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## **El Adobe and Crystal Inn Nightclubs 1936-1958**

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By Gilbert P. Gia  
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**B**ehind 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 a 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."<sup>1</sup>

Sam's father was Gennaro "Gere" Restituto [b. abt 1904]. He came to the US from Italy in 1919, worked his way West to the packing sheds of Los Angeles, and by 1920 was a 16-year-old truck driver working out of Bakersfield. During that period he met 14 year-old Annie Fachin [b. abt 1910], who was the daughter of Louis [1874-1968] and Marion Fachin, both immigrants from Socchieve Comune, Provincia di Udine, Italy.<sup>2</sup> Gere married Annie in 1924.

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

<sup>2</sup> Email of June 2013 from Gary Fachin. Louis and Marion arrived in the US about 1909. Marion died about 1911, Louis returned to Socchieve, and in 1912 he married Carolina [1891-1979]. During the 1920s they lived at the following locations: El Centro, California; Milford, Utah; Oxnard-Camarillo area (Ventura County) [The 1920 US Census shows them there]; and Pond (Kern County). In 1930 they moved to a farm in the Panama area south of Bakersfield where they operated a dairy farm on land leased from the Kern County Land Company. [The 1940 US Census shows the Fachins on Stein Road near Bakersfield.]

Bakersfield was a "dry" town in the 1920s, and Gere Restituto made some money during those Prohibition years.<sup>3</sup> Bakersfield's city directory of 1928 listed a chauffeur named Gere Restituto and his wife living at 123 Brundage Lane. In January 1930, Restituto bought 20 acres of unimproved land on nearby Union Avenue. The city directories through 1937 showed Gere Restituto as a driver, an express man, and "in trucking." The name was not in the 1938 city directory, but in 1939 it would be because Restituto was well into completing his El Adobe Motel at Union and Terrace Way.



Sam Restituto recalled how 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 12 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."<sup>4</sup>

"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."<sup>5</sup>

"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

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<sup>3</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Irene and Sam Restituto.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. From 1930 into the mid-1950s Gere and Annie Restituto's names appeared in more than 200 Kern County Hall of Records legal documents. Those from the 1930s included the names of George and Joe Barsotti.

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 31 guest rooms."<sup>6</sup>

Gere Restituto brought in fresh entertainment from Los Angeles, and featured the new acts before they even went out on the road. But the club also had local entertainers like Bunkey Valdez. "Yes, I played there before the war," said Valdez. "The El Adobe was a neat place and real popular. They had slot machines and some serious gambling in the 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."<sup>7</sup>

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 one of *the* stops on Bakersfield's nightclub circuit. The El Adobe hosted huge night crowds and during the day attracted bridal showers, weddings, and club meetings.

The Food Dealers Association met at the El Adobe once a month, and on the same day a sorority group held their meetings there. The two crowds seemed to finish-up the afternoon within minutes, and as the El Adobe band warmed up, couples filled the empty ballroom.<sup>8</sup>

One ballroom wall featured an oversized sombrero with autographed, oversized black-and-white photos on each side of it. 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 of Jean Harlow who played opposite Clark Gable."<sup>9</sup>

Gere was congenial enough, but VanZant said that Annie, with her long curls, was the number-one greeter, manager, and interior decorator. Irene Restituto described her mother-in-law's favorite room, "Annie designed, planted and maintained one of the dining rooms by herself. It had a beautiful rock grotto, with an array of colorful flowers, where two sparkling waterfalls cascaded into a wishing well. This was everyone's favorite dining room. She also did other banquet areas,

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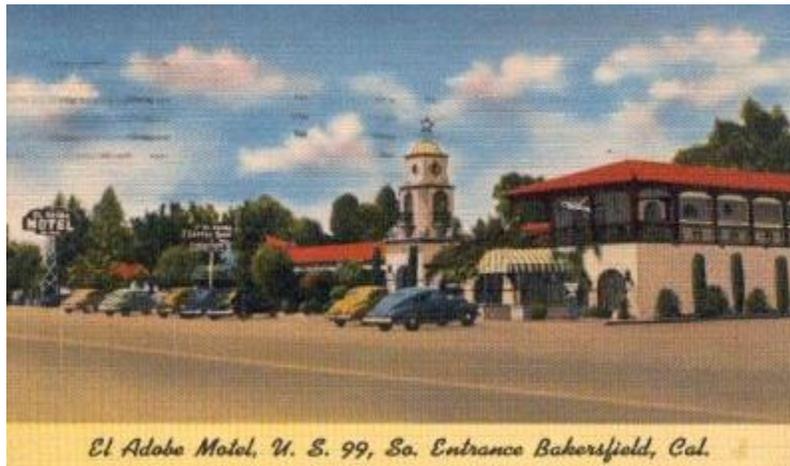
<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield musician Bunky Valdez

<sup>8</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield businessman Henry McCollum

<sup>9</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield educator Dean VanZant

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."<sup>10</sup>



Dean VanZant remembered those. "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."<sup>11</sup>

The El Adobe was especially crowded during the holidays. Said Sammy, "Johnny Calandrino was the bartender, but I also filled in behind the bar on New Year's Eve. We had customers 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."<sup>12</sup>

"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, but my father loved his more. Early in the

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Irene Restituto to the author, 2003

