

Introduction:

Bing Crosby's Other Life

MOST OF US ARE NOT AWARE THAT THE HISTORY OF NEVADA INCLUDES a long established relationship to Hollywood. The deserts that abound throughout the state have attracted filmmakers since the early 1900s for their beauty and “old West” quality. Even today the television and movie industry looks to locations in Nevada as a backdrop for their stories.

Las Vegas has also become a playground for countless celebrities, and casino showroom headliners were well-known names in the entertainment business. These performers were not movie stars per se, but singers, dancers, and musicians.

A number of film stars from the 1930s and '40s visited Nevada, and some even bought homes there, but none of them ever became a “true Nevadan” by local standards, except Bing Crosby, who purchased large cattle ranches in the northern part of the state, near Elko. Bing’s acceptance by the residents was probably because of his casual attitude towards his own celebrity status and willingness to “fit in” with his surroundings. Uncle Bing was captivated by the land and people of Nevada. He was once quoted as saying “I’m in love with these folks,” and that affection was returned many times over the years.

It is believed that Bing first encountered Elko County when he was returning from a hunting trip to Canada and Idaho. The highway leading south into Nevada takes the traveler directly into the heart of Elko, a city of about five thousand people at that time, around 1942.

Uncle Bing was an avid golfer, fisherman, hunter, and all around outdoorsman. Living and working in Hollywood satisfied his passion for golf, but not his other interests. Whenever he was able to spend time in Nevada, it was the best of all worlds for him. I don’t believe Uncle Bing

spent much, if any, time in Reno, but Las Vegas and Elko played host to him and his family frequently during a fifteen-year period.

Bing's Elko properties provided him with the outdoor ranch life that he grew to love, as well as excellent fishing and hunting grounds. He introduced his four young sons to that lifestyle when he bought his first cattle ranch not far from Elko in 1943. Some years later, my mother and I visited the ranches that Uncle Bing enjoyed so much.

The first recorded visit of my uncle to Las Vegas was in 1956. It was golf that lured him and brought him back a number of times. He also made several trips to Las Vegas to be in the audience and show support for the young members of the Crosby clan who were performing on stage there.

Although Bing was never booked to perform into any of the Vegas hotel-casinos, he did appear one time (for a one-night concert) at the Aladdin Theatre for the Performing Arts. This was a fund-raising event organized by a local priest who had virtually no assets. The priest was under orders, however, to build a church in a particular section of Las Vegas. Uncle Bing's concert raised the money to get the project started and the following year it was completed. I visited that church thirty years later, and met with the priest, the first Crosby family member to do so.

I think the life and times of Bing Crosby in Nevada gives us an insight into the man that, until now, has not been widely publicized. Let us begin.