



# CRAPS & THE SHOWGIRL



**Barbara  
Riiff Davis**

*Barbara Riiff Davis*

**CRAPS  
AND THE  
SHOWGIRL**

**Barbara Riiff Davis**

**LeRue Press, LLC  
Reno, Nevada  
[www.lrpnv.com](http://www.lrpnv.com)**

Craps and the Showgirl, Copyright ©2017 by Barbara Riiff Davis. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America by LeRue Press, LLC (LRP). No part of this book may be used or reproduced, in any manner, performed or copied in any form without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The author attempted to recreate events, locales and conversations from memory and notes as accurately as possible. In order to maintain anonymity, in some instances, she has changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence. Facts are stated to the best of the author's recollection and ability to confirm details. Though every effort is made to confirm these details, this is a personal story and subject to the interpretation and impressions of the author.

For information or additional copies, contact LeRue Press, LLC (LRP), 280 Greg Street, Suite 10, Reno, NV 89502

Cover art created by LeRue Press, LLC

Cover photos of Barbara Riiff Davis, courtesy of the author, used with permission  
[www.leruepress.com](http://www.leruepress.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP 2015959055

First Print Edition, July, 2017

ISBN 978-1-938814-15-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on FSC paper, responsibly sourced

# Table of Contents

<b>OVERTURE</b>	ix
Chapter 1 <b>Harolds Club</b>	1
Chapter 2 <b>Hiring In At Harolds Club</b>	4
Chapter 3 <b>Born Crooked</b>	14
Chapter 4 <b>From Crooked to Showgirl</b>	18
Chapter 5 <b>Folies Bergere of 1944</b>	29
Chapter 6 <b>Hayes Oliver Trukke</b>	38
Chapter 7 <b>Navajo Ordnance: Flagstaff, Arizona</b>	42
Chapter 8 <b>New York</b>	48
Chapter 9 <b>Brazil</b>	54
Chapter 10 <b>Ofuna</b>	68
Chapter 11 <b>Return To Reality</b>	71
Chapter 12 <b>Earl Carroll Vanities</b>	74
Chapter 13 <b>The Drunkard</b>	93

Chapter 14	101
<b>Reno: The Riverside Starlets</b>	
Chapter 15	118
<b>The Icon of Harolds Club</b>	
Chapter 16	122
<b>The John</b>	
Chapter 17	126
<b>The Customers</b>	
Chapter 18	132
<b>Children’s Theatre</b>	
Chapter 19	136
<b>Occupational Hazards</b>	
Chapter 20	141
<b>Cheating</b>	
Chapter 21	149
<b>Spooks, Hustlers &amp; Shills, Oh My!</b>	
Chapter 22	153
<b>Obituary-by Anthony Barbano</b>	
Chapter 23	156
<b>Al Ljusic the Gunsmith</b>	
Chapter 24	158
<b>Mt. Rose - 5 Acres for \$150</b>	
<b>OLIO</b>	166
<b>About the Author</b>	168
<b>Photos</b>	170
APPENDIX A	174
<b>Photo References</b>	

## OVERTURE

*Craps and the Showgirl* takes place during the golden age of live entertainment and old time gambling. Forget Dubai. It was Hollywood with Earl Carroll's "Most Beautiful Girls in the World"; Bugsy and Virginia hanging out at Barney's Beanery; the *Folies Bergere* of 1944 extravaganza in San Francisco; "Jack's" upstairs secret rooms; Reno and "Harolds Club or Bust" billboards seen around the world by travelers and G.I.s alike; and--women craps dealers.

Outside my immediate family, and some of my neighbors, I'm not all that famous, so why should anyone make an investment of time or money in my book? I think because it is uniquely interesting. I stumbled into distinctive jobs without any planning, utilizing nature's gifts, some stupidity, some luck and surely some courage at times.

The era and experiences I am writing about took place well over 60 years ago. They were not commonplace then, or now. *It was not important that I lived it, but that it was a part of history—a bit different and fairly intriguing.*

The time span is from babyhood (yes, it was necessary) through about 1958, slightly over 25 years. The next 25 and the next 25 are in the hopper.

