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Managing Editors

Robert Nieman 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

Byron A. Johnson 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

Byron A. Johnson 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

Pam S. Baird



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Galveston's Balinese Room

Born: 1942 – Died 2008



The Balinese Room was built on a pier stretching 600 feet into the Gulf of Mexico.

Robert Nieman ©

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For fifteen years, Galveston's Balinese Room was one of the most renowned and visited gambling casinos in the world. Opened in 1942 by the Maceo brothers, it flourished until 1957, when the Texas Rangers shut it down permanently as a gambling establishment.

In the times that followed, the building served as a restaurant, night club, and curiosity place for wide-eyed visitors. Mainly, though, it sat closed with its door locked—yes, it had only one door. For sixty-six years, it survived storms, neglect, and mismanagement but it could not survive Hurricane Ike. On September 19, 2008, the once mighty Balinese Room became only a memory.

It is a safe bet that gambling is as old as the history of man. Clearly, it would not be a stretch to say that ever since man has walked Galveston Island, someone has wagered on something.

As early as 1901, a Galveston grand jury investigated gambling on the island, with no results. The assistance of the Texas Rangers was requested, and legendary Captain John Hughes sent two of his men to work undercover and develop a case against the gamblers. Unfortunately, as would happen all too often in the future, the grand jury's investigation leaked, and the Rangers' work netted scant results.¹

¹ Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution: The Bloodiest Decade, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 35-26.



During the ensuing decades, grand juries continued to sit, all with varying degrees of success—or lack thereof. It is important to understand two paramount motives that dominated all investigating bodies: politics and economics. Not surprisingly, these underlying forces still dominate today.

Although investigation into the history of Galveston is not the purpose of this paper. A brief look back is important, before we can truly understand the situation as it was in the 1950s, the era in which this study is focused.

Since shipwrecked Spanish sailor Cabeza de Vaca first stumbled his way across Galveston Island in 1528, that spot has earned several designations, each accurate in its own way. Inundated with rattlesnakes and water moccasins in its early days, the sandbar was called the Island of Snakes. Through the centuries, other equally appropriate names were applied: the Ellis Island of the Gulf, the Wall Street of the Southwest, and the Pearl of the Gulf, to name a few. But to the people of the first half of the twentieth century, two nicknames described Galveston best: Island Paradise or Sin City. It depended on one's point of view as to which was more suitable.

A killer hurricane of Biblical proportions wrecked the city in 1900 and left six to eight thousand dead. This, however, was not what destroyed the economy of Galveston. The dredging of Buffalo Bayou from the Gulf of Mexico to Houston spelled the island city's economic doom. As the ships disappeared from sight, so did the jobs, and the people left for Houston.

No one could have possibly realized that 1910 would be a turning point in Galveston's history. The catalyst was not a great event like the horrendous hurricane ten years earlier. Instead, it was the quiet arrival to the island of Rosario and Salvatore Maceo, two young men from Palermo, Sicily, via Leesville, Louisiana. There was no particular reason to notice the brothers; after all, they were simple barbers.

It would not be long, however, before all of Galveston would know the names of Papa Rose and Mr. Sam. The brothers first found work at a business named Capadona's. Shortly thereafter, Sam went to work at the newly opened Galvez Hotel while Rose started cutting hair at Murdock's Pier. As fate would have it, Murdock's was one of Ollie Quinn's favorite hangouts, and Rose quickly came under his influence.

Rose could not have picked a better mentor for his new career, even if he had selected one by hand. Two gangs controlled Galveston Island: Quinn, along with Dutch Voight, led the Beach Gang; one-armed George Mosey and the "Beau Brummel of Galveston," Johnny Jack Nounes, ruled the rival Downtown Gang.²

O. E. "Dutch" Voight became the father of modern-era gambling in Galveston when he started running organized poker games in 1910. He was only twenty-two years old when he went into partnership with the leader of the Beach Gang, Ollie Quinn. Soon Voight and Quinn were running games in clubs that the Beach Gang controlled all over the island. When the Volstead Act (prohibition) went into effect, Voight turned to bootlegging, and he found willing aides with Rose and Sam Maceo. So impressed was he with the brothers that he went into partnership with them around 1923.³ The Maceos were on their way, and they never looked back.

2 Frank Chalfant, "Galveston: Island of Chance" in *Treasures of Nostalgia* (Houston, Texas; 1997), 24-25.

3 Alan Waldman, "Isle of Illicit Pleasure: The Casinos" in *In Between*, August 1979, part III.



Balinese Ballroom

The ballroom and restaurant at the end of Ranger Run. When the Rangers entered the ballroom, the band would normally strike up, "The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You." The gambling room entrance was just to the right of the bright lights in the left center of the photo. It was also in this room where Captain Klevenhagen ordered his Rangers to sit down and watch the entertainment from opening to closing time.

Mr. Sam and Papa Rose were as different as daylight and dark. When depicting brothers or lifelong friends, movies and books have a set pattern that is seldom deviated from. One is always suave, sophisticated, outgoing, and polished. He loves the spotlight and the high profile and is always the brains and ambition of the operation. The other brother is the muscle. When dirty work is called for, this brother never hesitates to take action. These profiles would pretty well describe Sam and Rose, except for the brains and ambition part. Good-looking Sam was the perfect front man, while Rose provided the muscle, ambition, and the brains.

