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## **Benny Binion and the Dallas Gambling Wars**

By Ed Hertel ([edhertel@hotmail.com](mailto:edhertel@hotmail.com))

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*Description: Before Benny Binion became the Las Vegas icon he is known for today, he was the kingpin of Dallas, Texas, gambling activity. When Herbert Noble dared to challenge Binion for a piece of the action, the city erupted in a war that left violence and devastation in its wake.*

Rarely has a chip said so much with so little. The chips stamped “BHS” come from the state of Texas, and like the state itself, they hold a story that is bigger than life.



The hub mold chip from the Mason & Co was ordered in 1939 and sent to Sam Murray at Santa Paula Hotel in Dallas, Texas. With this information, deciphering the initials on the chip can be reasonably guessed – “S” for Sam Murray;

“H” for Herbert Noble, Murray’s gambling manager at the Santa Paula; and “B” for Benny Binion, crime boss of Dallas and not-so-silent minority partner in the hotel’s gambling action.

But interestingly enough, the initials aren’t the only thing on the chips as the gamblers added a little flare to go along with the initials. With the benefit of hindsight, we are invited to interpret these designs and imagine that they aren’t just ornamentation, but are foretelling signs of times ahead.

Might the lightning bolts on the Mason chip be a mark of mistrust between the partners and a prediction of a coming storm? Perhaps the arrow through the center of the S-mold was a sign of ill will and possible threats between the men. It’s impossible to know for sure what the motivations were behind the chip designs, but the guesses would be logically considering what was about to happen.



Within a year of the Mason chip order, one of the partners would be betrayed and assassinated and the remaining two would start a war with the winner-take-all prize of becoming the Dallas’ vice czar. The conflict put a city under siege, leaving a wake of chaos and dozens of dead gangsters.

In this fight for supremacy between gambling giants there could only be one winner and the stakes could not have been higher. The victor would reign supreme not only in Dallas, but would eventually become a gambling icon with his name immortalized in lights. This is not

just a story of a few chips but one about the genesis of a gambling legend and the measures he had to take to get there.

This is the story of...

# BENNY BINION AND THE DALLAS GAMBLING WARS



Benny Binion's path towards underworld boss was anything but guaranteed. The sickly child from a small north Texas town barely survived childhood and his numerous bouts of pneumonia kept him home and both weak abled as well as uneducated. It was well known, even later, that Benny Binion was barely literate, but to underestimate his intelligence would be a mistake. Even though he wasn't good with words, he was a master of numbers and odds.



Benny's education in the real world started early when his father taught him the art of the horse trading business. He learned how to not get hustled, as well as a few tricks to get one over on the next guy. With his new found skills, Benny traveled to El Paso and

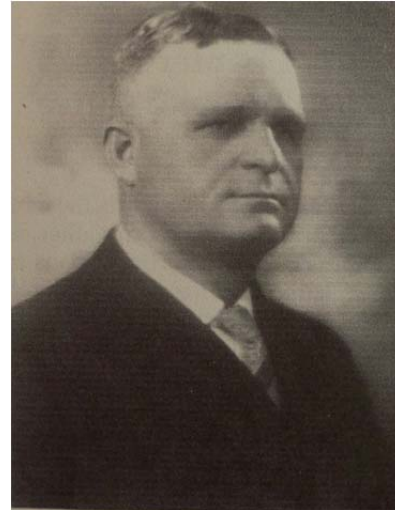
tried to make a go of his new trade. His time there would be short, and much would be hidden in mystery as he was later hesitant to go into details about his time in west Texas. What is known is that it was here that he first dabbled in gambling, as well as some bootlegging, and spent some time locked up in the local jail. Whatever secrets Benny kept of his time in El Paso, he kept them close to his chest. Within a year of arriving, Binion called it quits and headed to Dallas.

Dallas, even back in 1922, was a larger city than Benny Binion had been used to and at eighteen years young, Benny must have felt like a small fish in a very large pond. With his newly acquired knowledge of gambling and his aptitude for numbers, Benny quickly found a place in the Dallas gambling underworld which was



Dallas skyline - 1920

currently being run by Warren Diamond's gambling syndicate.



Warren Diamond, Dallas gambling boss

Under Diamond's tutelage, Benny learned the ins and the outs of running a gambling empire. Many of Diamond's business strategies would follow Benny throughout his life. It was Diamond who taught Benny that there was room for more than one gambler in town – as

long as he was the top and got his proper cut. It was also Warren Diamond who would never refuse a bet, regardless of how much. Table limits were merely suggestions and a big bet was never refused. This would later become one of Binion's claims to fame.