<sup>11</sup> VanZant interview, op cit

<sup>12</sup> Restituto interview, op cit

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."<sup>13</sup>

Hollywood celebrities frequented the El Adobe. Irene Restituto 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."<sup>14</sup>

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 the actor came down from LA he sat at the bar with Gere Restituto so "Pancho" could work on his "Mexican" accent.<sup>15</sup>

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

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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 20<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps. After the war I attended Woodberry Business School on the GI Bill."<sup>16</sup>

"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.<sup>17</sup> My father also had a gas station, but he never ran it himself. I don't think he had any other businesses other than those and the El Adobe. After I left Woodberry I became assistant manager at the El Adobe, with my mom. She ran the business and my dad spent the money."<sup>18</sup>



Restrictions on construction eased after the war, and like many other families the Restitutos accumulated money and were then 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 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."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Building extant in 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Restituto interview, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The Crystal Inn had a huge terrazzo dance floor and a cavernous dining room seating for 500 that was attended by waiters that Restituto hired out of a Los Angeles union hall. They lived in a six-room residence that Restituto had built behind the Crystal Inn.<sup>20</sup>

Managing two prominent nightclubs and several smaller businesses brought many challenges, and 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 his dad 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."<sup>21</sup>

The Restitutos scrambled to make the Crystal Inn pay. A major challenge was a 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, too far out of town, and worse, it lacked the charm and character of the El Adobe.<sup>22</sup>

Name entertainment played the Crystal Inn. "They really had the acts," recalled 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."<sup>23</sup>

The Crystal Inn remained a financial drain for the next four years. But Paul Lorentzen, a real estate investor and family friend of the Restitutos -- who had a past history in restaurant work -- figured he could make a success of it.<sup>24</sup> Back in 1939 the Bakersfield native opened the French Village, a new steak house, cocktail lounge and night club, in a remodeled adobe on Real Road between Brundage and Chester Lane.<sup>25</sup> Lorentzen might have not operated the business entirely by local, ad hoc agreements because in the early hours of January 1, 1941, Lorentzen and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Bakersfield musician Bunky Valdez

<sup>22</sup> Author's 2003 interviews with Connie Papas, Bunky Valdez, and Same and Irene Restituto

<sup>23</sup> Author's 2003 interview with Connie Papas

<sup>24</sup> In 1934 and 1935 Lorentzen was commander of Frank S. Reynolds Post, No. 26, American Legion Members were veterans of WWI.

<sup>25</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Aug 30, 1939

others were arrested in a gambling raid on French Village.<sup>26</sup> Lorentzen had other challenges. In March 1944 nearly half his building burned in a kitchen fire, although he reopened bar service days later and the restaurant in a few weeks.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after that Lorentzen sold French Village, moved to Newport Beach, and bought Balboa Pavilion, but in 1948 he was back at Bakersfield running the Crystal Inn.<sup>28</sup> Sam Restituto explained what happened next. "About 1950-51 my father sold part of the Crystal Inn to Paul, and Paul advertised it big as the San Joaquin Valley's foremost restaurant. But he also struggled to make a go of the business and had to get out of it, too. Then it stood empty for a while."<sup>29</sup>

Bunkey Valdez saw a future in the vacant building. He said, "I owned *Bunkey's El Portal*, a nightclub-restaurant at Olive Drive and Highway 99. In the mid-1950s the new freeway construction was about 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 the fire that burned the place down."<sup>30</sup>

Over the years, Gere and Annie Restituto had clashed over money matters, and in the 1950s came separation and divorce. In January 1949 after years of hosting Hollywood's elite and a generation of Bakersfield night-clubbers, the El Adobe's doors closed for ever. In May 1955 Annie sold the El Adobe to Hacienda, Inc., a national hotel chain.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 1, 1941

<sup>27</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Mar 22, 25, 1944. Apr 1, 1944

<sup>28</sup> After Lorentzen sold the French Village it continued as a restaurant, bar, and hall, and it became the preferred venue for the Petroleum Club and for Catholic fundraisers. (Bakersfield Californian, Aug 2, 1952). Pages of the Californian suggest that in the Village's last years it was a strip club and also a site for church revivals, which were probably held in its parking lot. (Bakersfield Californian, Apr 28, 1955, Mar 26, 1958). In March 1956 San Joaquin Valley Oil Producers Association remodeled the French Village as their temporary clubhouse. (Bakersfield Californian, Mar 29, 1956). A public dance was held there in February 1962, but shortly after that the building was demolished. In winter 1962 Convalescent Homes of California broke ground for a convalescent facility on the site, and about a year later a 27,000 sq-ft hospital opened there at 329 North Real Road. (Bakersfield Californian, Oct 31, 1962, Aug 24, 1963)

<sup>29</sup> Restituto interview, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Valdez interview, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Gere Restituto later started a restaurant at Palmdale.



The firm moved quickly to demolished everything--everything but the El Adobe's kitchen, around which 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 priced at \$7 or \$8 a night, but the new freeway was coming that would realign traffic in and out of Bakersfield. The Hacienda operated for less than ten years, and in the mid-1960s it was re-badged as the Casa Royale. In 1987, Kai Soon Chloe of Los Angeles bought it, but the hotel's time was almost over. In months it was torn down, and today the bus-overhaul shops of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools occupy the grounds.

And the Crystal Inn? After the 1958 fire Jay's auto wrecking stood on the spot, and it was followed by a truck supply store. Its metal building sheltered the terrazzo floor of the old Crystal Inn.

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