It did not take the Maceos long to move from minor members of the Beach Gang to a position of leadership. By the time prohibition started in the 1920s, the Maceos

were set to reap the profits, and by the Great Depression in the 1930s, their rule over the island was complete. They not only ruled the Beach Gang, but also ran the Downtown Gang off the island.

Rose and Sam started buying clubs from one end of the island to the other, either together or with partners. One of the first establishments was the Chop Suey Club, located at Seawall Boulevard and 21st Street. In 1926, they changed its name to Maceo's Grotto. It was a fine club, with gambling in the rear. Things were going along nicely until 1928, when it was closed for a short time for gambling violations. A storm severely damaged the club in 1932, and after remodeling, the Grotto was reopened and named the Sui Jen (pronounced *Swee Wren*). In 1942, it was remodeled yet again and christened by the name that would always be associated with Galveston—the Balinese Room.



Balinese Stage

Many great stars performed on this stage.

In 1926, the Maceos bought the Hollywood Dinner Club from Jackie Friedman, who had bought it from Ollie Quinn. This establishment was *the* place to go for first-class food, entertainment, and gambling. It was the pride and joy of Sam Maceo, and he spared no expense. Only the finest

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Some of the many stars who performed at the Balinese Room

Top row: The Marx Brothers, Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, the Three Stooges, Tony Bennett.
 Row 2: George Burns & Gracie Allen, Duke Ellington, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Guy Lombardo,
 Row 3: Gene Autry, Art Linkletter, Dorothy Lamour, Mel Tormé, Jayne Mansfield.

furniture and décor was good enough, and it was the first air-conditioned club known in the area. Sam was not about to degrade his establishment with anything less than the very best in big-name entertainment, either. He booked the finest acts in both the Hollywood and the Balinese Room. Jack Benny, Phil Harris and Alice Faye, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jimmy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians, Ted Mack, the Three Stooges, the Marx Brothers, Arthur Murray, Gene Autry, Fred Astaire, and Frank Sinatra were common sights at a Maceo club.

The Balinese Room and Hollywood Dinner Club were only a small part of the Maceo Empire. In time, the brothers would own outright or be partners in over sixty establishments in the Galveston vicinity. Their holdings in legitimate businesses and real estate were so great that the Galveston-Dickinson County line was often referred to as the “Maceo-Dickinson County line.” The island itself became known to many as the “Free State of Galveston.”

The Maceos were involved in practically every business imaginable, including gambling and illegal alcohol, but there was one enterprise that they stayed away from—prostitution. There were fifty whorehouses confined mainly to an area along Post Office Street, between 25th and 29th

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Maceo Family and Friends at the Balinese Room

The man seated at the head of the table at bottom left is Little Sammy Maceo (in profile), cousin to Rose and Sam Maceo. To his left, with their backs to the wall, are Frances Maceo (Rose's wife), Pearl Maceo, Joe Maceo, Katy Giliota Maceo, Katy Giliota Maceo, Unknown female (white hat), Deady Fertitta (wide, dark-brimmed hat), Olivia Gertrude Fertitta, Angela Maceo, and Kay Maceo (Angie Maceo's daughter). The man seated at the far end of the table with most of his face obscured is unknown. Standing in the back of the room are Santo Dispensa (left) and Joe Glorioso (right). To the right of Little Sammy Maceo, are Rose Maceo, Mr. Dispensa (Frances Maceo's father), Vic C. Maceo, Loranzy "Lorenzo" Grilliette, Unknown male, Frank Fertitta, Angie Maceo (Vincent Maceo's widow), and Vic A. Maceo (*aka* Gigilo). The bald man seated at the table in the right front of the photo is Christie Mitchell. *Photo courtesy of Assistant Chief, Captain Jim Miller, retired.*

Streets (known locally as the District). To say the world's oldest profession was a huge industry on the island would be an understatement. With over 1,000 working hookers,⁴ Galveston's ratio of 1 prostitute for every 62 citizens was one of the smallest in the country. In comparison, wild and woolly Chicago could only boast a fraction of that number: 430 to 1. Foreign countries could not even compete. In China, Shanghai's meager 130 to 1 ratio pales in comparison, while Paris, France, could only muster a measly 481 to 1.⁵ Galveston whole-heartedly subscribed to what early

4 The term *hooker* originated with the prostitutes who followed Union General John Hooker's army during the War Between the States.

5 Brady Mahaney, "Discovering Our History; The Maceo Empire" in *Bay Watcher*, July 28, 1994.



twentieth-century mayor of New Orleans Martin Behrman said about prostitution in the Crescent City: "You can make prostitution illegal in Louisiana, but you can't make it unpopular."⁶

When looked at closely, these seemingly stunning numbers should come as no surprise. As they did with gambling and bootleg whiskey, the city fathers wrapped prostitution in their protective arms. Most did not even bother being discrete; Police Commissioner Walter Johnston bragged that he was on the payroll of forty-six whorehouses.⁷ Even though the profits were huge, the Maceos never involved themselves in this enterprise. On the other hand, they made it abundantly clear to the whorehouse owners to stay out of gambling.

