

Ed Hertel takes us back to the deep south and its illegal clubs. This one was in a natural cave. An illegal club in a cave? Unusual but not unique. *vbg* "Illegal Of The Day" Louisiana 4 was posted on 10/11/13. You can read about Cave Tangi at this link.

<http://www.thechipboard.com/archives/archives.pl/bid/399/page/38/md/read/id/1274530/sbj/illegal-of-the-day-louisiana-4/>

Somewhere in my files I have research from years ago, maybe 15 years, on a 3rd illegal club that was in a cave. I can't find it. All I can tell you is "Don't Get Old." *vbg*

Take it away Ed.

Today's IOTD is one of the neatest places I bet you have never heard of – I know I hadn't. I've been collecting and researching illegal gambling clubs for 20 years, and every once in a while I come across something that amazes even me!

As I'm so fond of saying, this story starts with a chip:



Cave1att2

It was ordered by:
Fred Newman
Birmingham, AL
1937

To start with, there isn't as much information there as I usually like to see. To further muddy the waters, there is a note on the order card saying "New Orleans office" which some have interpreted as being the place of delivery. In actuality, this denoted the Mason Company's office that took the original order.

Sweeping that aside, I started looking into the little information I had available. First things first, the name Fred Newman. I searched through the Birmingham records and did find listings for Fred Newman – actually a couple of them. One of the Freds was consistently listed as working for a metal

manufacturing company while the other did not give any profession. If I had to guess who was involved in illegal activity, I usually look to the guy without the 9-5 job.

An exhaustive search continued, but for every avenue I went down, nothing concerning any Fred Newman was paying off. If either of these guys were involved in gambling, they were keeping it quiet. Frustrated, I turned my attention elsewhere.

With little else to go on, I tried my luck with the hot stamp on the chip itself. I was lucky that this wasn't the usual three letter monogram, but actually something which might have some meaning behind it. I started researching the word "Cave" for the Birmingham area. I got hits, a lot of them, so I focused even tighter and added "gambling" to the search. I immediately had a hit on something called the Bangor Cave Club, and to my utter amazement it popped up with the same year as the chips – 1937.

In the early 1930s, the future site of the plush club was anything but regal. Known simply as Bangor Cave, it was a rough hole in the side of mountain about thirty miles north of Birmingham, that attracted amateur spelunkers who could gain admission to the site for as little as a single silver dime (and that included a candle).

The cave, and the lands around it, had been owned by J. Breck Musgrove's family for generations. Its potential as a real moneymaker however would not be realized until he and four partners decided to invest \$70,000 into transforming it into an entertainment center. (In a time when a new car cost \$640, this was a considerable sum of money.)

Their plans were ambitious, and at times, must have seemed impossible. Natural cracks in the rock proved impossible to seal making seepage a constant problem. All attempts to stop the drips failed and their solution was to build a roof on top of the mountain itself. This helped, but industrial fans and ventilation had to be installed into the cave to help circulate the damp air. Their next problem was lighting. The ceiling of stalactites played tricks on the lighting, casting shadows everywhere. The engineers managed to fix this by placing lights both on the ceiling and in the floors to ensure everything was smoothly bathed in a multicolored glow.

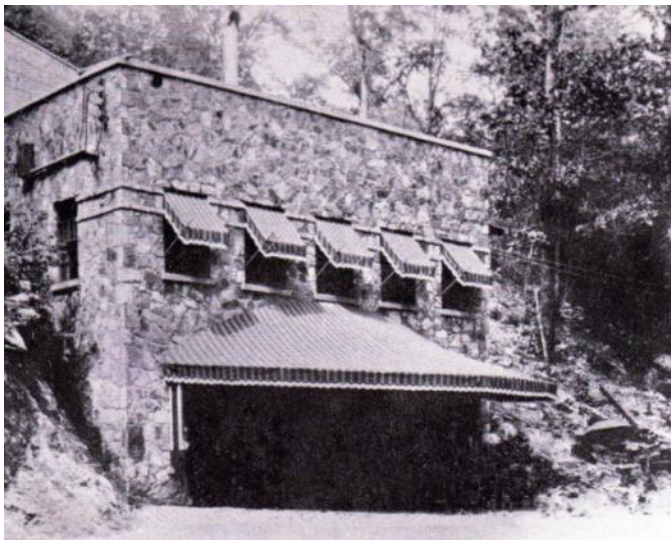
The floor was blasted smooth and covered in cement decorated with green and red tiles. The now cavernous first room was 300 feet by 57 feet and held a large dance floor in the middle with café tables aligning the walls. To one side was a large bar (below) made of stone and above the dance floor was an excavated alcove for the band.



Cave2att2

A second room in back of the dance hall was where the owners planned on housing their casino. It was smaller than the first, but they packed everything they could into it. There were multiple craps tables, back jack, roulette and slot machines.

