

NORTHEASTERN NEVADA MUSEUM

QUARTERLY



Newton Hunt Crumley

by Chris H. Sheerin

re-printed from 1979 *Quarterly*

It Began in Elko

by Angela Aguirre (deBraga)

re-printed from 1982 *Quarterly*

2011 - 4

NORTHEASTERN NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

IT BEGAN IN ELKO

Big-Name Entertainment in Nevada

by Angela Aguirre (deBraga)



This story about big-name entertainment in Nevada and its Elko beginnings was published in the *Northeastern Nevada Quarterly* in 1982.

It is being re-printed here because this was also an important part of the history of this area and many of the present *Quarterly* readers either did not live here, were not members, or were not even born when this story came out the first time.

A hush fell over the opening night audience in the Lounge of the Commercial Hotel in Elko as plush curtains parted. Applause broke out when the tuxedo-clad orchestra leader raised his battered silk top hat and asked, "Is everybody happy?"

Big name show business in Nevada started that night as Ted Lewis asked his famous question and gave his

That successful merging began in 1937 when Newton Crumley opened the first lounge in the Commercial Hotel. Although the hotel bar had been open, even during periods of prohibition, the new addition was Elko's first sophisticated cocktail lounge. There was a small dance floor in front of an alcove where three or four musicians held forth entertaining bar patrons and dancing couples. The popularity of the room led Newton



The Commercial Hotel, at approximately the time Newt Crumley started bringing in big-name entertainment.

Museum photo, donated by Jean Hunter

jazz band a downbeat. The date was April 26, 1941. The Commercial's show room was simply... The Lounge. There was no cover charge and no food was served.

Today, when people think of the Silver State, they see visions of exotic showgirls, dazzling lights, top-notch entertainment and that unique magic of gambling.

Gaming in Nevada was legalized by the 1931 state legislature, but it wasn't until the 1940s that gambling and name entertainment joined hands in a winning combination that would grow into today's huge exciting industry.

Hunt Crumley, son of the hotel's owner, to the idea that made him the "Father" of big name hotel-casino show business.

Through young Newt's activities big time entertainment thrived in Elko for more than two decades.

In early 1941 remodeling was completed on a new show area just west of the old lounge.

Young Crumley contracted the "High-hatted Tragedian of Jazz," along with his world famous orchestra and 21-member stage revue for an eight-day run. On April 26, Lewis began the parade of big name entertainers to

In Person
Everything NEW but the
Old High Hat!

**TED
LEWIS**
and his WORLD FAMOUS
ORCHESTRA

**April 26
Through
May 3rd**

Plus—

His Scintillating

"RHYTHM RHAPSODY IN REVUE"

Starting Tomorrow at

The Lounge

No Cover Charge—Drinks Minimum Price of 25c Each

Elko. The tab was \$12,000 per week, a fabulous price for a modest-sized city like Elko.

When local citizens heard that Ted Lewis was coming to Elko, it was too much for them to believe. A rumor circulated that Lewis would not appear and, if the band did come, the leader certainly would not be the famed Lewis himself, but someone posing as him. After his appearance, someone was heard to remark, "If the former

During the orchestra's appearance, the Commercial's business was brisk and even Lewis joined in the gambling. In fact, when he left Elko, he had spent all he made and departed with the two Crumleys holding his IOU for a sizeable amount – so large that Lewis endorsed his contract check in such a manner that he agreed to a return engagement to square the marker.

Elko appealed to other entertainers. Many show people stayed in Elko for a week or two just to have fun. In order to rest and "get a little Nevada sunshine," Sophie Tucker, the famed singer-comedienne, billed as the "Last of the Red Hot Mamas," came to town two days prior to her Commercial engagement. After her arrival, she met a number of Elkoans at the Lounge and topped off the day by going to the movies. The hotel management also arranged for her to visit the Petan Ranch in northern Elko County.

Miss Tucker appeared with Carl Ravazza's popular dance band in the hotel's "Serenade to Summer." She made such a hit Saturday and Sunday nights that it was announced that there would also be a show Monday evening. Ordinarily, no performance was presented on Mondays; shows ran from Saturday to Saturday, with a



An early picture of the Lounge at the Commercial Hotel.