For four decades, the Maceos and their partners ruled Galveston and, in the process, reaped a king's ransom in profits. In that time, few people ever made any serious attempts to shut them down. Why would they? People, then as now, get whatever law enforcement they want, and the people of Galveston had no problems with gamblers, bootleggers, or prostitutes. There was a worldwide depression everywhere but in Galveston, where money flowed as freely as the ocean that lapped its shores.

Profits were so huge that northern mobsters were soon attracted. From New York, Albert Anastasia, the lord high executioner of Murder, Inc., delivered inquiries to the brothers. From Chicago, Al Capone sent Frank "the Enforcer" Nitti to query about becoming "partners" with the Maceos. Rose told both politely, but with no room for misunderstanding, "Thanks, but no thanks."⁸

At one time, twenty-five hundred islanders worked for the Maceo brothers. The two men ran clean games, and crime was virtually unheard of. In Galveston, it was said that no citizens bothered to lock their homes, and it was safe to walk any part of the city at any hour. Papa Rose had his Night Riders patrolling the county to insure it remained safe. It was said that the Maceo's bookkeeper Sam "Books" Serio often walked without the protection of a bodyguard from the Maceo's downtown headquarters at the Turf Club⁹ to the bank. He could be carrying a million dollars in cash in his briefcase, and no one ever dared to bother him.¹⁰

Prostitutes had their own part of the city on Post Office Street, and they were strictly forbidden in any Maceo establishment, as were loud drunks. To make sure these policies were strictly enforced, there were always plenty of beefy, tough-looking men conspicuously standing around, though they were seldom needed.¹¹

The brothers realized that no matter how clean their games or how safe the streets, they could only survive as long as the citizens wanted them to. They were also aware that one of the quickest ways to turn the citizens against them was for the people to start losing their hard-earned money. Therefore, the Maceos were inflexible when it came to not allowing locals to lose much in any of their establishments—except, of course, for the wealthiest of Galvestonians.

Sam knew every string to pull to make his brother and himself look their best. It was said that whenever he loaned money to anyone down and out on their luck, it was not unusual for him to

6 T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 131.

7 Mahaney, 3.

8 Waldman, part V.

9 Bank of America is now located at the site of the Turf Club.

10 Waldman, part IV.

11 Waldman, part IV.



Gambling Room #1 & #2

The Balinese Room, located 600 feet over the Gulf of Mexico, where millions of dollars passed around the gaming tables in this room.

pass along this advise when it came time for repayment: "Someday, when you run across somebody who is really in need or is sick, take the money (owed Maceo) and give him a helping hand." He made it a habit to escort big winners at his clubs to their hotels so they did not have to be worried about muggers.

Always the perfect public relations man, Sam was also known to send orphans to college. In the tradition (myth would be a better word) of Jesse James, he also prevented helpless widows from being evicted from their homes on more than one occasion. Once a year, he even paid the expenses of Monsignor O'Connell, the rector of St. Mary's, to visit his mother in Ireland.

Knowing that the locals would also like to hear some of the big-named entertainers but could not afford to attend his clubs, Sam often had stars like Frankie Laine and Phil Harris perform free concerts on the seawall. In 1947, after the terrible Texas City disaster in which the ship *Grand Camp* suddenly exploded and killed hundreds, he arranged an outdoor benefit for the beleaguered city with such names as Gene Autry, Frank Sinatra, Jack Benny, and Victor Borge performing.¹²

But make no mistake about it: if an iron fist was required, Papa Rose was always ready, willing, and able to provide it. When he found out that his wife had a boyfriend, the wife and boyfriend ended up flowing face down in Galveston Bay.

There was virtually none of the gangland shooting in Galveston that was prevalent in Chicago and New York. The Maceos allowed competition among small-time operators as long as they did not try to muscle in on the brothers. The only one who ever dared was one-armed George Musey, leader of the Downtown Gang. In 1935, that threat came to a sudden end when Musey stepped onto 24th Street and met a hail of gunfire. Never again did anyone defy the brothers' empire, and that included the law.

12 Mahaney, 3.

From time to time, local and state officials made token raids on the Galveston clubs and shut them down long enough for the newspapers to meet their late editions. Nothing ever transpired that was serious enough to interfere with business for more than a few hours. In twenty years, there was never an indictment handed down by any grand jury.

Many political observers believe the attorney general's office is a stepping stone to the governor's office. In 1951, Attorney General Price Daniel had the governor's seat in mind, and he needed some publicity. What better issue to garner attention than cleaning up Galveston? He became chair of the so-called "little Kefauver hearings."

One humorous incident occurred during these proceedings. Galveston County Sheriff Frank Biaggne was in the witness box. He was known as a frequent visitor of the clubs, including the Balinese Room. When asked why he never raided that establishment, he replied with a straight face that the Balinese Room was a private club, he was not a member, and they would not let him in!¹³

Possibly because of Daniel's investigation, a grand jury handed down twenty-three indictments against the Maceos and many of their associates this time. But indictments are not convictions. More than a year and five continuances later, nothing had happened, and that's basically the way it ended. Ten of the indictments were dismissed outright, and Judge Charles Dibrell threw out the remainder. (Coincidentally, Judge Dibrell's son Louis was a longtime Maceo attorney.) Daniel did manage to close five Maceo clubs, though, but only for the few days that the Rangers were sent in.¹⁴

In 1957, the bug for the governor's seat hit another attorney general, Will Wilson. Looking around for an issue that would bring positive statewide attention, he too targeted the nationally known casinos and gambling dens in Galveston. Good choice. Even with his meager success, Price Daniel had ridden his investigations into the governor's office.