Within four years, Benny had become one of Diamond's trusted employees. He had begun as a mere shill who steered gamblers into the games, but soon his ambitions were leading him into going into business on his own. With Diamond's blessing (and 25% of his revenues), Benny opened his first craps game in 1926.

The following year would prove another milestone as Benny started his first policy game in Dallas. Policy, sometimes called bolito, was a lottery type game where gamblers bet on numbers that were picked in some random fashion. It was popular in the poorer neighborhoods because bets could be as little as one cent and the payoffs could be as much as six or seven

hundred times. These small bets would add up, and policy would become one of Benny's most lucrative, and therefore most heavily defended, businesses.

As the 1920s were winding down, Benny Binion was becoming not only wealthy, but powerful. His reputation



for defending his policy territory was well known and anyone encroaching would be dealt with quickly and harshly. Through it all however, Binion stayed loyal to his boss Warren Diamond. It was no surprise then in 1930 when Diamond announced his retirement and handed over the keys to the Dallas underworld to Binion. Now, with no limits to his ambitions, Benny would make Dallas his own and a new era in gambling was born.

Binion moved quickly to consolidate his power. He merged Diamond's old partners with some of his loyal gangsters and formed what would later be called the Southland Group which operated out of the downtown Southland Hotel which acted as both a headquarters and gambling casino.



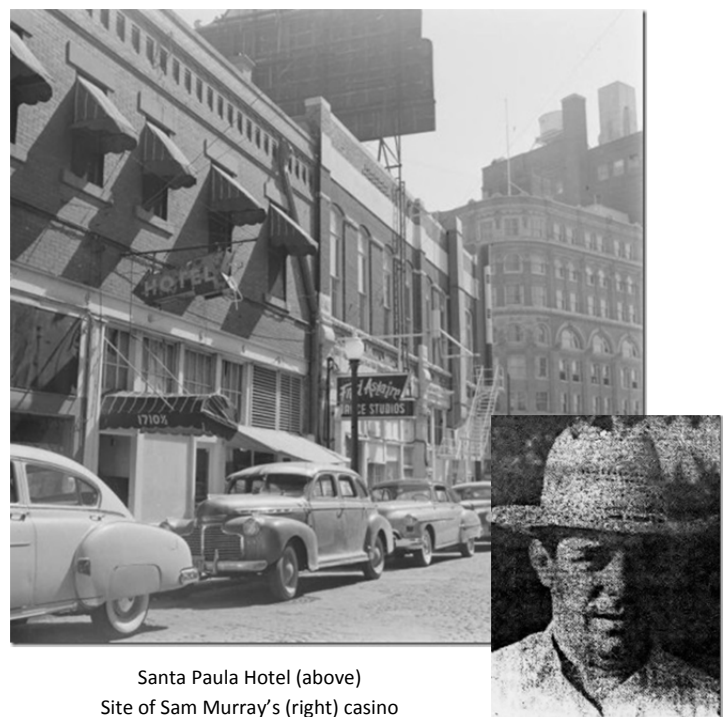
Southland Hotel  
Benny Binion's headquarters and gambling  
casino on the entire second floor

From the Southland Binion operated most of Dallas' gambling. Binion had his own games in various hotels around town, but independent gamblers were allowed to run their own games – with permission of course. For starters, Binion would be given a 25% cut of all the action. Failure to pay not only brought possible

retribution from Benny's gang, but also guaranteed harassment from the local police. Benny's contributions to local law enforcement made life much easier for those on his team. From police to judges, gamblers friendly with Benny were given an easy time.

As the gamblers shared the dice action throughout Dallas, Benny still held tight his zero tolerance for competition in the policy racket. One of the first people to test this was Sam Murray, operator of a craps game in the Santa Paula Hotel (and the one who ordered the BHS chips). Along with his manager Herbert Noble, Murray's casino at the hotel had been a success for years. He was content to pay his 25% protection money and welcomed the partnership with Binion until 1938 when he decided to reach a little higher. It was then that Sam Murray seized control of the horse betting business and then made the mistake of moving in on Binion's policy racket.

It was clear that threats were not sending a stern enough message, and Benny wanted to make an example of Murray to all the other would-be competitors. On an afternoon in June 1940, Benny received a call to inform him that Sam Murray was leaving the Santa Paula Hotel, unarmed and unescorted. Benny dispatched his right-hand man Ivy Miller to end the disagreement once and for all. Sam Murray, in front of witnesses, was gunned down in the street.