Museum photo, donated by Tony Ellen Primeaux

doubting Thomases of Elko heard that Eleanor Roosevelt was going to broadcast 'My Day' under the Lounge auspices from the corner of Fourth and Railroad Street, they'd be on hand to watch the proceedings."

Lewis, his orchestra, and revue had the desired effect. Former Nevada State Journal editor, Paul Leonard, remembered the reaction as "electric."

When the show was over, many in the crowd stuck around in the Commercial's casino that contained a long bar, a roulette table, a couple of 21 tables, a few poker tables and a simple lunch counter.

Thus, Nevada casino owners discovered that famous name entertainment set an excellent atmosphere for gambling, attracted people to the gaming rooms and, therefore, paid off well in the long run.

break on Monday.

Huge crowds quickly made seating difficult on weekend nights and the Commercial staff began taking fewer reservations and held them only until 8:45 p.m. Efforts were made to accommodate patrons on other nights so there would be more room for dancing. The big bands took up a large section of the floor. Floor shows in those days were just that..."floor shows."

The situation led to construction of a tiered platform at the north end of the Lounge to afford guests seated in that area of the night spot a better view of the performance. Later, a stage was built in the end of the room.

Many bandleaders of the era wrote one or two hit songs, but Ray Noble, who came to Elko in July, 1941,

SOPHIE TUCKER *in person*



with TED SHAPIRO at the piano, appearing at

THE LOUNGE

of the COMMERCIAL HOTEL

in another *Glorious Floor Show*

Opening Tomorrow Night

Saturday, June 21

For An 8-Day Run

was, perhaps the only one who achieved equal distinction both as a bandleader and composer.

Next up, just returning from a theatre engagement in New York City, came Paul Whiteman, "King of Jazz," who blitzed Elko crowds during his nine-day stint. This left the Lounge management wondering where they were going to "hang" the customers during the Elko County Livestock Show and Fair.

Club patrons who got a closeup of Whiteman for the first time went away remarking: "He's a real guy," "I liked his informal way." "You can tell he's from the West."

When Whiteman was first signed to appear in Elko, it made the front page of *Variety*, the show business newspaper. So astounding was the news in the night club entertainment field, that the headlines read "Whiteman Fixed to Play Stix."

While in town, Whiteman, with the help of the mayors from Reno and Winnemucca, selected the 1941 Miss Elko County to rule over fair time festivities. Headline in the *Elko Daily Free Press* of September 9, 1941, declared " '41 Fair Looms as Biggest in Show's History." People were attracted here from all sections of Nevada and neighboring states to see Whiteman and his orchestra in downtown Elko.

It is putting it mildly to say that the entertainment world was agog over the fact that city the size of Elko was so privileged to see big names appear one after another.

Ted Fio Rito and Getrude Niesen followed Donald Novis as the next Lounge attractions. Rio Fito was a world-famous composer and Niesen was billed as "America's Sweetheart – Star of Stage Screen and

Radio." Together, they presented the "1941 Harvest of Entertainment."

The seventh "big time" show of the year featured Dave Marshall and the NBC orchestra during Thanksgiving week.

Ending the 1941 list of famous personalities in the entertainment world, Chico Marx, a member of the popular Marx Brothers comedy team, starred in the seven-day Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations with a five-act floor show.

Young Crumley had a clause in every contract that required the star to give at least one free performance for the children and teenagers of the community. Most of



Another view of the early lounge at the Commercial Hotel.

Museum photo, donated by Tony & Ellen Primeaux

these shows were held in the Hunter Theatre. He insisted upon, and enforced, a policy that all these shows be on a level "to which you could bring your children." Anyone offering off-color entertainment soon found his contract cancelled. Special performances were also presented at the Old Folks Home and Nevada Industrial School.

In 1942 after the nation entered World War II, the economy was booming and the American public became entertainment hungry. The Commercial's shows, during the war, were taken to Wendover Air Base, Utah, for the men who were stationed there.