Things had changed a lot in the six years since Daniel's investigation, and none of it was good for the gamblers. Figuratively and literally, the once mighty Maceo Empire was a house of cards. For starters, Mr. Sam and Papa Rose were both dead. Sam had succumbed to cancer in 1951, and Rose passed away of heart failure in 1954. If they had been alive, would it have made any difference? Probably not. The doom of the island paradise had been sealed a few years earlier in the Nevada desert when a New York gangster named Ben "Bugsy" Siegel built the Flamingo Casino and Hotel on an out-of-the-way desert strip of land called Las Vegas. Everything that was illegal in Galveston—gambling, drinking, and prostitution—was legal there.



Frank Biaggne
"I went up to the door,
but they wouldn't let me
in because I was not a
member."

13 Gary Cartwright, "One Last Shot" in *Texas Monthly*, June 1993, 182.

14 Waldman, part VI.



Without Sam to keep the road smooth and Rose's iron fist to keep everyone in line, the Maceo kingdom was falling apart. Business was drying up, and even the dealers were fleeing to the desert. By all accounts, the Maceo houses ran honest games until the end, but that was not true for most of the other clubs. To stay in business, they started skimming and running rigged games.

In the past, the police, judges, and others in power never had to shake down the club owners for protection because Sam and Rose had made sure that those in control were always taken care of. Not now. Sheriff Biaggne went around to the clubs and demanded money if the owners wanted to stay in business. Desperately trying to stem the tide running against them, the owners went to their business friends who had been profiting for decades because of them, and asked for their help. The businessmen dutifully went to Attorney General Will Wilson and asked him to rein in Sheriff Biaggne.¹⁵

Instead of helping, however, Wilson saw the opportunity he had been waiting for. He secured injunctions to shut many of the gambling joints down. His plan was to close them in a grandiose way: he would hit all the major players in one grand sweep.

Texas Ranger Captain Johnny Klevenhagen was the commander of Company A in Houston, and Galveston was under his jurisdiction. In the first part of June 1957, he called a company meeting, and it did not take him long to get to the point: the Rangers were going to raid the Galveston gambling dens.

The Rangers knew the real motive behind Wilson's move, but it was not their job to pass moral judgments on gambling. Their assignment was to enforce the law and obey the orders of their superiors, even if their motives were sometimes questionable.¹⁶

About three weeks before the scheduled raid, Wilson put an undercover team in Galveston, commanded by George Reed, the chief of intelligence in the Houston area. In the ensuing weeks, Reed's team compiled a list of sixty-five gambling halls they wanted to raid. Once their list was completed, they set up temporary headquarters on Bissonet Drive in Houston and brought in the Rangers and several carloads of assistant attorney generals.

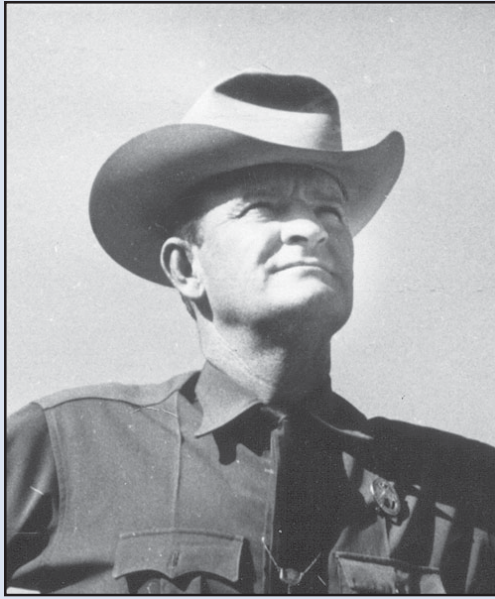
The plan was simple and effective. After search warrants had been secured, three lawyers would team up with two Rangers, and each team would go to the targeted gambling halls. There, they would serve their search warrants and seize all the illegal gambling equipment they could find. Rangers Ed Gooding and Pete Rogers were dispatched to Galveston to secure the warrants.

The club owners still had lots of money at their disposal, and they had been spreading it around for years, buying protection from the local police and judges. Crooked judges were a major problem for the Rangers. Gooding said that one certain justice of the peace would issue a search warrant at the drop of a hat. The only problem was, as soon as the Rangers walked out of his office, he would call whomever he had issued the search warrant against and say, "Storm raising," and hang up. That was all the gamblers needed. By the time the Rangers arrived, everything was as clean as freshly blown snow.