Santa Paula Hotel (above)  
Site of Sam Murray's (right) casino  
and eventual murder

There was no question what happened. The police arrested Ivy Miller, but he would never see a conviction for the crime. He claimed self-defense and the plentiful witnesses suddenly all came down with group amnesia. To everyone in “the know”, this was a gangland warning to stay away from Binion’s policy business.

The only question that remained was who tipped Benny off about Murray’s whereabouts? Although not known for sure, rumors swirled about Murray’s business associate Herbert Noble. He was usually in charge of protecting Murray, but on this day was nowhere to be found. And then there is the unusual amount of apparent rewards that Binion handed Noble right after the murder. Once just the manager of the Santa Paula Hotel’s action, Noble was given the hotel’s game outright as well as other places around town.



Chip ordered from Mason and Co  
by Herbert Noble (left) in 1935.

Regardless of how he became a gambling underboss, Noble was quickly starting to outgrow his shackles. He was coming in light on his 25% contributions and would be slow in answering inquiries. By the mid-1940s, Herbert Noble was becoming more brazen, and Binion was ready put him in his place. For Benny Binion, there was only one response to disloyalty and it would need to be served quickly.

In January 1946, the first shots of the Dallas Gambling Wars were sounded when Herbert Noble’s car was riddled with bullets and he barely escaped with his life.

Benny would take the first shot, but in not ending it that night, he opened the door to years of bloodshed that would rock the city.

With this single action, Dallas was split between the two groups – Binion on one side and Noble on the other. The city’s underworld was forced to choose sides in an important life or death decision. First one side would lose a man, then the other in a circle of retaliation that never seemed to end. What was once a city of cooperation was now divided between the two warring factions.

The violence was ramped up to such an extreme that the police could no longer turn a blind eye. Too much property was being damaged and far too much attention was now focused on their city. Word went out that on January 1, 1947, Dallas would be closed to gambling. The city’s gamblers shuttered some of their more visible games, and drove the others underground.

With the tide changing in Dallas, Binion decided to wait out the gambling lockdown out west in Las Vegas. Before he left, he assigned his gambling empire to various people loyal to only himself. Even though he wouldn’t be running the day-to-day operations, he wanted to make sure his craps games, and especially his policy empire, continued to bring in a good cash flow.

But there was one piece of unfinished business Binion wanted to make sure got handled while he was away. He didn’t forget who brought them to this point, and he made sure the order went out – Get Herbert Noble!

While Benny Binion was enjoying his time in Las Vegas running the Westerner Casino, Herbert Noble was doing everything he could to just stay alive. In May 1948, Noble was ambushed while driving home. He took a bullet in the arm, but managed to escape.

In the following February 1949, someone was spotted messing with Noble’s car outside of one of his clubs. An inspection found a pack of explosives around the car’s starter. The newspapers dubbed him “The Cat” because of his number of lives. Little did they know this cat had many more lives.

In September Noble’s car was forced off the road. Three gunmen emerged and starting blasting. Noble



grabbed a gun of his own, and even after taking a shot to his leg was still able to return enough fire to drive the men away. It must have seemed that Herbert Noble was unkillable. Whether you were on his side or not, he was gaining the respect of the entire underworld community.

Meanwhile, Binion received the news of Noble's miraculous survival with anything but respect. He was furious. His partnership in the Westerner was proving less than desirable and he quickly sold his interest and purchased the El Dorado in downtown Las Vegas. While he started the renovations that would eventually become of the Horseshoe, his men back in Dallas were doubling their effort to put a stop to Herbert Noble.

The day of November 29, 1949, started as one of celebration for Herbert Noble who was turning his hobby of flying into a dream of running a legitimate business. That morning found Noble at a local airfield signing a deal for its purchase. He had borrowed his wife's car because it was bigger and could hold his entourage of lawyers. Unfortunately, his wife was not as cautious as Herbert and didn't inspect his car before starting it. A well-hidden bomb killed Mildred Noble instantly.

Herbert Noble was devastated by the news. There was no question who the bomb was meant for, and in the underworld the identification of the bomber was well known. Police were told that Binion's henchman Lois Green was responsible, but no charges were brought. Regardless of his current residency in Nevada, Benny Binion could still protect his people from the local Dallas police. What he couldn't protect them from was an out-of-control Herbert Noble who was now furious. Less than a month after his wife's murder, Lois Green was gunned down outside a club in Dallas.