Almost all of the information in the book is from my own recollections, notes and/or opinions, good or bad. In some cases, I did research to refresh my data or to add historical emphasis. Some of my pictures are over 80 years old and I have no idea to whom I should attribute them or I would. The only pictures that were not mine are of Indians working at the Navajo Ordnance

Depot, Flagstaff, AZ. They were not my crew, but show exactly what we did.

I wish I could thank someone else for writing, helping with research, opinions, etc., but I can't. It's not that kind of a book. I have to take all the blame—or kudos, if any.

In Las Vegas, where I currently reside, some active and retired showgirl/dancers still exist, but in fewer numbers. Our

A NEW REVUE IN 50 LAVISH SCENES  
**EARL CARROLL VANITIES**  
*Pinky Lee*  
VIRGINIA DEW · PAT HUTTO  
JOAN LARKIN · WINONA SMITH  
THREE LOVELY LADIES  
CONSTANCE PEEL · BARBARA RIIFF  
FAMOUS ST. PASIDA DANCERS  
WILLIAM HAWLEY · ROBERT DAYO  
RODOLFO SILVA · RALPH PATTERSON  
THE CARROLLIERS  
BILL PLATT · HARRY GALE · JACKSON LANGSTON  
JIMMY HELTSLEY · HARRY KNIERIM · BYRNE GERHARDT  
*Bob Gentry and Jean Ritchey*  
THE 60 MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS IN THE WORLD  
ENTIRE PRODUCTION PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY EARL CARROLL  
\*  
COSTUMES BY JEAN LESEVEUX · DANCES BY EDWIN GALE  
MUSIC BY HARRY REVEL · LYRICS BY EARL CARROLL  
DANCE TO *All Lyons & The Earl Carroll Theatre Orchestra*  
MARCEL LAMAZE IN CHARGE OF CUISINE  
Orchestra Seats \$2.00 Dinner ala Carte  
**RESERVATIONS at BOX OFFICE INSIDE**



## Craps and the Showgirl

former Mayor, Oscar Goodman, the famous “mob lawyer” escorted two of them on his arm for his 12 years in office to almost all official events. They aged in place.

Sadly, most venues have done away with showgirls so few showgirl jobs remain. But with their spare time, books by showgirls seem to be proliferating! Female Blackjack dealers have increased over female craps dealers, but I definitely doubt there are many female gang bosses anymore; anywhere. My jobs in each category are what this book is about with some unique adventures around the edges.

The situations are up-close and personal as I experienced them from a female point of view, and written with respect. Quite a few authors have described their casino experiences negatively. Fortunately, I worked for the best gambling club that ever was. It was hard work, but the Smith family that owned Harolds Club treated employees exceptionally well.

*Barbara Riiff Davis*

# Chapter 1

## Harolds Club

During the six years I spent at Harolds Club, many changes took place in my personal and professional life. On the job, I became adept enough to be assigned to the high limit tables—those tables which accepted the highest bets in the House (as the gaming club is known), as well as call bets which were those only accepted by high rollers known to the Club.

Dealers were expected to be quick, accurate and professional. With lots of money changing hands, there was no time to correct mistakes; and mistakes were not acceptable on those tables by the players or the management.

Few, if any, women dealers have scribbled down their impressions after working a shift at a casino craps table. At least none that I've read. For whatever reason, I kept journals, diaries, note cards and scraps of paper of what I thought were interesting things that happened on my watch. I'm glad I did.

A plethora of articles have been written about Nevada and its gaming from the viewpoint of gamblers, non-gamblers, spectators and aficionados of every ilk.

I have never gambled unless someone like Jessie Beck, who owned the Keno game in Harolds Club, gave me a free Keno ticket, which she often did. Chintzy? Probably; but try as I might, I could never get interested in, or excited about risking my hard-earned money on the customer side of the table. Give me a real estate gamble and I'm liable to risk my tee shirt.

I was fast at math and figures, thank goodness; a big help when bets needed to be calculated instantly for each player on the

payoffs and with each one betting different amounts both flat and odds. Flat bets are the ones placed to begin the game on the dice table. After the first roll, players can take odds which are figured differently. I won't go into how that is played out. A huge number of books have already been written about the subject in detail.