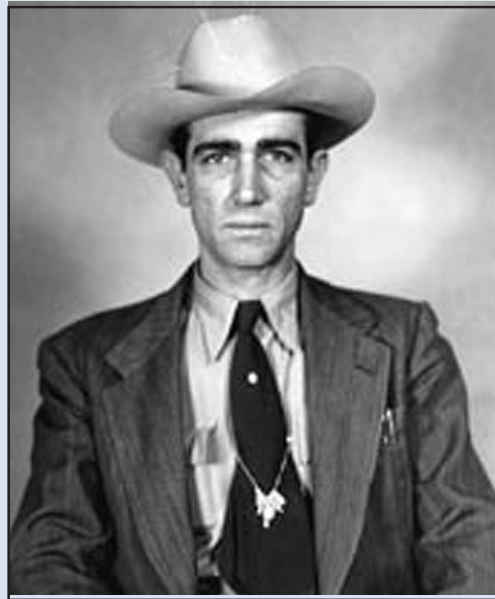
When the Rangers went to this judge's office one day, he was not there. That turned out to be no problem, however. To save himself time, the judge had signed a stack of warrants already filled

15 Waldman, part VI.

16 Ed Gooding and Robert Nieman, *Ed Gooding: Soldier-Texas Ranger* (Longview, Texas: Ranger Publishing, 2001), 108-120.



Ranger Ed Gooding



Ranger Johnny Klevenhagan

out except for the location. When the Rangers asked for a warrant, the judge's wife unwittingly picked one up from the pile, filled in the location, and handed it over. When the judge arrived home and found out what his wife had done, he rushed to the phone and called the club. When a voice came over the other end of line, he urgently cried, "Storm rising!"

"Storm raising, hell! The storm has already passed through," replied satisfied Ranger Gooding.

Fortunately, not all the judges were on the payroll. Donald Markle, a district judge in Galveston County, was one the Rangers knew they could trust and count on to do the right thing. Gooding and Pete Rogers drove to Judge Markle's house, showed him why they had probable cause for the search warrants, and explained their plan to him. The judge signed the warrants.

Gooding and Rogers returned to the Bissonet Drive headquarters, and just as they walked through the door, they heard Attorney General Wilson say that the raid was off because information had been leaked by one of the Rangers. That was a big—no, huge—mistake by Wilson.

Captain Klevenhagen operated on a short fuse anyway, and when he heard that ridiculous statement, he blew what little fuse he had. It did not matter one iota that Will Wilson was the attorney general of the state of Texas; the captain was not going to let anyone or anybody accuse his Rangers of something he knew to be untrue. He unloaded on Wilson with both barrels. Gooding said that he had seldom heard anyone talk to someone the way Captain Klevenhagen did, let alone to the Texas attorney general. He said that *yell* would be a better word for it. The captain roared at Wilson "like he was an illegitimate stepchild."¹⁷

Klevenhagen unleashed, "Don't you dare accuse my men of leaking information! You better clean up your own backyard before you start accusing my Rangers of anything."

¹⁷ Gooding, 108.

Obviously not used to being talked to in such a tone, Wilson feebly tried to defend himself and muttered, "What do you mean by that?"

"How many women did you have typing these affidavits in Austin?"

"Fifteen or twenty. So what?"

Not backing up an inch, Captain Klevenhagen asked the attorney general if he knew that women talked over their back fences.

"What?" asked Wilson, with a look of total mystery on his face.

"My Ranger in St. Augustine, Tully Seay, lives beside the lieutenant governor [Ben Ramsey]. About a month ago, their wives were visiting in their backyards, and Mrs. Ramsey told Mrs. Seay to watch for something big that was going to happen in Galveston around the first of June. Now, if the lieutenant governor's wife was telling her neighbor about the raid all the way over in St Augustine, then anyone with ears could have heard about it." Klevenhagen said all this in a tone that implied, "I can't believe I have to explain anything this basic to you."¹⁸

Attorney General Wilson did not like it one bit, but he had a little crow for dinner. Gooding wrote in his book, *Ed Gooding: Soldier, Texas Ranger*, that he could understand and certainly appreciate a boss standing up for his people, but the attorney general was wrong to accuse the Rangers of such a betrayal. As bad as Wilson hated to admit

it, he knew it too. He and the intelligence people had put a lot of time and effort into this venture just to see it go down the drain, but that is what happened. The raid was cancelled. As Ranger Gooding said, "Regretfully, countless man-hours with no positive results are common in police work."¹⁹

The raid had not come off, but Captain Johnny Klevenhagen was not the type of man to let something like this just quietly slip into the past, not by a long shot. The day following the busted raid, he and Ranger Gooding went to Galveston and talked to Sheriff Frank Biaggne. After explaining the situation, the captain told the sheriff that he had two choices: "Help us close the gambling dens, or stay out of our way while we close them down." Either way, the Galveston gambling houses were going to be busted.

Sheriff Biaggne listened and said he could not help because the gambling interests were just



Alarm Bell

One of the original alarm bells that would ring when Rangers charged down Ranger Run.



Ranger Run

By the time Rangers charged down this walkway and got to the gambling room, the guests would be playing bingo, hearts, or some other perfectly legal game that could be found at any church social.

18 Gooding, 109.

19 Gooding, 109.

too strong. If he cooperated with the Rangers, he might as well resign right then because he would never be reelected. Captain Klevenhagen said, "Fine. Just stay out of our way!"²⁰

Klevenhagen and Gooding left Galveston and went directly to Beaumont. Though it never had



Buccaneer Hotel

The tall building in the center left is the Buccaneer Hotel. No Ranger could have imagined that when he checked into the Buccaneer Hotel, it would be three and a half years before he checked out.

gotten the publicity, Jefferson County was just about as bad as Galveston County as far as gambling was concerned. The captain made the same speech to Charlie Meyer, the sheriff of Jefferson County, as he had to the Sheriff Biagne. Meyer had more backbone, at least on the surface. He told Captain Klevenhagen not to worry about it; his department would take care of their area, and there would be no more gambling in Jefferson County. When the Rangers got into their car, Klevenhagen asked Gooding if he had ever heard such a load of crap in his life. He was right: Jefferson County continued to be a major headache for the Rangers.