Feeling like he had little to lose, Herbert Noble tipped off the state police as to Binion's secret headquarters for his policy racket. In one raid, the police shut down his policy business and confiscated all his records showing years of enormous untaxed gains. Of all the fights Binion had endured to this point, none were as serious as those over taxes, and he knew it.

It was only three days after the Binion raid when the next attempt on Noble would be tried. On New Year's eve in 1949, Noble was met at his front door with a hail of gunfire. Bullets shattered his arm, but he escaped. He was taken to the hospital where his arm would be reconstructed. A week later, his peaceful stay at the



Noble's car explodes, killing his wife

hospital was cut short when a sniper from across the street took a shot through his upper level window. It was clear that Herbert Noble would not be allowed to find any peace what-so-ever.

With his world quickly spinning out of control, Herbert Noble was starting to show the signs of man with little else to live for. He moved out of his house and into his ranch, which he fortified with security and enough fire arms for an army. He was drinking heavily and taking pills which allowed him to stay up all night and others to put him asleep during the day. He didn't allow anyone to the ranch and his only companions were a pack of Chihuahua dogs and parrots he used as barking and squawking alarms. His mind was gone and the guilt of his wife's death weighed heavily on his conscious.



Noble's animal companions during his exile from reality

With Binion in Las Vegas and Noble locked in his fortress, it was up their associates to continue the war, which they did with a gusto. The violence was slipping over the border into neighboring Fort Worth where Binion's good friend George Wildenstein ran his Eastside Club. In the fall of 1950, the Eastside was robbed by men from Noble's faction, and it didn't take long for Benny to send a response. In late November, the peace in Fort Worth was broken with the sound of an immense explosion that took the life of one of the robbers. Unfortunately, also caught in the blast of the thief's pregnant wife. The publicity and outpouring of anger for the violence brought swift action from law enforcement who formed a grand jury to look into the area's gambling.



Benny Binion was finding it difficult to stay under the radar. The grand jury summoned him to appear, but he declined stating that he feared for his life. In reality, his fear was that once back in Texas he would be arrested on gambling charges stemming from the raid on his policy headquarters. Even without Binion, the grand jury handed down sixty felony indictments against gamblers. However, their efforts would, for the most

part, be thwarted by Benny and Noble's influences as most of the gamblers got off with little more than small fines.



Meanwhile, back in Dallas, Herbert Noble was still feeling the heat. His pride and joy, the Dallas Airmen's Club was destroyed in a late night bombing. Although

nobody was there at the time, the message was loud and clear – the war continues!

Benny Binion was finding the publicity of his illegal activities to be quite counterproductive to him getting his gambling license for his Las Vegas Horseshoe Club. He was originally denied on the grounds he was connected with illegal activities in Texas. His lawyer argued that his activities outside of Nevada should not prejudice his ability to get a license. The argument was persuasive enough, as well as possible payments to the commission, to finally get his approval.

If getting approved for his dream casino wasn't enough, August 1951 would prove to be celebrated by Binion for yet another reason. His war in Dallas was about to be concluded in the most violent of ways.

Herbert Noble's ability to keep one step ahead of his enemies was about to hit a stumble. On August 7, 1951, Noble pulled up to his mailbox and found not his monthly bills, but explosives. Before he could react, someone from a nearby hill flipped a switch and





