

## Frank “Booze” Beyer and Tijuana

He has been called the greatest benefactor in San Ysidro history--a mining engineer turned rancher who donated land for churches and schools, and built the community’s first public library. Dimly remembered today as the namesake of streets and schools, Frank B. Beyer is less known as the “gambler from the owner’s side of the table”—a man with a colorful career below the border, who spent his last years giving back his wealth to his adopted community.



Border Baron Frank “Booze” Beyer (center) visiting the racetrack at Tijuana. From *San Diego Magazine*, Sept. 1967.

Frank Beyer was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania in 1875. The son of a school teacher, Beyer graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and continued his studies at the Missouri School of Mines. As a young mining engineer, Beyer followed mining booms and rushes in Alaska, Colorado, and Arizona.

When Beyer reached the booming mining camp of Tonopah, Nevada in the early 1900s, the mechanics of mining were replaced by other interests. In 1910, the occupation of the 35-year-old Beyer was listed as “roulette dealer” on the U.S. Census rolls. Four years later, the ex-mining engineer discovered his true calling as an entrepreneur of vice in the border town of Mexicali, Mexico.

Beyer partnered with two other Americans—Marvin Allen and Carl Withington—in a Mexicali nightclub called the Owl Café and Theatre. Located just below the border across from the U.S.

town of Calexico, the notorious Owl prospered with gambling, liquor sales, and prostitution. Mexican authorities welcomed the “ABW Syndicate,” as the three partners were called, who paid huge shares of the profits to the municipal government as license fees.

Ironically, ABW owed its success to aggressive moral activism in the United States. The Progressive movement in California, which helped shutter San Diego’s notorious Stingaree District in 1912, included the Red Light Abatement Act of 1913, which closed houses of prostitution, declaring them sites of public nuisance. Along with “dry laws” and codes against gambling, the moral reforms created booming opportunities for “vice tourism” in the wide-open towns below the border, even before the arrival of Prohibition in 1920.

The cornerstone property for the Beyer and his fellow “vice-concessionaires” would be the Owl but their interests also included casinos in the Mexican border towns of Tijuana and Algodones. In Tijuana, the ABW realm controlled the gambling clubs of Monte Carlo, the Tivoli Bar, the Foreign Club, and horse racing at the Jockey Club.

In Mexicali, the Owl drew a large share of the American tourists that crossed the border each day in the 1910s. With roulette wheels and nearly 40 tables for keno, faro, and poker, the casino billed itself as “the largest gambling house on the American continent.” Liquor was served by ten bartenders at “the longest bar in the world.” The Owl also housed the largest brothel on the border, with rooms for over 100 prostitutes. Beyer and his partners crafted a slogan to remind tourists they were open 24/7: “both night and day, across the way, you will never find closed, the Owl Café.”

But despite profitable success for most of a decade, the Owl did close in 1922 after a severe fire. Rebuilt, it reopened for a time as the ABW Club. But the death of Beyer’s partner Carl Withington in 1925 began the decline of the Syndicate’s firm control over vice in Mexicali and Tijuana. New border barons, such as James “Sunny Jim” Coffroth and Baron Long moved in to dominate gaming in Tijuana.

In the meantime, Frank Beyer had growing interests closer to his new home in San Ysidro where he and his wife Blanche settled in 1918. In the 1920s, the Beyer’s ran a jewelry and pawnshop in town. They bought ranch property, bred horses, and raised Guernsey cows on a dairy farm Beyer called Rancho Lechuza.

San Ysidro was, of course, conveniently close Beyer’s business activities in Tijuana. Known to all as “Booze” Beyer, he was a fixture at the racetrack where he was usually seen in a rumpled gray suit with a black hat crumpled under his arm. He was a skilled card player; Hollywood celebrities were known to drive to Tijuana to play high-stakes faro with Beyer. Evenings were spent at the nearby Sunset Inn--another ABW property—where the music-loving Beyer tipped the orchestra \$2 after every set.

While he kept an attentive eye on his Tijuana gambling interests, Beyer also began to show a public interest in philanthropy. In May 1924, the county of San Diego was surprised to hear that “Booze” Beyer and his wife wanted to donate \$7000 to San Ysidro for a community library.

Beyer promised to build and furnish the library and establish a ten-year trust fund to buy books and magazines.

The county gratefully accepted the gift, and agreed to honor a few provisos from Beyer. "The conditions," reported the County Librarian, "are that his name will be on the building . . . that it shall have a smoking room and he wants it understood from the start that there is to be no gambling in the building." Beyer also requested that copies of the *Police Gazette*, a racy magazine in the 1920s, be kept available in the reading room. The library added a spittoon for the tobacco-chewing gambler and hung portraits of Beyer and his wife.

## *San Ysidro's \$10,000 Library, First With Men's Smoke Room, To Be Opened Thursday Night*

Bearing the distinction of being the only public library in the country which has a smoking room for men, the new library at San Ysidro, the gift of Blanch and Frank Beyer, will be dedicated formally at 8 o'clock Thursday night. This library, which cost \$10,000, has been erected facing on the main highway, and has been accepted by the county board of supervisors. In making the gift, Beyer insisted that most men want to smoke when they read, and that a separate room be set aside for them with smoking trays and other paraphernalia dear to the heart of the smoker. At the dedication Mr. and Mrs. Beyer will make short addresses, and J. P. Conway, secretary of the San Ysidro chamber of commerce will make the speech of acceptance. Supervisor Hornbeck will make a few remarks, and Miss Eleanor Hitt, county librarian, will have something to say. Monney Pfefferkorn, who has presented a \$1500 painting to the library, will be present, as also will Miss Warren, San Diego city librarian. The county has furnished some of the books, but Beyer has bought many others, from suggestions made to him by the county librarian. The new library will be open every night after its dedication, although the old library was open only two nights a week.

San Diego Union, Oct. 12, 1904.

The next year Beyer donated funds to build a Civic Center for San Ysidro on Hall Avenue, between East and West Park. The site would be used by the San Ysidro Women's Club. In 1927 Beyer gave land and funds for the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. Displaying his ecumenical tastes, he also donated money to a local Protestant church.

After a long illness, Frank Beyer died at age 55, on November 15, 1931. "He was a splendid character, a square-shooter," his San Diego banker eulogized. "A gambler—yes, but unlike most gamblers he gave away much of his winnings. He always said, 'the rich won't miss the money and the poor need it.'"

Two streets and an elementary school bear the name of Beyer in San Ysidro today. The library that "Booze" Beyer built is now a branch of the San Diego Public Library. While the smoking room is gone and the subscription to the *Police Gazette* lapsed, the San Ysidro library still boasts framed portraits of its benefactors, Frank B. and Blanche Beyer.

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