Galveston was more than enough work without having to worry about Jefferson County. At that time, Company A consisted of only eight men. Mart Jones

was stationed in Huntsville, Pete Rogers in Lufkin, Harvey Philips in Woodville, Tully Seay in St. Augustine, and Hollis Sillavan in Burton. Captain Klevenhagen and Sergeant Eddie Oliver were headquartered in Houston, while Ed Gooding was the only Ranger private there. (In those days, officers still worked cases, so Gooding did not have to work all of Houston and Galveston by himself.)

A few days after the failed bust, Captain Klevenhagen called another company meeting and explained the situation in Galveston as he saw it. He did not want to request any Rangers from outside companies unless he absolutely had to, and his men would therefore be putting in more hours in than ever, when sixty- to eighty-hour weeks were already the norm.

Captain Klevenhagen explained his plan to defeat the casinos, and it was a devilishly simple one. They were going after the big names first, especially the Balinese Room. With all the gambling places' high-placed connections, it was clear that search warrants did no good. However, there was nothing to stop the Rangers from going into the Balinese Room, the Turf Club, and the other big gambling establishments and just sitting around like any other private citizens.

The Balinese Room was far and away the biggest, fanciest, and best known of all the gambling halls in Galveston. That is where the captain set his sights for his Rangers to start—right at the top. Anyone who knew Captain Johnny Klevenhagen would have been shocked if he had wanted to begin anywhere else. Captain Jim Ray described Klevenhagen as having "a fire burning in him like

²⁰ Gooding, 110.

²¹ Private conversation between the author and Captain Jim Ray.

no man I have ever known.”²¹

Klevenhagen explained that, from that day forward, two Rangers were going to be at the Balinese Room every evening at eight o'clock when it opened, and they were going to stay there until it closed, usually at two o'clock in the morning. The Rangers were to go in, find themselves a good table, put their boots under that table, and make themselves at home. They were to conspicuously leave their hats and gun belts on for everyone to see.²²

Officially, the Balinese Room was a private supper club, and it was one of the best ever. Its claim to fame, however, was being *the* premier gambling casino on Galveston Island (the Hollywood Dinner Club had been closed years earlier by court order). It was built on a pier hanging several hundred feet into the Gulf of Mexico. Not only did this make it unique among the clubs, but it also allowed approach from only one direction: down the pier that became famous as the “Ranger Run.”

The way the Balinese Room was situated made it impossible for the Rangers to surprise the gamblers. Entrance was through doors fitted with electric locks at the sea wall. A lady was stationed in a booth at the entrance, and she would be smiling very sweetly. All the while, she was standing on a buzzer, warning the occupants that the Rangers were on their way. There were actually drills, just like school fire drills, where the employees practiced putting the gambling equipment away. They could hide the machines and apparatus almost as fast as you could blink an eye. The indentations in the carpet where the tables had stood would be visible, but by the time the Rangers reached the end of “Ranger Run,” the room would be clean. Everyone would be sitting around playing dominoes, pool, bridge, or checkers, acting as innocent as newborn babies.²³

The Rangers rented a room in the Buccaneer Hotel, overlooking the entrance to the Balinese Room. None of them could have dreamed that it would be three and a half years before they would check out of that space. Rangers Hollis Sillavan and Tully Seay drew the first assignment to Galveston. Each team of two Rangers worked two weeks on and four weeks off. The four weeks off were not meant to be used for relaxation, however. During that time, the Rangers had to go back to their regular duties and do six weeks of work in four!²⁴ In addition, some Rangers would go to Beaumont at least once a week to make sure that the gambling clubs in Jefferson County were staying in compliance the way the sheriff had promised they would be. Needless to say, after a couple of months of this killer pace, everyone in Company A was worn to a frazzle.²⁵

As good as his men were, Captain Klevenhagen realized they could not keep up with this tremendous workload. He contacted Colonel Homer Garrison, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, and asked for help. Rangers from the era of Homer Garrison swear to this day that he was the best friend the Rangers have ever had in the director's chair in Austin. Anything he could do to help the Rangers, he did. In this case, he personally saw to it that Captain Klevenhagen got the help he needed. From that point

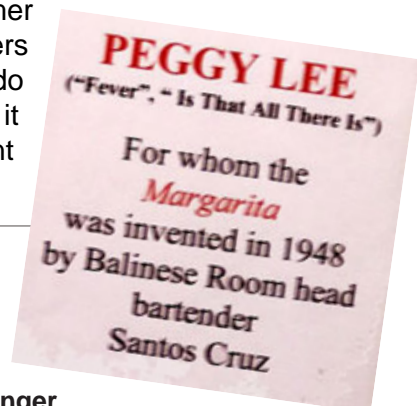
22 Gooding, 108-120.