PAUL WHITEMAN

"The Greatest Name in American Music"



and
HIS ORCHESTRA

Featuring:

- Murray McEachern
- Frank Howard
- Dolly Mitchell
- Buddy Weed
- Mike Pingatore
- Willie Rodriguez
- Robinson Twins

And in Addition:

The Murtah Sisters

The Famous Five Brothers

and

ROSITA and DENO

at

THE LOUNGE

of the COMMERCIAL HOTEL

9 Days September 6 through 14

(Including Every Day of the Great Elko County Fair)

The Commercial Hotel continued its “big-name” policy after the war and was joined by its rival directly across the railroad tracks through downtown Elko, the Stockmen’s Hotel. Once the Mayer Hotel, the 102-room building was bought by R.C. “Red” Ellis and A.C. Bigham who changed the name to the Stockmen’s. They opened a lounge in August, 1946, to take advantage of the county fair crowd around Labor Day. A few weeks later, on October 4, the name of the room was changed to the Roundup Room and opened with “Hi” Davis and his orchestra, with Ann Triola, a singing comedy star. The Andrini Brothers rounded out the show.

Following the first show were stars Margaret Whiting, Burl Ives, Alfred Drake, Rex Allen and Tennessee Ernie Ford.

Elkoans and their visitors never had it so good as when the

In 1946, another hotel, the Ranchinn, was built and opened by young Crumley. Elaborately dedicated on December 18, the “super motel,” one of the first ever built after the war, had a second-floor club room, and elegant bar and cabaret, fine Chinese food and the highest gambling limits in town.

Tex Ritter, “America’s Most Beloved Western Star,” and Henry Busse, the famous “Hot-Lips Trumpet Man,” entertained at the Commercial’s Christmas show to honor the Ranchinn’s opening.

The Intermountain West’s biggest professional rodeo came to Elko in 1948 and the First Annual Silver State Stampede was not exclusively a local show; it was also sponsored by several casinos in other Nevada towns. Bing Crosby, Elko’s Honorary Mayor,



The Stockmen’s Hotel, the second establishment to feature big-name entertainment in Elko.

Museum photo

Crumleys and Ellis were in competition; and the prices were right – there was never a cover charge or minimum. Hotel patrons saw the most beautiful floor shows in the world. Entertainment was fabulous, hard to believe – and it didn’t cost more than a drink or two at one of the hotels. All this was offered at a time when drinks were 25 cents apiece!

officially opened the celebration that featured the nation’s foremost riders, ropers, bulldoggers and arena entertainers.

Top attractions were booked into the local nightspots. The Rocky Mountain Playboys performed in the



Now Playing

at the

Round-Up Room

For a limited stay

By Popular Demand - Return Engagement - Andrum Brothers

DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF

Dave Pierce

and His Orchestra

- Enjoy The -

**TAP DANCING
OF**

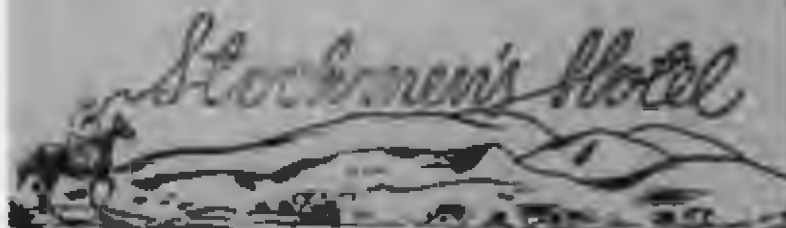
**Colleen
Carpenter**

**COMEDY
BY**

**Bill
Grant**



Colleen Carpenter



ON HIGHWAY 40 • ELKO, NEVADA

Roundup Room while The Lounge featured stage and screen favorites, Professor Lambert and Pinky Lee, in its "Stampede Revue." In short, according to the Elko Daily Free Press, "no expense had been spared, no stone left unturned and nothing was left out" in order to make the Stampede a success.

