

TAPE #42

WILLIAM SPRAGUE

Taped: June 1979

Reference: Gambling in Jackson.

(When did you move to Amador County, Bill?)

In May of 1948. I was working on the dam projects at Electra and West Point.

(Is that when you bought the Union House in Volcano?)

No. I didn't buy that until 1963.

(Where did you live when you came here?)

We had a company camp out at Electra. All the powerhouse people stayed there and some of the tunner gangs too.

(How did you get into Jackson?)

I'd hitch a ride. We only had one day a week off.

(Did most of the men try to hit Jackson on their day off?)

Yes! Saturday night was the night!

(Did you know that Jackson was wide open before you came up here?)

No. I'd never been to Jackson before. I was born and raised in Plumas County.

(Why do you think that Amador County and Jackson were able to get away with gambling and whore houses?)

Well, other little towns had gambling; probably all over the state, but Jackson was really unique in being totally wide open---no holds barred! Watsonville had gambling in the 30's, but it was nothing like Jackson. And Jackson just seemed to hang onto it.

(Take us on a Saturday night tour of Jackson.)

People came from everywhere on the weekends---Los Angeles, for instance.

(What were the names of some of the gambling places?)

Well there was the Kit Carson Club; it was located in the old Globe Hotel, but then it burned. It was located above the drug store on the alley going up to the court house. Then there was the Louvre. I think of that place the most, because that's where I cashed my checks. The sherriff and his deputy would walk through the place, and they'd just look straight ahead past the crap tables and the roulette wheels---see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil; that was their motto! It was located in the basement under what is now the Wells Fargo Bank on Main Street. At the time there was a rooming house above it. It was loosly called a rooming house, that is.

(What games did they play?)

Dice, roulette, poker---those were the three main ones. I guess they had others but I didn't notice what they were.

(There must have been a lot more gambling places around?)

Good lord, yes! You know where the saving and loan is next to the Wells Fargo Bank?

(Yes.)

Well, where the book-keeping place is now, that was a bar---it was down in the basement too. And there was a bar downstairs below the National Hotel. There was also a bar upstairs in the National. And there was the Wells Fargo Bar and Restaurant across the street from the bank---that was a big one. There was one where the Azure Club is now, but it wasn't called the Azure then. Then down by the Krabenhoff Building, next door to that was a bar and gambling place.

Oh, and where the Western Shop is next to the National Hotel--- there was one there, too. And there was a bar right around the corner from that. Lets see, now. There were four right in the National Hotel block. And the Pioneer Rex was a big one. And there was a bar between the Pioneer Rex and the Wells Fargo, in addition to Sammy's, he had some gambling. I don't really recall, however, if it was Sammy's place at that time. And beyond the stationery store there was another one, but I don't recall the name.

(Was the movie theater going?)

Oh, yeah. It was the Amador. It was practically new when I was there because the old one had been closed for a number of years. All of them are gone now, however.

(Did you ever run into tourists who didn't know that Jackson was wide open?)

No, I never did.

(What was at Jackson Gate?)

The area started with Theresa's. It is now Surachi's. Theresa had two buildings there at one time. Then there was the Wheel and Buscaglia's was going then. They didn't have gambling, just a little bar. Then there was what is now Theresa's. It was owned by her then, as she owned two places. Then way out the road, that big building before you get to Martel. That was a bar, and I think they had gambling too.

(What about the Martel Inn?)

I never got out that far, to tell you the truth! I did go to the Mill Mar which is now the Elks Club on the highway.

And there was one out where Valencia had a place; it's the Mexican Restaurant now. Where 88 and 49 meet at Martell.

That was the last until you got to Sutter Creek.

(Was there any bootlegging going on that late?)

I don't think so.

(Do you think the town was run by local people, or was organized Mafia crime involved?)

I think it was a closed corporation. I don't think the locals took kindly to anybody telling them what to do.

(Do you think payoffs were involved?)

No. I think they all just scratched each others backs!

(Were you ever around when the state closed down the town?)

No. I was usually out on the job when those things happened.

I think the first close-down was in 1949.

(Was there much paranoia on the part of the town merchants?)

Yes indeed! They were rugged individualists and took a dim view of outsiders telling them what to do, but the writing was on the wall after the first close-down. It was just a matter of time. This happened two or three times. The last close-down was in 56, I think, and that did it.

(What can you tell me about John Wayne and his poker game?)

Wayne and a number of the locals got in a high-stake game during the filming of a movie. They kept playing, and I believe Wayne lost 18000 dollars. It was held in the National Hotel, around 1951. Tom Rasica could tell you about it. I think he was in the game.

There was another bar, the Bridge Cabin. Its been torn dow. That called it that because it straddled the creek. It was right around the corner from the National Hotel. That alley was girl-town.

(Were all the whore houses in one spot?)

Pretty much down along the creek there. The houses ran along the area between Water Street and Highway 88. There were also some across the road where the Safeway is. And the place called The Cat House Antiques was one too.

The houses had nick-names, but I don't remember them.

(Were they run by the locals?)

I think so. But the locals won't talk about it now. That's where their money came from.

And all of this went for 24 hours a day, non-stop. They never closed. And The Louver had a sign that said, We Haven't Closed for 25 Years! They didn't even have a lock on the door.

(Did the girls have to stay at the houses, or could they walk the streets?)

No. No girls on the streets. All they had to do was to ask the nearest bartender.

(Were the girls pretty nice?)

Yes, they behaved themselves.

(Where did the girls come from?)

I don't really know.

(When the town was finally closed down it must have been disasterous.)

When the poeple realized that their very way of life would change Jackson became almost a ghost town.

It was dead as a doornail in Jackson during the 50's. And during the 60's too. They never did quite recover.