Noble's mangled car after the explosion

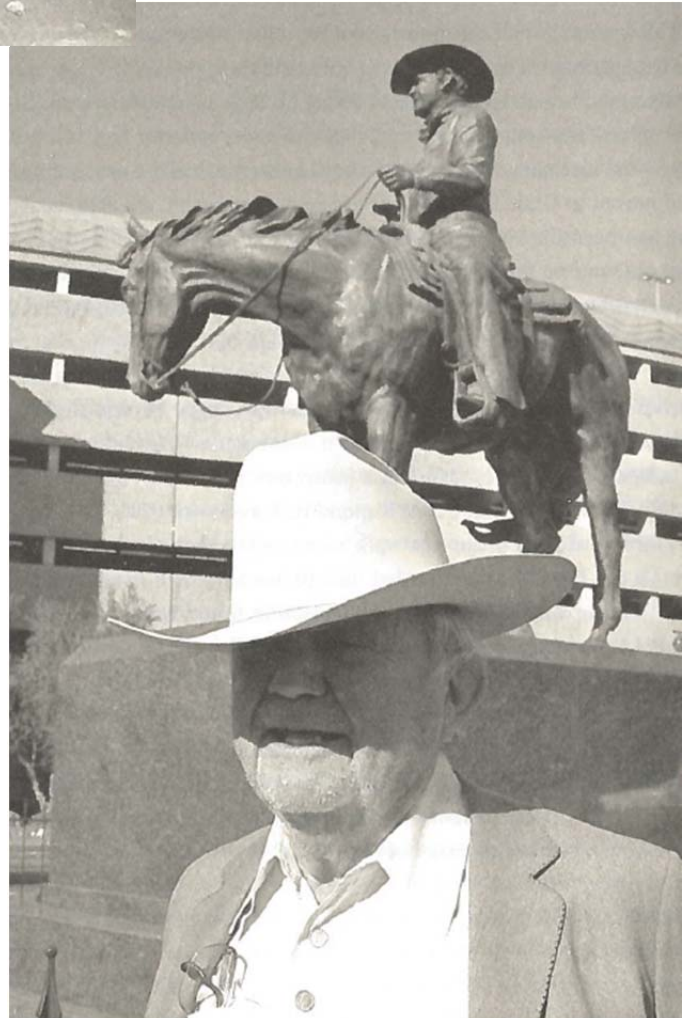
Herbert Noble was instantly killed in the explosion. It seems appropriate that the war that burned so long and so bright should end in blaze of fire. Benny Binion would later say in an interview about his war with Herbert "The Cat" Noble, "They said he had nine lives. Damn good thing he didn't have ten."

Life for Benny Binion wasn't all roses however. Even with his new Horseshoe Casino and the death of his arch nemesis, Benny was still facing charges stemming from his illegal activities in Dallas. In September 1953, he finally gave in and plead guilty to four counts of income tax evasion and one count of gambling. He received five different four year sentences to be serves concurrently and quietly did his time.

When he was released in October 1957, he had a decision to make. On the one hand he could return to his Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas that was under the care of his friend Joe Brown. Or, he could return to his roots and head back to Dallas. Gambling was in his blood, and in Las Vegas he could do it legally. But Dallas was his home, and with his enemies gone, that too seemed like a good option. Stay in Las Vegas and be

one of many gamblers, or return to Dallas and become the top man again?

In the end, Benny Binion would stay in Las Vegas. His larger than life personality and cowboy attitude was well suited for the Las Vegas crowd who quickly adopted him as one of their legendary fathers. Benny would grow his Horseshoe brand until it was synonymous with big-time gambling. Today, the name Benny Binion demands respect and admiration. From his humble beginnings to his legendary status, Benny Binion knew what he wanted, and he wasn't about to let anyone get in his way.



Benny Binion, standing in front of a statue of himself erected in downtown Las Vegas



Chips from the Dallas Gambling Wars

Southland Hotel  
Commerce Street  
Headquarters for Benny Binion and partners



Ordered by Ivy Miller, Benny Binion's right hand man

 1938	 1940	 1941	 1941
 1942	 1943	 1944	 1945

Ordered by Red Scarborough, Benny Binion's partner

 1940	 1940	 1941	 1941
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Ordered by various Southland Group members

 1937	 1942	 1946	 1950
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## Chips from the Dallas Gambling Wars

### Blue Bonnet Hotel

1302 Commerce

Operated by J.C. Cheek and W.D. Walker, part of Binion's direct control



Ordered by W.D. Walker  
(date unknown)



Ordered by J.C. Cheek  
(1938)

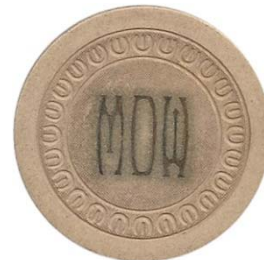
### Various Binion Controlled Dallas Hotels



**Maurice Hotel**  
James Worsham  
(1940, 1941)



**Jefferson Hotel**  
Johnny Andrews  
(1942)



**St. George Hotel**  
Jack Darby  
(1941)

### East Side Club

Fort Worth

Operated by George Wildenstein  
and Binion's headquarters for his Fort Worth operations



Ordered by Jack Darby  
(1950)



(date unknown)

## Chips from the Dallas Gambling Wars

### Santa Paula Hotel

1710-1/2 Live Oak

Operated by Sam Murray (until 1940) and Herbert Noble



Ordered by Herbert Noble, 1935

Ordered by Sam Murray, 1939



Date unknown

Ordered by Sam Murray, 1939

### Campbell Hotel

Elm and Harwood

Operated by Eddie Wroten, controlled by Herbert Noble



Ordered by Eddie Wroten, 1945