Besides earning top dollar for a shift's work, I received large tips from the players. It didn't matter if they won or not. It was tradition, and "good luck" to tip the dealer some amount. I worked hard for mine with good service, courtesy, accuracy and

HAVING FUN  
at  
**HAROLD'S CLUB**  
RENO

**HAROLD'S CLUB**

RAYMOND I. SMITH

HAROLD S. SMITH SR.

DOROTHY M. SMITH

RAYMOND A. SMITH

*A warm welcome from the  
whole Smith family*

It's been 22 years since we  
built Harold's Club for your fun and  
excitement! We're still here in full  
force, doing our best to see you  
have a bang up time in Reno...  
here's hoping you really enjoy it!

**HAROLD'S CLUB**

*Owned and Managed by the same  
Smith family since 1935*

## Craps and the Showgirl

lots of smiles. Thank goodness in those days at Harolds, dealers were able to keep their own tips. It was the incentive to be the best you could be; not like now, where tips are pooled and lousy dealers, and even pit bosses, are allowed to share in money the good dealers earn.

It has been years since debates about whether gambling should be legalized or not were front page news; in most states it is legal. Old time gamblers took being arrested as merely inconvenient delays in their business hours anyway. People wagered, no matter what the law said, so it was a matter of either jailing every gambler or legalizing it. Ergo, a forward thinking Governor of Nevada, Fred Balzar, made history on March 19, 1931 when he signed Assembly Bill No. 98 into law, which formally legalized commercial gaming in the State of Nevada; it had actually been informally legal since about 1869. So far, the “Politically Correct” troops have pretty much kept hands off trying to protect problem gamblers from themselves. Human fur is not thick enough for PETA.

I’m not totally convinced that people are going to bet no matter what the law says. It is a form of escapism, and some—who would not inflict drinking or drugs upon their body—turn to gambling which is just as insidious, and possibly a harder vice to conquer. I think, for what it’s worth, that if legalized gambling were not available, the majority would not seek it.

People flocking to the State of Nevada in the twentieth century made it the fastest growing state for many years, percentage-wise. Why did they come? Not just to gamble, but also to live and enjoy the weather, unique lifestyle, find work, and hide. One small town nearby is reputed to be a haven for people in the Federal Witness Protection Program; don’t know if it still is.

Please regress for about 60 years to another time in the history of Nevada’s gaming—where, as well as keeping our own tips, some of the characters were actually like the “Goodfellas”.

## Chapter 2

### Hiring In At Harolds Club

Snow was melting in 1951 as I drove from Squaw Valley, California to Reno, leaving my new husband to follow when his ski instruction ended. My goal was to find a job for myself and a place to live.

I knew nothing about the gaming business, except what I had observed while working as a showgirl at the Riverside Hotel. Plus, it was Spring, not the ideal time to apply for a job anywhere as it was considered the “slow time.”

Everyone I had asked about jobs in a gambling establishment said Harolds Club was the best place in town to work: people there were honest and treated their employees well.

Also, the word was that Harolds’ policy was to hire inexperienced help and train them to become whatever type of employee they thought would make the best fit for a particular job. This was particularly applicable when it came to hiring dealers. Harolds rarely hired anyone who had dealt before at other clubs. Too many bad habits, it seemed. Plus, they hired more women.



Author in Harold’s Club uniform, 1953

## Craps and the Showgirl

I checked in with some friends and set out for Harolds Club. The entrance to Harolds had a very tacky façade which was open to the street. Passers-by could look inside and see the slots and table games, which drew the curious like a magnet. In addition, seeing women dealers was intriguing. Across the whole openness was an air curtain, supposedly to keep out bugs.

After a short wait in the small personnel office, I was given an application to fill out. The friendly woman who interviewed me asked, "Would you be willing to start tonight?" No criminal checks, no background checks in those days, though that was about to change.

