



El Adobe and Crystal Inn

ver 4

By Gilbert Gia

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Behind the Crystal Inn's bar was an unusual fish tank. A real mermaid was inside. Sam Restituto explained, "My father had taken a liking to a certain supper club in Los Angeles that had a bar like this. The 'mermaid' we had was actually a girl in the back room, and her image was projected into the fish tank by mirrors. The cocktail crowd came in just to see her appear from time to time and 'swim' behind the glass. It was a big attraction."¹

Sam's father was Gennaro "Gere" Restituto who came from Italy in 1919, worked his way West to the packing sheds of Los Angeles, and by 1920 was an 18-year-old truck driver in Bakersfield. At this time he met 14-year old Annie Fachin. Louis and Carolina Fachin came to Kern County from Provincia di Udine and joined the many Italians who worked in Kern County Land Company dairies. Gere Restituto married their daughter Annie in 1924.

In the 1920s Bakersfield was a "dry" town, and Gere Restituto made some money during Prohibition.² The Bakersfield city directory for 1928 showed chauffeur Gere Restituto and wife at 123 Brundage Lane. In January 1930, Restituto bought twenty acres of unimproved land near his home on Union Avenue near Brundage Lane. City directories through 1937 show he was a driver, an express man, and "in trucking." The Restitutos weren't in the 1938 city directory, but they soon would be. At that time Restituto was well into completing his El Adobe Motel at Union and Terrace Way.

¹ Sam Restituto's father, Gere, built the Crystal Inn on Union Avenue in 1946.

² Author's 2003 interview with Irene and Sam Restituto.



Sam Restituto recalled when it was built: "My father went to Mexico and hired a contractor who brought in his own labor, and in 1936, when I was ten, they started building at 251 South Union Avenue. The men made adobe bricks from scratch right on the property, and those doorways between the rooms were three feet thick. That year we built the coffee shop and twelve motel rooms. Our family lived in two of the rooms for couple of years after we opened, until I was about in the seventh or eighth grade."³

"My father knew a lot of people from Los Angeles from his earlier years there, and after we finished the motel, a lot of his friends came up to visit. He was very close to people in Southern California, like Clark Gable, Leo Carrillo, and Rosso Barsotti--he was one of my father's investment partners. But my father was a colorful figure himself. So in time my father got to know even more people."⁴

"About 1939 my parents remodeled the motel and added three dining rooms, two bars, and quite a bit more. Their friend Bert Zanetti who lived across Union Avenue was a cement mason, and he put up the new brick walls. After all this was done we had several new rooms: a 'wine cellar'; a nice cocktail lounge; banquet rooms called the 'Catalina' and 'Indian'; the 'Fiesta' room with statues along the walls; a twenty-seat bar; and my mother's own rock grotto, which also had a service bar. By then there were thirty-one guest rooms."⁵

Restituto brought-in fresh entertainment from Los Angeles, and Sam said that the El Adobe featured new acts before they went on the road. But the club also had local entertainers, like Bunkey Valdez. "Yes, I played there before the war. The El Adobe was a neat place and real popular. They had slot machines and some serious gambling in the

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

back rooms. In those days Gere was kind of gruff as a businessman, and he was definitely no front man, but he was a good guy when you got to know him. His wife, Annie, was the perfect front person--she had the personality. She did all the decorating, with glitz, too, and she took care of the El Adobe pretty well. Annie was a good businesswoman."⁶

Before television, entertainment meant a night on the town in your finest, a fancy meal, drinks, a live show, and dancing. From the beginning, the El Adobe was a stop on Bakersfield's nightclub circuit. The El Adobe hosted huge night crowds, and it attracted parties during the day, such as bridal showers, weddings, and club meetings.

The Food Dealers Association met at the El Adobe once a month, and a sorority group had their meetings at the hotel at the same time. The two groups seemed to usually finish-up in the afternoon within a minutes of each other, and as the club's band was warming up, some couples danced in the empty ballroom. ⁷

On one wall hung an oversized sombrero, and next to it were two signed, over-sized black-and-white photos. Dean VanZant recalled, "One was of Will Rodgers, and the other was of an actress wearing a dress cut so low I thought it was pushing the limits of the law. It was Jean Harlow who played opposite Clark Gable."⁸

Gere was a congenial-enough host, but Annie with her long curls was the number-one greeter, manager, and decorator. Irene Restituto described her mother-in-law's favorite room at the El Adobe. "In one of the dining rooms Annie designed herself, and planted and maintained, was a beautiful rock grotto with an array of colorful flowers. Two sparkling waterfalls cascaded into a wishing well. This was everyone's favorite dining room. She also did other banquet areas, including the Indian Room and the Catalina Room that had original murals. On the stairs to the Fiesta Room, customers passed by two custom-made statues."⁹

⁶ Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield musician Bunky Valdez.