In 1951, a movie premiere was scheduled to be held in Elko and elaborate citywide preparations began for the three-day festivities. Fifteen thousand windshield stickers were pasted on vehicles entering town: "We are coming back for the World Premiere of 'Here Comes the Groom.'" Store fronts and windows, street lamps and "public conveyances" were decorated to give the entire community a holiday atmosphere. The eyes and ears of the nation were focused on Elko when the premiere showing of Paramount Picture's "Here Comes the Groom," starring Elko's honorary mayor, Bing Crosby, was held.



The opening ceremonies for the new Ranchinn drew a big crowd, considering it was in late afternoon in December. The dignitaries, including Governor Pittman and Bing Crosby, were on the balcony, addressing the crowd in the parking lot.

Museum photo

More than a hundred Hollywood celebrities, newsmen and political dignitaries arrived in chartered planes at the Elko airport. Their coming was witnessed by the largest gathering of people in the history of the city.

The huge celebration began with the CBS coast-to-coast radio broadcast of a street show from a platform in front the Hunter Theatre featuring all the stars, several media people, Utah governor J. Bracken Lee, Nevada governor Charles Russell, Nevada Congressman Walter S. Baring and Elko Mayor Dave Dotta. A giant stage show of stars was held in the Hunter Theatre later that evening starring Bing Crosby, Alexis Smith, Dorothy Lamour, Cass Daley, Jay Livingston, Ray Evans and Connie Bosswell and the Cass County Boys. The entertainers then appeared on the stage at the Rainbo Theatre. The showing of the film took place later that evening.

Almost ten thousand dollars were taken in from the premiere. The money was turned over to a fund for constructing a new million-dollar hospital for Elko.



The Ranchinn, after a new sign was put in place and the gate and fence had been removed from the front of the parking lot.

Museum photo, donated by Pete & Dawn Ormaza



THE LOUNGE PRESENTS:

A SPECIAL SHOW HONORING THE OPENING OF

RANCHINN

Henry
Busse

STARRING
FAMILY

Tex
Ritter

With a gallery of Talent
Including the Following
Katie Horvath Adams



From December 21 Through New Years

The Commercial Hotel

ELKO, NEVADA

"The Best Entertainment in the West"

The general opinion of many was that this had been the "biggest and most elaborate movie send-off since "Gone With the Wind" in Atlanta," and that "Here Comes the Groom" represented the greatest "entertainment package" in Crosby's career, including "Going My Way." He won an Oscar for Best Actor in 1944 for his role in "Going My Way."

Ellis sold the Stockmen's Hotel to Dan Bilboa Sr., J.B. Dollard and V.J. McGee, all of Boise, Idaho, on December 30, 1952. By 1955, young Crumley decided to look for new fields of action and had sold the Commercial to Harrington Drake. The sale did not go through and Red Ellis purchased both the Commercial Hotel and Ranchinn.

Entertainment in Elko continued to be first rate. Such

stars as Nelson Eddie and Jeanette McDonald, Anna Maria Alberghetti and the original Sons of the Pioneers performed.

Wayne Newton sang in Elko when he was just 12-years old. Because of his age, he was escorted to and from the stage.

Vikki Carr first came to Elko in 1959 with The Pars. After playing only a short time at the Commercial, a misunderstanding arose and she left the group. Being 19 then, she took a job at the front desk of the hotel and became acquainted with Eileen and "Dutch" Holdren who became her "adopted parents," Miss Carr moved in with the Holdren family and later returned to entertaining at the hotel bar. From the Commercial Hotel, she moved to the Ranchinn with the duo, Knight



A banquet during the grand opening of the Ranchinn. Newt Crumley is at the microphone, with Ida Pittman, Governor Vail Pitmann, and Frances Crumley, to his left.

The large cake on the table was made in the shape of the new hotel.



SPIKE JONES

and His

City Slickers

WELBY WATSON • RED WAGLER • GEORGE ROOF
 CARL GRAYSON • DICK MORGAN • GARY ROYCE

...IN A...

VICTORY SALUTE

to the

ELKO COUNTY FAIR

at

The LOUNGE

of the Commercial Hotel

Tuesday, Aug. 28th through Monday, Sept. 3rd

AND

★ Johnnie and Sondra Steele

A close engagement of two of our best
 performers to appear in a lounge show.

