



The S.S. Monte Carlo, aground at Coronado.

The Gambling Ships of San Diego



On a Saturday night in January 1936, the S.S. *Reno*, San Diego's first "floating pleasure palace," opened for business. Anchored three miles off Point Loma, the refurbished British Q-boat provided fine dining, dancing, and "sportive" games, described by the management as "ping-pong and other innocent pastimes." But a newspaper reporter observed that the ping pong tables were "curiously decorated with numbers from 1 to 36," and the "parchesi" boards had strange labels such as "come" and "don't come."

The gambling ship *Reno* was on instant hit with the sporting crowd of San Diego. Free water taxis ferried people daily try their luck at craps, roulette, blackjack, and poker. Local law enforcement officials found these games something less than innocent pastimes. District Attorney Thomas Whelan cited a State statute that prohibited the transport of people to gambling ships. Whelan tested the law by arresting one shore boat operator and several passengers. A Superior Court judge threw out the case, arguing that the statute was unconstitutional and furthermore, "the district attorney had no proof that gambling was conducted aboard the ship."

In April, the owners of the *Reno* decided to replace their ship with a larger vessel—the S.S. *Monte Carlo*. The new gambling ship was a rebuilt freighter—300

feet long with a concrete hull and no engines. As the *Monte Carlo* dropped anchor off Coronado, a tugboat returned the *Reno* to her home port of Long Beach.

Fun for the gamblers of San Diego lasted only a few more months. On December 31, a heavy winter storm hit Southern California. On board the *Monte Carlo*—closed for the winter since November 1—two caretakers awoke in the early morning to find that the anchor chain had snapped in the gale force winds. The men fired distress flares into the sky as they drifted helplessly toward shore. By daybreak the ship had grounded, broadside on the Coronado Strand. As ocean breakers pounded away at the *Monte Carlo*'s wooden superstructure, a power launch

from the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* rescued the hapless caretakers.

Throughout the day, hundreds of people braved the wind and rain to watch the "Goddess of Chance" break up in the surf. Fashionably dressed vacationers from the nearby Hotel del Coronado waded through wet sand to scoop up roulette wheels, gambling tables, and other paraphernalia that littered the beach for hundreds



Gambling paraphernalia littered the beach at Coronado.

of yards. The crowd became especially attentive to the debris after a rumor circulated that hundreds of cases of whiskey remained on board. Representatives of the ship scotched the story but not before a sailor drowned while trying to swim to the wreck.

In the days that followed, efforts to salvage the *Monte Carlo* proved futile. After a few articles were removed from the wreck via an overhead tram, the owners surrendered the hulk to the waves. For more than a decade the battered casino ship remained visible to beachgoers. As late as the winter of 1975, the ship's rudder was exposed at low tide—a rusty reminder of San Diego's brief flirtation with legalized gambling.