23 Gooding, 108-120..

24 Gooding, 108-120..

25 Gooding, 108-120..

26 Gooding, 108-120..



Sign under singer
Peggy Lee's photo in the Balinese Room.

on, one man from Company A worked with a man from one of the other five companies throughout the state. In this manner, each Company A Ranger worked one week with a Ranger from some other company, and then the next week he caught a Ranger from another company.²⁶

xxxAt first, the clubs did not take the Rangers seriously, and they tried to kill the Rangers with kindness. The Balinese Room had a five-piece house band and a small dance floor. Whenever the Rangers walked in, the Balinese band would play "The Eyes of Texas." All of the clubs tried to treat the Rangers like kings by offering steaks, shrimp, and all sorts of food and drinks. But the Rangers were not buying. In the words of one Ranger:

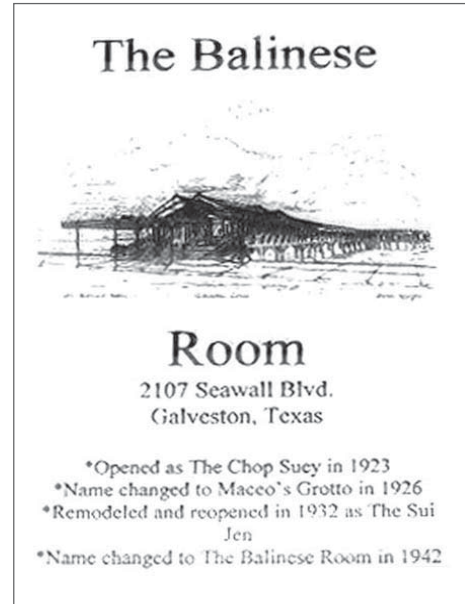
The clubs were trying to have us bought and paid for, but we didn't take anything. Whatever we ate or drank, we paid for. I can't imagine how many gallons of coffee we drank. Clearly, they thought they could simply wait us out. They were wrong. We were prepared to stay in Galveston however long it took to break them. And we did.²⁷

When the club patrons walked in, the first things they saw were the Rangers' boots, hats, gun belts, and badges. The customers' reactions seldom varied. They would sit nervously for a while, have a drink, talk in hushed voices, and then leave. After about two weeks, the management of the Balinese Room started calling Captain Klevenhagen, complaining that the Rangers were ruining business. "Couldn't some kind of deal be made?"

No, it could not. The Rangers kept the pressure on.²⁸

Then on Wednesday night, June 19, 1957, the Rangers broke the clubs' backs. During that week, they started ripping the guts out. By now, the casinos had stashed their gambling paraphernalia away, obviously meaning to simply wait the Rangers out. The only problem was that the Rangers were not going to leave. To the club owners' horror, the Rangers started finding the hidden equipment. In the few days immediately proceeding June 19, they found and destroyed \$800,000.00 in gambling equipment hidden in an old bunker at Fort Crockett. As great as this was, they still had not hit the mother lode. The Rangers knew hundreds of slot machines and gambling tables were still hidden away, but they had never been able to find the stash because the gamblers had concealed it really well. But not well enough.²⁹

Sam Maceo's pride and joy, the Hollywood Supper Club, had been closed for years. Even in its dilapidated state, though, it was clear that it once could have put anything currently in Galveston, including the Balinese Room, to shame. Ranger Gooding said that he had never seen it when it was open, but he could tell that, in its heyday, it had really been something to behold. When Hollis



This poster gives a thumbnail history of the Balinese Room.

²⁷ Gooding, 108-120..

²⁸ Gooding, 108-120..

²⁹ Gooding, 108-120.



Sillavan and a couple of the attorney general's people happened to check on the Hollywood Supper Club, they were stunned. Inside were slot machines, pinball machines, roulette tables, and blackjack tables stacked to the ceiling.³⁰

Pete Rogers and Ed Gooding were working together when two attorney general agents ran up to them exclaiming, "Man, we've found their stash!" Rogers and Gooding took one look themselves and called Captain Klevenhagen in Houston. After listening to what had been found, the captain highballed it to Galveston. As soon as he got there, he and Gooding headed straight for the old Hollywood Supper Club, where they met Ranger Rogers and several men from the attorney general's office.³¹

The agents had literally hit the jackpot: 1.2 million dollars—that is 1957 dollars—in gambling equipment. There were fifteen hundred slot machines and numerous roulette wheels, blackjack tables, and dice tables. Box after box of chips and dice were also found. Many of the chips were of \$100 dominations, with Balinese Room inscribed on them.

The discovery in the Hollywood Supper Club seemed to open Pandora's box. Within a week, the Rangers confiscated more than \$2,000,000 in gambling equipment.³² As Ranger Gooding described in his book, "I remember it all as though it were yesterday. As we stood there looking at the mountain of slot machines, I heard Captain Klevenhagen mutter to himself, 'Man, I don't know what in the world I'll ever do with all this stuff. I wish I had a boat big enough to haul it out in the Gulf, and just dump it'."