★ Betty Jo

Miss Foy's, the "ambassador" singer

★ Jack and Dory Schaaf

in "Stage & Screen"

★ Burns Twins and Evelyn

in "Stage & Screen" 1941-1942

Reservations being made at a special rate

and Day. After that engagement, she left Elko but returned to stay with the Holdrens in 1960 and 1961. She often cleaned house, fixed meals and even mowed the lawn during her visits.

Advertising has always played an important role in attractive visitors to see big name casino attractions. Thomas C. Wilson, in *Nevada* magazine, said, "In Elko, where big name showbiz began in Nevada, there has always been keen competition between the two leading casinos. Billboards for the Stockmen's Hotel featured an eye-grabbing bull in a strong highway campaign from the Utah border to California. Scores of signs featured the huge bull. One night a group of friends of the rival Commercial Hotel drove across the entire state painting the cattle brand of the Commercial's owner on the side of

every Stockmen's bull. It meant nothing to tourists, but provoked belly-laughs in every Western cowtown.

Exact prices paid for special entertainers are closely guarded secrets, but in the forties, Ted Lewis was paid \$12,000 a week. From the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, the Commercial Hotel's entertainment budget was \$600,000 a year. Today, its budget is under \$275,000 annually. The biggest and most expensive shows have always been booked during holidays and county fair time.

In Elko, shows have mostly been promoted locally, though advertisements were run in Salt Lake City in the 1950s through the 1970s. Some commercials now appear on the three Salt Lake television stations. Ellis



A crowd in front of the Hunter Theater, awaiting the arrival of the movie stars for the world premier of Here Comes the Groom.

Museum photo

Get Your Tickets Now at Dupont Pharmacy and
Hunter and Rainbo Theatres for —

World Premiere

Mayor Bing Crosby's

**"Here Comes
the Groom"**

Bing and All-Star Cast IN PERSON



Monday, July 30

ENTIRE PROCEEDS TO ELKO'S
NEW COUNTY HOSPITAL FUND

Hunter and Rainbo Theatres - Elko, Nevada



Ranchinn
MOTOR LODGE

TELEVISION
AIR CONDITIONED

MOTOR LODGE

says he now employs around 250 people and spends about \$1.5 million annually on advertising.

Appearances of top-ranking performers cost their sponsors hundreds of thousands of dollars for a week's engagement. Such prices, the lack of proper facilities and policy and ownership changes in Elko's leading casinos brought an end to the "big name" era and the entertainment center has migrated to the two metropolitan areas in the state. Although big time shows are gone from Elko, the memory of where it all started in Nevada remains, and the city will always hold, with pride, the title of where it all began back in 1941.

Shortly after the hotel opened, a swimming pool was installed in the middle of the front parking lot. After several years, it was removed because the parking spaces were needed. This picture shows the Ranchinn sign, reflected in the pool.

Museum photo, donated by Earl & Genevieve Frantzen

About the Author

The following was written in the 1979 Quarterly about the author, Angela Aguirre.

Angela Aguirre is presently attending the University of Nevada, Reno, and is in her second year of business administration. She is a member of the Ad Club and Delta Delta Delta sorority and is studying with a scholastic scholarship.

Her monograph about the start of big name entertainment in Nevada is her first published work.

She was born in Elko in 1962, attended local schools and graduated from Elko High School in 1981 where she actively participated in band,

cheerleading, student government, German Club, Honor society, Girls State delegate, Homecoming Queen, Catholic Young Group and recipient of the Triple "E" award, Nevada Insurance Education Scholarship and Phyllis Carter Memorial Scholarship.

Angela's parents are Frank and Louise Aguirre of Elko.



Angela Aguirre, 1982

Editor's note:

In 2011, Angie is married to Joe deBraga and they are the parents of two sons, Thomas and Justin. She is the Director of Continuing Education and Community Outreach for Great Basin College and previously was with the University of Nevada, Reno Extended Studies in Elko for 15 years.