I couldn't say "yes" fast enough. I learned later, that if this lady liked you, no matter what time of year, you could be hired. She apparently did a good job. I found almost everyone at Harolds to be special. Looking back at the many places I have worked over the past sixty years, (retail, school teaching, government, show business, etc.) none topped Harolds for employee friendliness and cooperation. It was not just hype.

Upon leaving, my interviewer gave me a book called, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. She said, "Harold Smith, the owner, wants all his employees to read this book." She also handed me a copy of "Harolds Club, To Our Employees," a guide to what was expected of me.

I was also told the proper attire that I would be expected to buy as soon as possible. In the meantime, I could wear slacks and a tailored shirt. The required "uniform" consisted of either Western pants and boots or shoes, if I preferred, or Western-style skirt and a tailored blouse. Boleros were required and would be supplied to me with a \$5 deposit to be deducted from my pay for however many I wanted.

The rest I learned upon reporting to work the first night. I was taken from the office to the sewing room where the woman in charge fitted me with a bolero embroidered with cactus on the front and a covered wagon on the back. She asked me what colors and how many boleros I wanted. Two changes or two deductions

from my pay were plenty to start with, I thought. Later, I had boleros made of material to match my tailor-made frontier pants. I had already discovered Parker's for cowboy boots when I was at the Riverside. Eventually, I owned about ten pairs ranging from pink to snakeskin. They were the most comfortable footwear I have ever worn.

The seamstress also issued me a "change" apron. That was the job I was to start learning. The apron was made of a heavy green fabric to be worn around my waist. It had long ties and several different-sized pockets. Aprons were made and replaced when necessary by the sewing people. Some aprons had straps to go over the shoulders to help alleviate the weight at the waist of carrying the heavy silver. We were still using silver dollars in those days, but chips for the larger denominations. There was a \$5 deposit for my apron, as well as a \$1 deposit on a name pin that I was issued at the same time.

Everyone was required to wear a name pin on the left upper chest with the first name in bold printed letters. The tag made it easy for any customer to "turn you in" for some reason. The large pin could also be read by the watchers behind the mirrors up in the catwalk—as well as the stoolies, or spooks patrolling the floor.

Below the name was printed the place you considered home. My pin said, "BARBARA," and underneath, "Burbank." The customers could get to know you and where you were from--that personal touch that "Pappy" Smith, the club patriarch, liked so well. Floor bosses and fellow-employees could get to know you too.

Some customers came to like individuals so well, that they would tell management how nice we were, or how well we did our job. Positive customer comments were always the best to get and we knew that management took great note of compliments.

After the deductions of the first week were made, I was well aware there would be little left in my paycheck! I did cheer up when I found that the club paid for the dry cleaning of all uniforms, and did alterations and repairing at no charge.



## Craps and the Showgirl

The Smith's started the practice of hiring women in gambling. They thought females would draw more customers by creating confidence and believed women were more honest. In addition, the thought was that women were more adept at handling money and cards because they had been trained in sewing and knitting; thus, had finer hand movements than men. Being pretty didn't hurt either. I wonder what the rationale would be now. Maybe texting, although both men and women are adept at that these days.

For some reason Nevada Governor Grant Sawyer attempted to ban women dealers in Nevada during his tenure, 1958-1967. Obviously, that issue was dead on arrival.

From the sewing room I was taken upstairs to the Roaring

Camp Room. Roaring Camp was the name of the room that became famous for some 3000 antique guns Raymond

“Pappy” Smith had purchased from a collector. I was introduced to a “Key” man. A Key man was so-

called because he carried keys to open up the back of the slot machines in case of any breakdown. In the event the machine did not pay off, he opened the back and got the necessary amount of the customer's claim and paid him. He then attempted to fix the machine right there; if he could not, he called the slot machine mechanics to remove it to their workroom.

Besides his mechanical duties, the Key man was responsible for breaking-in change personnel. In his 1953 book,



Author dealing craps in Harold's  
Roaring Camp Room

“Sagebrush Casinos,” Oscar Lewis referred to “Harolds Club’s school for lady dealers.” There was no school that I attended, as it had been done away with when it was found that going right onto the floor, directly into the melee, was a much better and more realistic indoctrination. Lewis’ description was quite accurate about the reasons for the new tradition. I experienced them later as a dealer.

