

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

A Written Narrative by

Chris Beck

Written narrative sent via email from Roanoke, Virginia

October 9, 2014

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I have to really go back down memory lane for some of your questions. Keep in mind I am now 86 years old. Back then, when I first glimpsed the Reno Arch, I had just become 21.

I cannot answer that first question of where I lived—the address itself. I can remember the face of the little Italian lady that I rented my room from, not the address. I do remember that I needed to have some sort of job as I waited for my six weeks to pass. I took a job at the Nevada Club as a shill. I had no idea what that was, but back then the \$6.00 a shift paid my basics. A kindly old gent, with a sweet little black doggie, a Mr. Fitzgerald, owned the Nevada Club. I can also remember that I walked the seven blocks to work for the graveyard shift and back in those days there was no need to be afraid of the night in Nevada.

My lawyer (1949) was Charlotte Hunter. I don't think any witnesses were present. I do remember we both (Charlotte and I) stood before a judge (and I do not know that name). As for how I spent my time for the first few weeks in Reno, it was mostly work and trying to sleep for a shift I was unaccustomed to.

My plan in the beginning was to go back to Maryland after the six weeks and divorce had been completed. My two children were waiting there with the housekeeper for my return to my big fat \$35.00 a week job. The gambling industry was so foreign to me. I had never held a deck of cards for any reason. Now and then I would take a little walk through Harolds Club, after my shift, just to see. I expected to see shifty-eyed dealers and scary things. They looked just like normal people. They would even smile and speak to you. Back then, if you can imagine, I did have a bit of trouble with what they were calling "frontier pants." I am coming from a time and place where women were being pretty brazen to wear "slacks" very often. Certainly never at church. 65 years ago.

The word on the street was that for a dealer the place to be was Harolds Club. Before my six weeks was up I had gotten brave enough to climb those stairs from the Roaring Camp Room, second floor of Harolds, to the office of the personal manager, who at that time was one nice

lady named Jesse Brown (later Jesse Beck, as she married the man who owned the Keno and poker games within Harolds—Fred Beck). When I heard of the salaries women were making at Harolds and they would teach you how to deal, I decided Reno would be a good place to start over.

And it was.

I was paid the salary only men were making in many areas of our country at that time. I got my little family out of Maryland. Good old "Pappy" Smith protected and valued his women dealers. He made sure we had the degree of respect that made life wonderful.

I had ten mostly happy years there. In 1952, Stead AFB was starting up with a group of Strategic Air Command's survival instructors teaching crews from all around the country how to survive in the Sierra Mountains. This terrain was selected by SAC as the mountains were much like what you would be shot down over Russia when you were shot down. (Notice, not "if.")

Charles Beck had just done a tour in Korea and had been sent to Stead as one of the first of these Survival Instructors. 62 years ago, I am dealing a 21 table at the top of the escalator in the silver dollar bar room of the Roaring Camp area at Harolds. Maybe a point of interest here could be the escalator as well as the characters. It was the ONLY escalator in the whole state of Nevada. There was no Las Vegas as we know it today at that time. Coming up the escalator is this handsome, 6' 3" tall, twentyish, with a smile as big as all of Dixie, saying with the best Georgia accent, "Howdy do, Ma'am."

Since I had no one at my table at the time, I said, "You must be Charlie Beck." And that floored him, and should have me, too, for I had no way of knowing what this great guy looked like. I had been dating what was to be his Flight Officer and he had been telling me about this great guy that would be coming into the base from Korea. The instructors did not have to wear uniforms off base. Back then thousands of people were in and out of Reno and the air base.

Just three months later we were married at the Federated Presbyterian Church, just across the tracks near the Arch. That was September 3, 1952. We were married 60 years. Greatest guy in the whole world. Come Wednesday, October 15th, Charlie Beck had the stroke that started his accent heavenward. He never spoke another intelligible word. Had another stroke then two heart attacks and passed away on November 15th, 2012.

We bought our first little home at 74 Boyd Place, Reno. Near McKinley Park School on Riverside Drive. When Charlie finished his four years in the military in 1954, Chuck Webster

(one of the best floor bosses Harolds ever had), told Charles to apply for work. He did and dealt dice as he was finishing at the University of Nevada. We enjoyed lots of years with our boat at Zephyr Cove, Lake Tahoe, times at the very beautiful Pyramid Lake.

I think we left Nevada at a good time. 1959, back to Atlanta. This was just before Howard Hughes was buying up casinos and "killing" them. Raymond I., Harold, Dorothy and Raymond A. [Smith] ran the nicest gambling casino the world could ever know. It was the best of times for such. I was so saddened when friends still in Reno, sent me the newspaper pictures of the IMPLODING of that magnificent seven-story tall building. My memories are all good of the wonderful employees that came from every state and other countries.

I have lots of photographs. Charles and I were selected to do a Technicolor movie travelogue for the Three Flags association. Mexico, Canada and the U.S. We were on the road for six weeks with the photographer, Tom Wilson, for the advertising agency that Pappy Smith had hired in an effort to get the California coast highway visitors to take some trips inland as they traveled from country to country.

Then in later years when Columbia Studios came to Reno to make the movie *Five Against the House* with Kim Novak, Brian Keith, Guy Madison and William Conrad, I was given a small part in that movie. Not a big deal, but did have a full screen shot of just me and a small bit to do. I have that on VHS, but so does the university.