

Texas Personalities

"Benny" Binion

Binion was born in 1904 and raised in Grayson County, Texas, north of Dallas, but moved to El Paso when he was 17. There, he began moonshining where he was twice convicted for it. In 1928, under fear of legal consequences, he gave up moonshining and opened a numbers game, or lottery, which was also illegal. While he was in El Paso he learned to gamble, a skill that would become important in his later life. In 1931 he was convicted of murder after shooting Frank Bolding who moved as if to attack Binion in a back yard where they were arguing. Because the reputation of Bolding was so poor, Binion only got a two-year suspended sentence. He would later kill a fellow numbers operator who first drew a gun on him. Binion was found not guilty on the grounds of self-defense.

Because of his own notoriety, in 1946 he moved to Las Vegas, Nevada. He became a partner of the Las Vegas Club casino, but left after a year because of disagreements about limits on bets. In 1951, Benny purchased the building which had previously housed the Las Vegas Club and opened it as the Westerner Gambling House and Saloon. In 1951 he purchased the Eldorado Club and Apache Hotel opening them as Binion's Horseshoe casino. It immediately became popular because of the high limits on bets. Because of the competition, Binion sometimes received death threats, although eventually casinos raised their limits to keep up with him. Additionally, the Horseshoe would honor a bet of any monetary value as long as it was the first bet made.

Binion was in the vanguard of Las Vegas casinos, being the first in downtown's Glitter Gulch to replace sawdust-covered floors with carpeting, the first to dispatch limousines to pick up customers to and from the casino, and the first to give free drinks to players. Although comps were normal for high rollers, Binion opened the door for all players. Binion, in an Nevada oral history, said he followed a simple philosophy when serving his customers – *Good food, good whiskey, good gamble*. He was more generous to gamblers than any other casino owner in Las Vegas. Despite physically getting away from Texas, he still had legal troubles. He served time in Leavenworth Penitentiary from 1953 to 1957 for tax evasion related to his operations in Texas. He had to sell his share of the casino to pay around \$5 million for legal costs, but in 1964 his family regained control. Benny, however, was never allowed to hold a gambling license afterwards, although he was on the payroll as a consultant. He passed away on December 25, 1989.

His sons Jack and Ted would become president and manager, respectively, and his wife Teddy Jane managed the casino cage. In 1998, Binion's daughter, Becky, took over the presidency after a legal battle, and Jack moved on to other gambling interests. Becky's presidency would not turn out well: in 2004, the casino was raided by the IRS and closed for non-payment of taxes, eventually passing into the hands of Harrah's Entertainment. It now operates as Binion's Gambling Hall and Hotel under MTR Gaming Group. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny_Binion]