The last bit of work needed to be done was putting a façade in front of the rough gaping hole in the side of the mountain. The owners knew this was a gimmick, but they weren't about to have the wealthy patrons of Alabama think they were going to dance and gamble amongst a bunch of bats!



Cave3att2

The grand opening came on the evening of June 5, 1937. Despite constant problems and engineering setbacks, it opened its door only five days behind schedule to a huge crowd. Hundreds of people packed into the new Bangor Cave Club and danced the night away. It was an immediate success and the owners thought they had found the golden goose that would never stop paying. However, like most of these stories, they were sorely mistaken.

Two weeks later, June 18th, Alabama Governor Bibb Graves wrote a letter to Sheriff S.A. Bains saying, "I call your attention to the notorious dive being operated in your county which is known as Bangor Cave. Please close this dive at once and apprehend and prosecute those guilty of law violations therein."

Two days later, the governor received a letter back from Sheriff Bains stating that he "made an immediate search of the place inside and out and found nothing illegal." Despite this however, he did temporarily close the place down on the governor's orders while they investigated.

After a couple of weeks, and much to the surprise of Governor Graves, the operators of the Bangor Cave Club announced to their patrons that they would be having a grand re-opening in July. Graves sent an order down to Sheriff Bains that the club would reopen at the cost of his job, which Bains replied with his resignation. The restraints were off and the Bangor Cave Club was reopened.

Down, but not out, Governor Graves searched for, and found, a man he could trust that would stand firm against gambling. At the stroke of midnight, July 31, 1937, Ed Miller was sworn in as sheriff. Eight minutes later, he and his newly appointed deputies were on their way to the Bangor Cave Club.

As the raiders crashed through the dance room they were bombarded by seas of "boos" and "raspberries", followed by all the lights shutting off. It didn't take long before the officers took charge, snapped the lights back on and closed down the back room. Despite what they felt might have walked out when the lights were off, they found a bonanza. There were four dice tables, two blackjack tables, one roulette wheel and many cases of illegal liquor.

The patrons were ordered to disperse and three of the partners were arrested on the spot. (The other two would turn themselves in the next day.) What proceeded were countless witnesses and testimonies about the club and the action within. Some said the gambling tables would be swarming with up to fifty people deep throwing money on the tables. It became clear that this was a really significant operation.

With little recourse to fight it, each of the owners pled guilty and was given a \$500 fine – a mere slap on the wrist. The damage however was done. The spotlight was firmly on the cave now and nothing would ever be the same.

The Bangor Cave reopened soon after and despite the notoriety, gambling was again openly displayed. This was enough for Sheriff Miller who raided it yet again and padlocked the doors. After only three months since their opening, Musgrove and his partners would never again operate the club.

In October 1937, the club was sold and reopened under new management who promised that the illegal booze and gambling were a thing of the past. The response was a rousing yawn.

From the local Birmingham newspaper:

* * * * *

Bangor Cave is operating again, "without gambling and drinking," according to the Birmingham dailies. AND naturally the huge crowds that attended the Cave on other occasions are attending elsewhere.

The Cave might remind some of the young lady who was questioned by a new friend: "Do you smoke?"—"I don't!"—"Do you drink?"—"I don't!"—"Do you have late dates?"—"I don't!"

Finally after a slight exasperation, the questioner said, "Well, one would think you had no fun at all!"

"I don't!"

* * * * *

Cave4

The new owners however weren't keeping their noses completely clean. The back room, now hidden and guarded, was back in business. Unlike the previous casino that was open to all, you needed to be invited to play now. This more exclusive arrangement was easier to keep under wraps, at least for a while.

After a year of rumors and whispers about gambling, the sheriff had enough. On January 7, 1939, the final raid on the Bangor Cave Club was performed and the club was closed. There was always talk of reopening, but those were silenced on the night of May 8th when billowing black smoke came pouring out of the cave's entrance. Although the rock structure was impervious to fire, the façade, furniture, electrical set-up and equipment were completely destroyed. Speculation about the fire swirled, but most pointed to law enforcement putting an exclamation point on the club.

Despite its short life of one and a half years, the Bangor Cave Club reported made its investors over one million dollars. Not bad for a \$70,000 investment!

The cave door would remain closed for two decades before being opened back up in 1961 when the government had plans to use the space as a nuclear fall-out shelter which would hold 1,000 people. Their work cleaned out the burned wreckage but did little else. Soon, even this was abandoned and the cave was claimed by local teenagers as a place to party and spread their graffiti.

Efforts to make the cave a historic site seem to have failed. It resides on private property and is off-limits today. As recently as 2008 the following link was put up as a sales video. The images are difficult

to see and in no way should reflect the glamour that was once the Bangor Cave Club.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8BAI_SIA1I#t=143

My note: When this research started I did not have the CAVE chip. After a post on the BB, I was able to trade for it. Thank you to a fellow Louisiana chipper.