Cecil Rotsch, first assistant to the attorney general, overheard the captain and said, "That sounds like a wonderful idea to me."³³

Until then, whenever the Rangers confiscated equipment, they took it to the city dump and burned it, and the fire department was present to make sure the flames did not get out of control. The Rangers would have had to notify the fire department beforehand and arrange the burning to meet its schedule, which was clumsy and very time-consuming. But that was when they were only grabbing a few machines; now they had a mountain of gambling equipment to dispose of. The more Rotsch thought about dumping the equipment in the ocean, the better he liked the idea. He looked over at the captain and said, "I think the attorney general will like this idea, too. Let me check with him."³⁴

Captain Klevenhagen had not been serious when he made the remark, and he did not like the plan now. He told Rotsch that he had only been mumbling to himself. Rotsch was convinced it was a good idea, however, and the captain had no luck changing his mind. Finally, Klevenhagen said to Rotsch, "Well, that's fine, but until the A.G. tells me different, I'm going to start burning this stuff."³⁵

The Rangers hired a moving company to come in and load all the gambling paraphernalia onto trucks, and then they headed for the city dump. It was not long before they had a roaring fire going, and they started feeding it with the slot machines. Soon a voice came over the captain's

30 Gooding, 108-120..

31 The assistant attorney generals were Cecil Rotsch, J. L. Smith, B. H. Timmins, Ed Horner, and Richard Stone.

32 Gooding, 114.

33 Gooding, 114.

34 Gooding, 115.

35 Gooding, 115.



radio: "Eighty-eight to unit six." ("Eighty-eight" was an airplane from Austin.)

Captain Klevenhagen grabbed the microphone and said, "This is six. Go ahead."

"This is Joe Fletcher. Could you meet me at the airport?"

Rotsch had obviously hit the right chord with Attorney General Wilson because Joe Fletcher was Colonel Homer Garrison's right-hand man. The Rangers knew that if Colonel Fletcher was there, that meant something big was going to happen. Rotsch had been right: the attorney general had liked the idea of dumping the whole mess in the Gulf because that would get him lots of free, front-page coverage.

When Fletcher joined up with the Rangers, he told them that, on the trip from Austin, he had thought about the ferry at nearby Port Bolivar. It had a capacity to carry about sixty cars and would have plenty of room to hold what had not been burned. It was also big enough to sail a short distance into the gulf, where the water would be deep enough to bury the gambling equipment forever.

Captain Klevenhagen told Gooding to make the necessary arrangements for the ferry but, until then, he was going to keep burning. Gooding arrived at the dock just as the ferry was pulling in. He went aboard, climbed up to the pilothouse, and told the captain what they wanted to do.

The ferry captain said, "I'm sorry, Ranger, I would really like to help you, but I can't. I'm not licensed to go outside the bars. I can only sail inland waters. If I went into open water, the Coast Guard would pull my license."

Gooding went back and reported this to Captain Klevenhagen. By then, however, the idea had taken on a life of its own because the attorney general had come to Galveston himself. Between Colonel Fletcher, the attorney general, and a reluctant Captain Klevenhagen, they came up with what they considered a workable plan. The attorney general's office rented a tugboat to haul some of the slots into the gulf.

Tugboats are nothing but floating engines designed for one thing only: to supply power to move huge ships. A tugboat only has about a foot of walkway on each side of the pilothouse, so the Rangers could not put many slots on board. Nevertheless, they managed to stack about fifty machines all over the boat. Slot machines were hanging over the sides, on the pilothouse, everywhere you can imagine. Although they did not have much room for slot machines, somehow there was plenty of space for the newspaper reporters and cameramen!

The Rangers sailed about five miles into the gulf, close to Pelican Island and near a sunken concrete ship, and they pushed the machines into the water. Except for the Rangers, it had all been marvelous fun for everyone. News reporters had recorded it all and, just as Wilson hoped, the event had made all the papers. Yes sir, it was great.

Great, that is, until the next day. It seems the Army Corps of Engineers considered the ship channel their private domain, and they did not want so much as a napkin thrown in their water, let alone a boatload of gambling equipment. Most of the machines had sunk to the bottom, but some were made of plastic and wood, and those had popped back up and were floating all over the channel.

Cecil Rotsch was frantic the next day when he called Captain Klevenhagen. "Captain, what are we going to do? The Corps of Engineers is having a cow. They're threatening to file charges on us for fouling the waterways!"

Keeping a straight face, Captain Klevenhagen said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I burned all the slot machines I was responsible for."

Company "A" Texas Rangers Balinese Room - Galveston Island



Back: Sergeants Bobby Smith, Grover Huff, Pete Muskunas, Tom Davis, David Maxwell, Crayton McGee, Joe Haralson, Brian Taylor, Danny Young, Kevin Pullen.

Front: Sergeants Bryant Wells, Jeff Cook, Ron Duff, Lieutenant L.C. Wilson, Captain Tony Leal, Sergeants David Rainwater, Freeman Martin, Otto Hanak, Adolphus Pressley

The battle with the Balinese Room and the other clubs would continue for several more months, but the haul from the Hollywood Supper Club had destroyed the gambling clubs in Galveston. They had had enough, and the world-renowned Balinese Room closed its doors. Most of the big gambling establishments saw the handwriting on the wall and followed it into history.

The war was won, but for another three years, many battles would be fought with small clubs trying desperately to hang on. The sand in their hourglasses was running out quickly, however. In 1960, after three and a half years, the Texas Rangers checked out of the Buccaneer Hotel and went home. The Rangers had reined in Galveston.

