

Harrah's showroom – a 50-year history



By John Packer

STATELINE – In 1955, budding casino magnate William F. Harrah took a chance on the then-sleepy, seasonal resort town of Stateline on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. He bought the Gateway Club on the lake side of Highway 50 and opened his second gambling house in Nevada, nearly 18 years after opening the bingo parlor that became Harrah's Reno.

Looking to expand, the next year he bought the former Stateline Country Club across the highway and, in 1958, added the adjacent Nevada Club to his holdings. These moves gave him the property needed to realize his vision for Harrah's Lake Tahoe.

In 1959, Bill Harrah decided it was time to roll the dice and spend more than \$3.5 million of borrowed money to expand Harrah's Tahoe and build a state-of-the-art nightclub and dinner theater with "Vegas-type stars performing every night of the year."

Built in just nine months, with construction crews often working around-the-clock, Harrah had insisted that his dream 850-seat theater (fairly large by the standards of the day) be ready in time to host the expected horde of visitors coming to the 1960 Winter Olympics in nearby Squaw Valley.

In December 1959, Harrah opened the South Shore Room with the one-and-only Red Skelton as the headliner.

The plan to attract the Olympic visitors, however, fell fairly flat: After spending their days watching the myriad events on the slopes, people were just too tired to trek to the South Shore for a show.

Despite a massive advertising and PR campaign, shows in the first quarter of 1960 – which included such contemporary stars as Patti Page, Fred Waring, Liberace, Victor Borge, Marlene Dietrich, Nat King Cole and Ray Bolger – drew disappointing numbers.

Undaunted, Harrah continued to insist on booking the top names in entertainment for two-week runs, two shows every night. Once again, his vision was vindicated. As April turned to May, vacationers and gamblers began to flock to the new entertainment Mecca.

The South Shore Room soon became “the place” outside of Las Vegas to see the biggest stars of the day.

For nearly 50 years, hundreds of the world’s most popular singers, comedians, Broadway shows, pop bands and rock bands have graced the maple boards of the legendary showroom, some on numerous occasions over several decades.

Superstars from today and yesterday, including Frank Sinatra, Jack Benny, Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Sammy Davis Jr., Bob Dylan, The Smothers Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Marlene Dietrich, Robin Williams, Willie Nelson, Tom Jones, Emmett Kelly, Huey Lewis & The News, Jonny Lang, Liberace, Johnny Mathis, Wayne Newton, Patti Page, Don Rickles, Diana Ross & The Supremes, The Lawrence Welk Show, George Burns, Donna Summer, Danny Thomas, Sarah Vaughan, Dionne Warwick, Bryan Adams, Andy Williams, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Loretta Lynn, Belafonte, Scott Hamilton & Dorothy Hamill, Tony Bennett, Sonny & Cher, Radio City Music Hall’s Rockettes, Carol Burnett, The Muppets, George Burns, Paul Anka, Ray Charles, Nat King Cole, Sammy Hagar, Billy Crystal, David

Letterman, Bill Cosby, John Denver, Liza Minnelli, and many others, have played the famed Harrah's Lake Tahoe stage. The list goes on and on.

In 2006, the South Shore Room underwent a multi-million dollar renovation. The project included a \$500,000 state-of-the-art sound system and a top to bottom renovation of the theater. The stage, which many performers have recognized for its efficient design, friendly feel and impeccable acoustics, was left relatively untouched – looking much like it did when the curtain first rose on Red Skelton on Dec. 21, 1959.

For more information about who is next to visit the South Shore Room, call 800.786.8208.

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