

## THE EL REY RESORT & CASINO

The El Rey was the brainchild of **Willie Martello**, one of seven brothers, several of which were in the night club business. The original El Rey club was founded in Southgate, California in 1937 and owned by Willie's brother, **Tony Martello**. Tony, who had one of the first liquor licenses in California, named the club after a favorite beer of the time, El Rey Beer.

The tiny mining town of Searchlight, Nevada was the home of the El Rey Resort & Casino from 1946 to 1973. Located halfway between Needles, California and Las Vegas, Nevada, it was both a welcome oasis for road-weary travelers and a secluded hideaway for some of Hollywood's biggest names. It was not uncommon to find the likes of **Frank Sinatra, Betty Grable, Martin & Lewis**, and **Louis Prima** among the casino patrons. In the words of **Bob Martello**, Willie's nephew, **"It was a great place for Hollywood to hide out and relax."**

Willie Martello came to Searchlight after his brothers, **Buddy & Albert**, relocated to Searchlight to raise livestock. Soon thereafter he opened the El Rey Resort & Casino with the dream of turning Searchlight into a vacation destination, not unlike modern day Las Vegas.

The El Rey, though small in size, had massive ambitions and offered everything from gourmet meals prepared by renowned chef, **Luigi Scirocco**, nightly live entertainment & a complete line-up of casino games.

Willie Martello, eager to bring more and more people to Searchlight, built the Searchlight Airport which featured a massive 6600 foot long paved and lighted runway. Gamblers wanting to experience the fun and excitement of the El Rey were offered free flights to Searchlight but the perks did not stop there. While on board the DC-3 airplane, passengers were given a free bottle of champagne, five dollars in nickels, 2 for 1 gaming vouchers, & a coupon for a complimentary dinner. Patrons were also promised a free ride back to the Long Beach, California airport.

In the early 1950's, the El Rey began offering spacious and affordable air conditioned single, double, and family rooms for rent. Prices ranged from \$6.00 to \$20.00 per night.

Sadly, Willie Martello and his El Rey Resort & Casino are more often associated with the world's oldest profession instead of the visionary entertainment and innovative marketing and amenities. For a brief period of time, it was possible to find comfort in the arms of **Daisy Mae and her Ladies**, who operated from inside the resort.

Let it be known that the addition of the "Ladies" was not initially Willie's idea. He was approached by a Madame wanting to set up shop and after much deliberation Willie decided to give it a try in order to boost the cash flow and bring in more customers. **"She ran the girls. He ran the club. That was that."**, according to Bob Martello.

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While prostitution was certainly nothing new in Nevada, it did tarnish the reputation of the club and the great man who created the El Rey. Wanting to bring the resort back to the high level of entertainment and family appeal it had become known for, Willie decided to remove the prostitutes from his establishment. A few news articles have been found suggesting that prostitution was around as early as the 1950's and existed up through the 1960's, but not necessarily from or within the El Rey club.

On the cold day of January 21, 1962, the El Rey Casino caught fire and burned to the ground. Across the street a second El Rey was established. The casino was not owned by Willie Martello for long and by many accounts, **"It just wasn't the same."** The motel section of the old resort still stands to this day and the building that housed the last El Rey Casino is now the town's senior center.

Willie Martello died on January 9, 1968. It is reported that the legendary Dell Webb served as one of the pallbearers.

Although many people wish to remember and dwell on the short-lived, and quite salacious aspects of the El Rey, it must not be forgotten that Willie and the Martello family did infinitely more good for the town and people of Searchlight than anyone before or since.

Aside from building the airport and bringing in valuable dollars and traffic to an otherwise abandoned mining town, Willie built the first swimming pool in Searchlight and had an integral part in the creation of the town's baseball field.

Willie was commonly known for his generosity, often taking in folks who were down on their luck and offering them room & board as well as employment in order to help get them back on their feet. **"No one ever left the El Rey broke or hungry,"** says Sharon Richardson, niece of Willie Martello.

**"We were trying to build a town",** says Bob Martello of the old days, **"Every dime Willie made went right back into the club and the community."** Perhaps Chef Luigi Scirocco said it best about Willie Martello, **"Willie Martello was a gentleman, I don't care what anybody says. He was a man who wanted to go first class and he went that way if he had to hock himself to the hilt."**

Information for this column was provided by interviews with Bob Martello, stories from Kenny Laursen & Tony Lovello, an archival letter from Sharon Richardson, and archival newspaper articles in *The Nevadan*.

Archival letters and newspaper articles provided by Jane Overy or the Searchlight Museum, Searchlight, Nevada

By Andy Martello