

# History: From snowstorms, to city incorporation, to original casinos

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Among the best loved couples in South Lake Tahoe are Don and Ethel Clarke. We missed Ethel at our June 26th meeting, but Don was there to share his recollection of the South Shore over 25 years. Don has probably more "firsts" to his credit than anyone else in the community. He was elected to the first Unified School Board, to the first board of directors for South Tahoe Public Utility District, to the first City Council, and was the first City representative on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board. In addition, Ethel opened the first insurance agency to be established here in 1951.



Don spoke of all the change that had occurred since he and Ethel first arrived here in May 1, 1950 in a blizzard. At that time, the trip took six hours, at the very least, from San Francisco, and many times involved an overnight stop in Placerville. The Clarkes first took over Lawson's Coffee Shop at the "Y", generally in the location where the Chevron station is now located at 1053 Emerald Bay Road. He also worked for Harvey West at the Placerville Lumber sawmill as a chain operator and tallier. In 1950, there were somewhere between 500 and 1000 residents and everyone knew each other. The three markets were Fenn Barkley's Tahoe Valley Store located on a portion of what is now the South Y Center, Young's Bijou, and, the only one presently existing, Cecil's Market at Park Avenue.

In 1951 Ethel Clarke became a reporter for the weekly Auburn Journal, her biggest scoop having been an interview with Rita Hayworth who was staying at Glenbrook awaiting her divorce from Ali Khan. She also enjoyed interviews over the years with Lena Horne, Gildersleeve, and the Ink Spots.

In 1951, in May, the M.S. Dixie came into being having been brought in piece by piece and reconstructed at the Lake. The stage a Sahadi's, now Harrah's was a teepee. Harvey's Wagon Wheel was a one story structure with the cowskull and wagon wheel insignia woven into the red carpet.

One of the Clarke insurance agency's first customers was Clyde Beecher, owner of the Nevada Club where the "real" gambling took place. Clyde, after advising the many thousands he had "in the drawer and I don't know how much in the safe" had no trouble getting the bond he requested. The Clarke agency enjoyed a tidy business inasmuch as outside insurance agencies seemed to have the opinion the local casinos were operated by those who were only a half-step from outlaws and were patronized only by killers carrying guns. We did have Indians. Hank Pete, last of the Washo chiefs, and his wife Judy picked up extra change by posing for tourist pictures at Helen Perry's Trading Post across from the Crescent V until the Nevada Welfare Agency forced them to stop or lose their welfare subsistence. Flip Brandi, published Lake Tahoe News, leased Vikingsholm in July 1951 these plans went awry when the estate was transferred by Park System. Don recalled playing Santa Claus at Vikingsholm that year of the "Big Snow". They left the car at Camp Richardson and boated over to Emerald Bay. On the return trip, he found only the very tip end of the car aerial poking above the snow – and no shovels! Emerald Bay was frozen solid eighteen to twenty inches deep, and 152 houses collapsed from the snow that winter. Skiing over the rooftops was not unusual.

The following year, 1952, the Lake Tahoe Unified School District was voted in. The high school classes were held at

the American Legion Hall, with basketball being played on stage. The team had only basket for practice but the South Tahoe team was well known throughout the area. Don recalled the Clarke adventures in driving the first school bus back from the factory in Lima, Ohio, the first day at 35 mph, the second at 40 mph, then the governor held at 45 mph all the way across the country. This was the old Bus No. 1 which, after many years faithful service, was sold recently and is on it ways to South America.

Don's other recollection over the years included his serving as MC at home talent shows held in the amphitheater when the El Dorado Campground was opened the summer of 1953. In 1954 the South Tahoe Public Utility District was formed. Around 1958 the Lake Valley Planning Organization was formed among business men and residents, later developing into the Community Forums with active citizen participation in the early days after incorporation of the city. In 1960 came first discussions of a freeway question. August 1965 saw formation of the Recreation Advisory Board which preceded the Joint City-School Recreation Commission.

In November 1965 the city incorporation was voted in by a 2011-614 vote. In 1968 the ill-fated Tahoe College was formed, later closing it doors after the death of its founder Jim Wilson. In June 1968 the Olympic High Altitude Training site was established at Echo Summit to train track stars for the games in Mexico City. The Tartan Track at the Intermediate School was moved from the Echo Summit. In 1970 came the Bi-State Compact establishing Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

After serving as Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce Don "retired" to travel and enjoy life but neither Don nor Ethel have ceased their active participation in community affairs.