That first night I was simply put into the care of the Key man. He led me to a cashier, where I was given \$50 in small bills, about \$40 worth of quarters wrapped in paper wrappers holding twenty each, about \$50 worth of dimes, the wrappers holding fifty each, and the usual two sacks of wrapped nickels: a dollar’s worth in each wrapper. Each sack contained \$25 worth of nickels and other change that I could not carry all at once. I signed a receipt for the money and a key for a locker.

The locker boxes were about the size of a small USPS post office mailbox. We stored extra change and small purses that we were allowed to have. As the extra change from my apron and my locker became depleted, I bought more with the soft currency I had collected. The apron weighed about 25 pounds when stuffed.

Starting employees on making change was a good policy, both psychologically and organizationally. For the club, change-making afforded an opportunity to see if the new employee would fit into the gambling atmosphere with a minimum of training, could handle money, as well as be friendly, patient and honest.

For the employee, this job offered a chance to adjust to an entirely new world. The change person sauntered among the patrons on the slot machines to be available with more coins as needed, and to watch for cheaters.

It was difficult to become used to being on my feet for long hours and to hear the constant slot machine noise. The racket was deafening. The exhaustion that goes with noise, plus standing all shift wearing an apron full of silver around my waist, was something definitely foreign to me.

## Craps and the Showgirl

It did not take me long to notice the intensity of the players on the slot machines. Not many of them seemed to be having fun. Some customers, as they do today, fought over machines. Technically, a customer was not allowed to play more than two machines at a time, and only one on a busy night.

Sometimes women came in with one hand gloved, as though ready for a shooting match or a golf game. She used the gloved hand to pull the slot handle. Regular players knew that whatever the handle was made of caused the hand to become quite black; hence, the glove.

Fifty-cent and dollar players demanded stools, even though having stools was against the fire law at the time. Some players, however, in particular those who were feeding the dollar machines for hours, were given a stool--to hell with the fire laws!

Becoming a dealer in one of the busiest clubs in the United States at that time was both a fascinating and frightening experience. Being almost 5'10" I was chosen to be trained as a Craps or Dice dealer. The owners preferred the game at Harolds Club to be referred to as a Dice game, believing that "Craps" was a distasteful reference.

After a few weeks of apprenticeship with the change apron and having gotten used to the continuous noise and people, I was taken to the dime Dice table in the back of the club by the Douglas Alley door; it was there that all new dealers on that game were trained.

It was on this table that I met the infamous Joe Conforte. I did not know who he was, much less that he was "infamous." Like clockwork, he played the dime table every day. Dressed poorly, he appeared to have little money. He was an extremely polite, patient, and quiet man, though a little grungy. He did not offer me a job! A couple of years later I was shocked to learn that he was Nevada's biggest brothel owner.

One night Conforte came in with two of his girls to play on a high-limit table. They were being extremely noisy, calling attention to themselves. That night, Joe Conforte was a completely

## About the Author



Barbara Davis received a BA from the University of Nevada, Reno while working as a dealer in Harolds Club, a gambling casino. Her MS is in Public Relations and Communications from Boston University.

Davis taught college level English and Public Relations both in Nevada and Texas, along with courses for the Learning Annex, and for corporations and non-profit organizations. She traveled extensively throughout the United States giving seminars to both paid and volunteer Executives in Girl Scout Councils, teaching the integration of public relations into corporate planning at all levels.

She received the *Matrix Award* from Women in Communications for Training and Training Materials, a *Certificate of Achievement* from The Publicity Club of Boston, The *Busted Anvil & Bent Quill Award* from the Public Relations Society of America and numerous other awards.

Currently Ms. Davis writes anything she feels like!

## Craps and the Showgirl

For additional copies of ***Craps and the Showgirl*** or bulk purchases, contact the publisher, LeRue Press, LLC

Look for more titles from  
LeRue Press, LLC (LRP) at [www.lrpnv.com](http://www.lrpnv.com)

If you are in Reno,  
Visit LeRue at