⁷ Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield businessman Henry McCollum.

⁸ Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield educator Dean VanZant.

⁹ Letter from Irene Restituto to the author, 2003



VanZant remembered the figures. "On a landing about half-way up the stairs was a statue of a small, crouching lion cub. Then, at the top of the stairs on the left was a life-sized, nude statue of the Venus de Milo. But unlike the original, this one had arms. That statue was lighted, and a shawl was draped coyly over one of her shoulders. I recall that several years after the El Adobe closed, I was working at Beardsley School and got a complaint from a parent about a nude statue near the school in somebody's front yard. As I walked up to the house I could see next to the front door what I guessed was the problem. It was about five feet tall and covered with a sheet, and it sure reminded me of the El Adobe's Venus. Right next to it on the porch was the statue of a crouching lion cub."¹⁰

The El Adobe was especially crowded during the holidays. Sammy: "Johnny Calandrino was the bartender, but on New Years Eve I also filled in behind the bar. We had people come in just to see our cocktail lounge and the unique, recessed florescent lightning we'd put in to pick up the floral design from the carpets. It created an iridescent glow. That was a real conversation piece. Our place was a big draw and did a tremendous business. In fact we did so well that in 1940 my parents built a gorgeous new home on the east side of Union Avenue on Belle Terrace. The Tomerlins who owned the Bakersfield Inn lived near by."¹¹

"About this same time my father built a tack room, a barn, and stables out behind the El Adobe. The horses were just for our family, and we rode them in all the parades. My sister Celia loved her horse,

¹⁰ VanZant interview, op cit

¹¹ Restituto interview, op cit

but my father loved his more. Early in the morning when he opened up the bar to get ready for the day, he almost always took that horse inside, just like a pet dog. It must have been the treat of the day for that horse. We called him Bar-Fly."¹²

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Hollywood celebrities frequented the El Adobe. Irene explained, "Yes, Clark Gable and his wife Carole Lombard, and Frank Morgan and others stayed there when they came to town, or when they came to hunt at the Pin Tail Duck Club. We'd prepare the ducks for them, and no one cooked duck better than Sam's father."¹³

Other experts in the kitchen were Pat Reyes and cook named Louie. Although the building had a Mexican motif and some great Mexican dishes, the El Adobe's fare was mostly Italian. But that changed some. In 1947 an ad in the city directory announced, "The El Adobe. Smorgasbord, Sunday 4-11. Drive two miles south on Highway 99. Phone 5-5021."



Another friend of the Restitutos was actor Leo Carrillo. He'd been Grand Marshal of the Tournament of Roses in 1938 and was a friend of Bakersfield's own Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. An early show on TV was the *Cisco Kid* in which Leo Carrillo played Pancho, the sidekick of Cisco, played by Duncan Renaldo. Pancho's part required Carrillo to speak in fractured English, and because Carrillo had no accent at all, he struggled with the role. When

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

the actor came down from LA he sat at the bar with Gere Restituto so "Pancho" could work on his "Mexican" accent.¹⁴

Sam attended Kern County Union High School and was a top student until his junior year when he caught the car bug. "I chopped and channeled a '41 Dodge and installed a Carson top. After that I got a '34 Ford convertible, and by then it really looked like the end of me going to school. I knew I had to get out of town or I'd never graduate." Sam went to San Diego and enrolled at Brown's Military Academy. "It was the smartest thing I did. I graduated, and in 1943 I joined the 20th Army Air Corps. After the war I attended Woodberry Business School on the GI Bill."¹⁵

"While I was in the service my father owned the Rita Cocktail Lounge on Eye Street, and he had a saloon in Tehachapi. Later on, he owned a bowling alley called Frank's that was next to the 7-Up Bottling Company on 19th Street.¹⁶ My father also had a gas station, but he never ran it himself. I don't think he had any other businesses than those and the El Adobe. After Woodberry I became assistant manager at the El Adobe with my mom. She ran the business, and my dad spent the money."¹⁷



The restrictions on construction eased after the war, and like many other families the Restitutos had accumulated money and were ready to spend it. Sam recalled, "In 1946 when I was still in Guam, my father was building the Crystal Inn on a small lot at Planz and Union Avenue

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ building extant in 2009.

