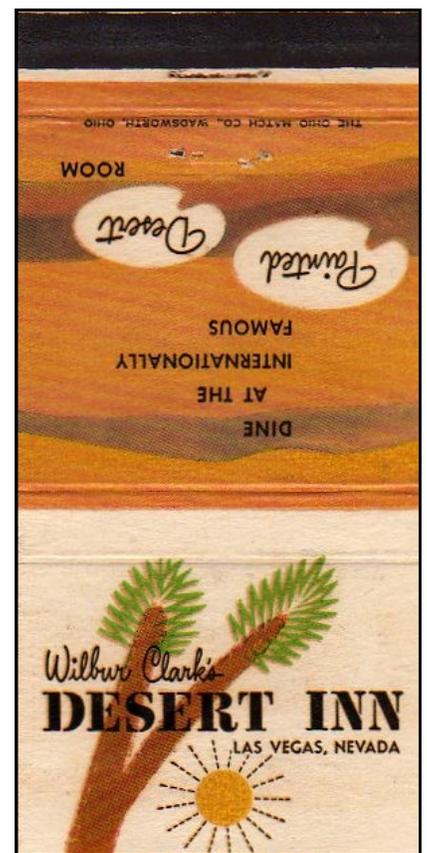
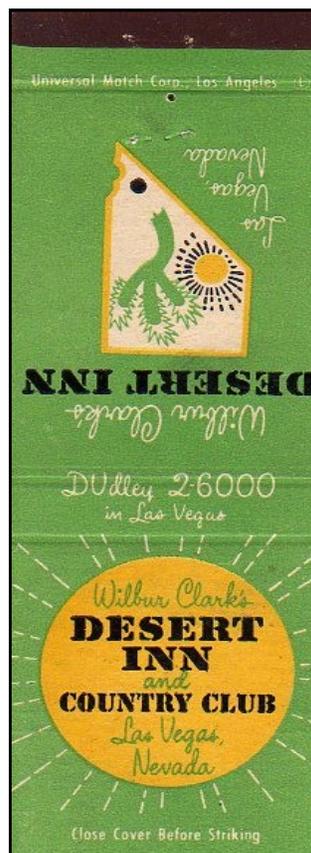
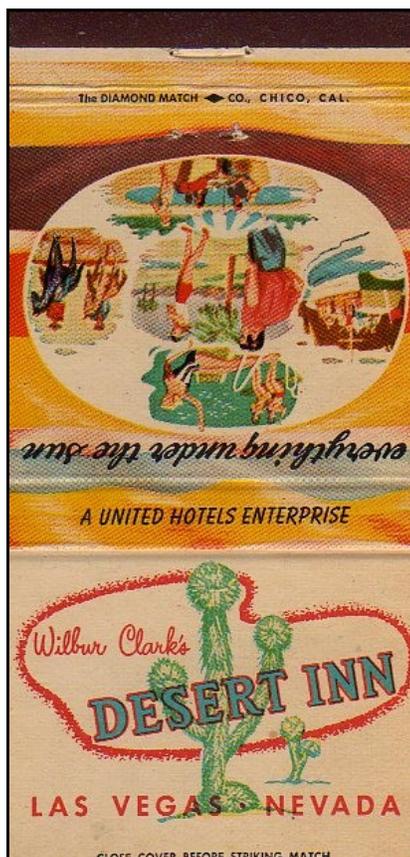


Goodbye, Desert Inn!

by
Mike Prero

Another big one bites the dust! When the Desert Inn first opened its doors, legend has it the key was thrown away because, it was said, the resort would never close, but Las Vegas's famed Desert Inn closed its doors at 2:00 PM, on August 28th.

When Wilbur Clark opened the \$3.5 million Desert Inn in 1950, with financial assistance from Moe Dalitz and other Cleveland organized crime figures, it was the largest resort in Las Vegas, with 300 rooms.



Now, 50 years and several remodelings and additions later, the Desert Inn's 715 empty rooms seem quaint compared to its new mega-resort neighbors. Steve Wynn's announcement to the Nevada Gaming Commission last August that he would close his newly acquired resort marks the end of a venerable Las Vegas tradition

"The city has been incredibly capable of reinventing itself, with shorter and shorter cycles," said Frank Wright of the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society. The Desert Inn's closure and the scheduled implosion of the El Rancho, along with past implosions of the Dunes, Landmark, Sands and Aladdin may mean the end of the '50s and '60s era hotel-casino," Wright observed. "The Desert Inn is one of Las Vegas's most historically significant resorts," he said. "From its golf tournaments to Wilbur Clark and Howard Hughes, the Desert Inn stood out among its competitors -- probably only the Flamingo was better known, until the last decade."

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Professor Bill Thompson said the Desert Inn was an elegant, classy place, a notch above its competition. "It had the best golf course and was a true resort," Thompson was quoted as saying.

And like the bulk of the Strip, the wise guys had their role. "The Desert Inn was a mobbed-up place," he reflected. From Frank Sinatra, whose first Las Vegas performance was at the Desert Inn in 1951, to its famed golf course, which hosted Las Vegas' first professional tournament and the Tournament of Champions during the '60s and '70s, the Desert Inn was the home of much that signified the Strip, Thompson said.

Wright cited the Desert Inn's connection to Hughes as the key to Las Vegas gaming's transformation from a mob-run operation to a corporate business. Thompson agreed. "When Hughes bought the Desert Inn, it won Las Vegas the confidence of the business community, and legitimized us," he said.

Hughes chose to buy the resort rather than move out of its top high-roller floor of suites in 1966, but was merely one in a line of noteworthy owners of the Strip's grand dame. After Clark, Dalitz and Hughes, other owners included some of Las Vegas' biggest names: builder and investor Kirk Kerkorian, and, of course, Wynn. Thompson said recent owners -- ITT Corp. and Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide -- failed to make a long-term commitment to the property. As with the other Las Vegas properties that have been demolished in recent years, the Desert Inn will now make way for a planned facility that will undoubtedly be bigger and fancier, but you can't order 'heritage' from a contractor.

Thompson said the Desert Inn has lost neither its elegance nor its potential, but believes Wynn's ego, and money, is making him start over. "I thought Wynn believed the place was special, but he just saw the value of the land." Thompson thinks Wynn's plans will have difficulty matching his accomplishments at the Golden Nugget, Mirage and Bellagio. He's not thinking of the future, he's thinking of the past. He already was the biggest, and he already was the best, he said. Although Wynn's decision to close the Desert Inn and its golf course is now fact, the resort's legacy in Las Vegas and on the Strip has already been determined.

And so the Desert Inn joins the other past greats in the pages of gaming history, gone but not forgotten by those of us from the last three generations.

[From Jeff Simpson, lasvegas.com Gaming Wire]