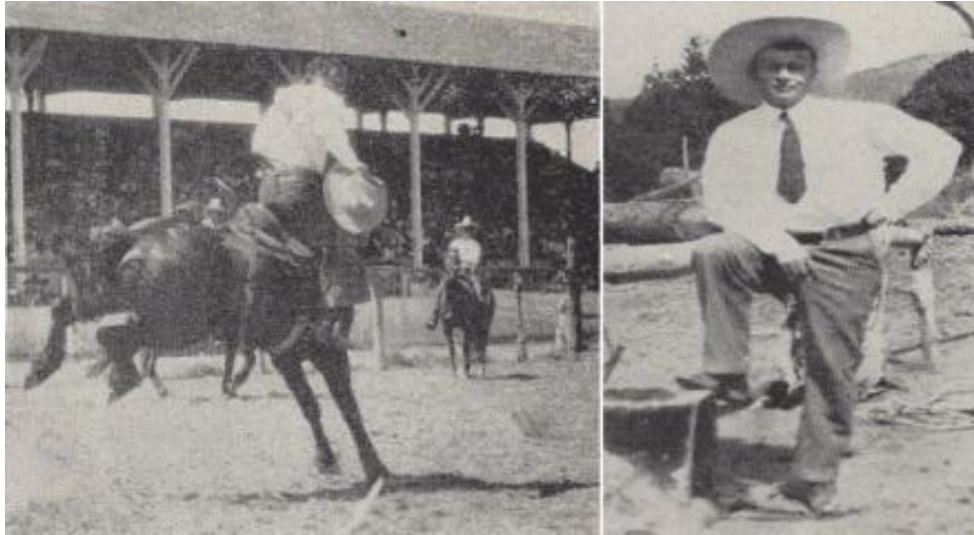
I never thought these kinds of men were real, but with the research into some new chips, I found that sometimes stereotypes are pretty on the nose.



MXC IOTD1 Att2

Mike Cunico
Taos, NM – 1936

Michael Cunico was born in 1900 in Venice, Italy, and immigrated with his parents to New Mexico where his father worked as a coal miner. It didn't take long before his father hung up his hammer and shovel and went into the business of raising cattle and horses. It was here that the young Mike learned the business and techniques of horse breeding, training and trading. By the time he was in his late teens, young Mike Cunico found himself on the rodeo circuit making a decent living. In 1926 he headed to Las Vegas and won the Championship of the Southwest and repeated the feat again in 1928. He was at the top of his game, and rodeo advertisements made sure the public knew when the crowd favorite was coming to town.



MXC IOTD2 Att2

It was during this time of riding dominance that his life would change forever. In 1929, during a rodeo in Chicago, his horse flipped over, pinning Mike underneath, breaking his back. Doctors did everything they could, eventually transplanting ten inches of live bone from his shin into his back to replace his smashed vertebrae. He would spend three long years in a steel brace, but he would walk again. His riding days however were done. Mike hung up his saddle and moved onto another pastime for reformed cowboys – moonshining.

In the years between 1929 and 1936, Mike Cunico ran a thriving business out of the famous “Vine Covered House” in Harwood, New Mexico. With its 100 gallon still and inhouse bottling operation, Cunico soon had a reputation as one of the lesser law abiding citizens in town.

A newspaper expose outed Mike as a serial criminal and even claimed he had once taken part in a bank robbery. Enraged, Cunico filed a \$15,000 defamation suit against the newspaper for “seriously damaging his feelings and reputation” and “exposing the plaintiff to hatred, contempt, ridicule and obloquy.” But before the reader had time to look up the word “obloquy”, the jury found in favor of the newspaper. The reason... Mike Cunico DID indeed participates in a bank robbery year before. Not only that, he pled guilty and received a ten year suspended sentence.

While his liquor business was booming, Mike turned his attention to Taos, New Mexico, where he opened the city’s first night club. He called the place “Mike and Mary’s” after himself and his wife, who ran the club personally.

It didn’t take long for Mike’s reputation to precede him in his new venture. In April 1932, Prohibition agents raided Mike and Mary’s (along with five other Taos establishments) and seized a quantity of beer and whiskey. In response, Mike again used his selective memory on the day of his hearing. As reported, “Mike Cunico, Taos, who said he was a first time offender and asked for leniency, did not impress the court favorably and he was fined \$300.”

In 1936, the same year the chips were ordered, Cunico moved his night club into a larger building and called it "Mike's Nite Club".



MXC IOTD3 Att2

The new club was instantly popular. Dances were held every Saturday night, and more often during tourist season. Ladies were welcome at all times and the general rule was no cursing or fighting. Although Mike was breaking all kinds of laws, he wanted his patrons to feel safe.

In 1941, while trying to enforce this atmosphere of peace, tragedy struck when an unruly customer was accidentally killed when Cunico tried to get him out of the club. Although he would eventually be acquitted of all charges, Mike's Nite Club was beginning to gain the wrong kind of reputation.

Cunico Freed On Murder Charge

RATON, N. M., May 17 (AP)—Mike Cunico of Taos has been acquitted by a district court jury of a murder charge in connection with the fatal shooting of Simon Peralta in a Taos night club July 4, 1941.

The jury reached its verdict Saturday after hearing Cunico take the stand in his own defense to testify that his altercation with Peralta was intended only to quell a disturbance in the night club.

Roy Hill of Taos, another witness, testified that in the struggle Cunico struck Peralta twice, and that a gun shot was heard when the second blow fell.

Claude Hagan, bartender in the night club, said he replaced the gun in a drawer behind the bar, and surrendered it later to the sheriff when the officer demanded it.

MXC IOTD4 Att2

Throughout the 1940s, Mike's Nite Club became the place in Taos for good gambling action. The Who's-Who's of local gamblers, including John Dunn and Doughbelly Price, ran the games in Mike's back room. These guys are colorful enough for their own IOTD, and there are several books dedicated solely to them and their colorful lives. (Doughbelly once wrote, "And I even ran once for State Representative, but that is about the only thing I have done in my long, black career that I am ashamed of.")

As the action grew, so did Mike's reputation. In the waning years of the 1940s, public sentiment towards the gambling in Taos was definitely changing. In June 1947, state police officers raided three major casinos, including Mike's Nite Club, where money was confiscated and equipment destroyed on the spot.

The writing was on the wall and Mike had had enough. In 1950 he turned the night club over to his brother John who converted it into a curio shop. There he would forgo the gambling and treat tourists to a snack amongst the local curiosities. In 1973 John Cunico passes away, leaving the building vacant. Of all the property's illegal and questionable activity, the last indignity would be the worst. In late 1978, the Boogie Man disco club would open, ending the legitimate life of what was an eventful history.

My note: The illegal clubs knew no bounds, they were in all 50 states. I am still looking for chips from 2 states, Delaware and Vermont.