¹⁷ Restituto interview, op cit

three miles south of the El Adobe. My mom wrote me every day and told me about the progress. They opened it in January or February of 1946 at a total cost of \$75,000 cash, and it was a beauty. Frank Capacchione was my father's manager."¹⁸

The Crystal Inn had a huge terrazzo dance floor and a cavernous dining room, seating for 500, attended by waiters Restituto hired out of a Los Angeles union hall. They lived in a six-room residence that Restituto built behind the Crystal Inn.¹⁹ Managing two prominent nightclubs and several smaller businesses brought many challenges. One was booking entertainment for the clubs. Bunkey Valdez recalled, "Sammy was young when I started playing at the El Adobe before the war, but when I got back he was managing both clubs. I was then waiting for my music school spot to come up because I had the GI Bill, and when Gere heard I was going to leave for school, he offered me big money to stay at the El Adobe. But I didn't. I left Bakersfield for La Porte, Indiana, near Chicago."²⁰

The Restitutos scrambled to make the Crystal Inn pay for itself. A big problem was the changing social scene influenced by the growing popularity of television, but an equally fundamental problem was the building itself. The Crystal Inn was large and elaborate and pricey. It was too far out of town, and worse, it lacked the charm and character of the El Adobe.²¹

Name entertainment played at the Crystal Inn. "They really had the acts," said Connie Papas. "I remember they even had Sally Rand, the nude fan dancer. That Crystal Inn was a high-class place, but it had competition --the Saddle 'n' Sirloin, Maison Jaussauds, the KC Steak House, and Gene Goodfriends. Those places also had things to offer, and they were closer in. Lots of places were good in those days."²²

The Crystal Inn was a financial drain for four years. Paul Lorentzen, a family friend and real estate investor, decided he could make a success of it. Sam explained, "About 1950-51 my father sold part of the Crystal Inn to Paul. He advertised it big as the San Joaquin Valley's foremost restaurant. But Paul also struggled to make a go of

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield musician Bunky Valdez.

²¹ Author's 2003 interviews with Connie Papas, Valdez, and Restituto

²² Author's 2003 interview with Connie Papas.

the business, and he had to get out of it, too. Then it stood empty for a while."²³

Bunkey Valdez saw a future for the vacant building. "I owned *Bunkey's El Portal*, a nightclub restaurant at Olive Drive and Highway 99. In the mid-1950s the new freeway construction was going to wipe us out, so we went into bargaining with Geri Restituto to lease the Crystal Inn. It had a lot of seating and a big, beautiful terrazzo dance floor, one of the firsts of its kind, and maybe the only one around. But the paperwork that Gere drew up was too tight for us. We were still talking about it in 1958 when some neighborhood kids broke in and started a fire that burned the place down."²⁴

Over the years, Gere and Annie Restituto had clashed over money matters, and separation and divorce came in the 1950s. The El Adobe's nightclub doors closed in January 1949. After years of hosting Hollywood elite and a generation of Bakersfield night-clubbers, in May 1955 Annie Restituto sold the El Adobe to Hacienda, Inc., a national hotel chain.



The firm moved quickly and demolished everything--everything but the El Adobe kitchen. Around it they built a \$1.5M, 130-room hotel. In June 1957, Hacienda held a lavish, one-week public open house. The pool was sparkling, and the rooms were priced at \$7 and \$8 a night, but freeways were coming, and the Hacienda operated less than ten years. In

²³ Restituto interview, op cit

²⁴ Valdez interview, op cit

the mid-1960s it was re-badged as the Casa Royale. In 1987, Kai Soon Chloe of Los Angeles bought it, but its life was almost over. In months it was torn down and leveled. Today, the bus overhaul shops of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools are on the grounds of old El Adobe hotel and nightclub.

And the Crystal Inn? After the fire of 1958, Jay's auto wrecking came occupied the spot, and then came a truck supply store. Its metal building had a beautiful terrazzo floor.

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