

The Strange Saga Gambling Part



[In Part I, we saw the first gambling ship appear off the

Southern California coast in 1926. Soon after, one Tony Cornero entered the picture and became the "Commodore of the gambling fleet," for at its peak, there were as many as seven such ships in action. Some 5,000 customers a week were ferried out to the ships, but California legal authorities did what they could to harass and stop the gambling activities...]

In 1938, when Cornero debuted his brand new gambling ship, the *S.S. Rex*, it was just too much for law enforcement. Attorney General Earl Warren, accompanied by Los Angeles County District Attorney Buron Fitts and local police, led a series of raids in late August, 1939. The *Showboat* and the *Tango* were seized off Long Beach, as was the *Texas* in Santa Monica Bay. Boarding the *Rex*, however, turned out to be another matter...and the fabled 'Battle of Santa Monica Bay' began!

Cornero spotted agents in his crowd and had them escorted off the *Rex*. Metal doors sealed off the deck. Fire hoses were used to fend off the fleet of tiny boats holding the police. Police Chief Charles Dice of Santa Monica was hosed from a boarding platform right into the ocean in what must have looked like a scene out of a silent comedy. "I won't give up the ship!" Cornero shouted at Warren through the thick morning fog, but he eventually surrendered after holding out for nine days.

Warren filed a complex suit that argued that three-mile limit in Santa Monica Bay was not measured from the shore but rather from the headlands of the bay, which would put the gambling ships in rough, open seas not suitable for gambling landlubbers. Cornero, cleared of gambling charges, contested the suit, but it was clear that the litigation would drag on for years. Seal Beach banned water taxis from its pier, and the skippers of the small ships were still being arrested.

In November 1939, Cornero and the other ship owners threw in the towel. Stratton, incidentally, by this time was back in private practice and successfully defended the Blazers and several of the water taxi drivers. Warren's highly publicized battle against Cornero had been successful, but it later surfaced that he had had a little 'help.' The future California governor and U.S. Chief Justice had had Cornero 'bugged.' Warren Olney, Warren's chief aide, had asked the FBI to keep the potentially explosive disclosure secret, and it was for more than 40 years.

But, the indomitable and flamboyant Tony Cornero wasn't down long. World War II had interrupted everything, and a few of the gambling ships were even drafted into the service. The *S.S. Rex* actually ended up being captured by a German submarine and sunk off the coast of Africa. When the war ended, however, Cornero was back, and he had decided to revive the gambling ships



of California's Ships! II

with the grandest of them all, the *S.S. Lux*.



Nearly 2,000 eager patrons arriving from Long Beach Harbor in 1946 were greeted by a dazzling 100-foot bar, the longest on the coast. “The *Lux* was a grand ship,” recalled Stratton. “It was really doing business.”...Switching sides again, Stratton went to work as District Attorney Fred Howser’s chief deputy. “Howser wanted to run for attorney general,” Stratton said. “He told me to stop the *Lux*. So we used considerable legal fiction to seize the water taxis.” It was illegal, Stratton charged, to transport people to a place of gambling. Attorney General Warren filed a state legal action alleging the ship to be a public nuisance.

Albert Ramsey was the new Long Beach city prosecutor at this point. Perhaps remembering what had happened the last time someone had tried to confront Cornero, ‘high level law enforcement officials’ decided that Ramsey would be the one to seize the water taxis, which was a step beyond merely arresting the taxi skippers. “On the opening night, everyone else (Howser, Warren, and Long Beach officials) was out of town,” said Ramsey. “It was a strange situation. I was the fall guy, the little guy. My office handled drunks and barking dogs.” Ramsey said he met with Howser and Cornero. The colorful gambler rejected Howser’s offer to return the taxis if the *Lux* was closed down. Howser then told Ramsey he was on his own.

Cornero again defeated Warren, Stratton, and Ramsey in court by again being found not guilty on gambling charges. But, by now, the Feds were moving in for the kill. The Coast Guard seized the *Lux* on a technicality (just as Capone had eventually been imprisoned for tax evasion). Cornero’s vessel was licensed for coastwise trade, and federal officials noted that the *Lux* was not sailing coastal waters or trading anything. The magnificent *Lux* was sold at auction after operating only two days.

Cornero quit again; this time for good...well, sort of. Stratton quit too. “I left the D.A.’s office,” he said. “I didn’t want to be associated with the thing any longer. It was odious. I just read about it in the papers.” The taint of political corruption had been present throughout the entire affair, going all the way back to 1926. Warren, himself, was quoted as saying, “It is impossible to run a big, notorious open gambling joint without buying off public officials.” Ramsey agreed. “We must have filed a zillion counts against Cornero, but he was never convicted.”

...And Cornero? Well, he went on to build the Stardust Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas, at the time the biggest on the strip. He didn’t live to see it finished, however. It was still under construction when he died of a heart attack in 1955—while at a craps table.

