

The Las Vegas Sun

Payback: Gaming pioneer Redd looks back on a lifetime of giving to those in need

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Tears welled in the aged eyes of Las Vegas gaming legend William "Si" Redd as UNLV President Carol Harter talked about him at a recent tribute dinner.

It was not so much the kind words Harter said about the 89-year-old philanthropist and inventor of the video poker machine, who has long demonstrated a devotion to improving education. Rather it was an image that formed before Redd as she spoke.

"I looked up and in Carol Harter I saw my mother. Everything I am today I owe to my mother," Redd said of the ceremony last week, when he received the Chin's Humanitarian of the Year Award from the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

"It just touched me, because my mother was a very religious woman who was opposed to me going into gaming. She only approved of it after I was giving so much of the money to education and others who needed it."

Nancy Redd has been dead for more than 20 years, but Si Redd, nicknamed "the slot machine king," spoke of his mother as though she were at his side. In everything he does, he said, he still seeks her undying approval.

Redd said he was proud to join such past Chin honorees as entertainer and friend Jerry Lewis, former Las Vegas mayor Jan Jones and longtime casino owner Jackie Gaughan.

You couldn't blame him for wanting his mother there for such an occasion, even if only in spirit. For Redd is well aware his mother's ghost disapproves that her son's main claim to fame -- the International Game Technology video poker machine -- has ruined the lives of those who have become addicted to it.

Redd says he listens intently to, and reads reports of, the gaming device that has become known as the "crack cocaine of gambling" because of its highly addictive nature.

"Of course it hurts me when such things are said, I guess because it is kind of the truth," Redd said. "I never intended it to become that way, and I never could have dreamed of how successful the video poker machine would become.

"I honestly thought video poker would be a novelty game that people would put a few dollars into then go to the slots and table games. I think that with the money they make today, casino

operators should take \$1 per machine per day and put it into a fund to help those who have become addicted to video poker."

Redd said he can sleep soundly at nights, because he has given away so much of the money he made from the machines to the poor and to other worthy causes. Besides, the concept behind his video machines is fair to gamblers, he said.

"If you were to take \$100 and play slots, you'd get about an hour of play, but video poker was designed to give you two hours of play for that same \$100," he said. "That's because there are a number of smaller jackpots (straights, full houses, etc.) as well as the big jackpot (royal flush)."

Still, when people write to Redd about their video poker addiction, he advises them to, if necessary, move away from Las Vegas and get away from the machines.

Sometimes that is not easy, as video poker machines are in operation nationwide. In areas where gaming is not legal, they are marketed as amusement games.

"They are really castigated here in the Bible Belt, and anti-gambling forces seize on how cancerous a force video poker machines are," said Dan Turner, gaming reporter for the Shreveport, (La.) Times, whose father, Joe Turner, was a schoolboy pal of Redd's in their native Philadelphia, Miss.

"Today, you find video poker machines in bars, restaurants and truck stops in Louisiana. Fifty years ago, table games dominated casino play. Now, 80 percent of casino revenue comes from slots. Si Redd played a key role with the revolution of technology in gaming."

Although he is a member of the Gaming Hall of Fame, Redd today has little to do with gaming. He sold his interest in IGT as an octogenarian and opened a rival company, International Technical Systems Inc., which is no longer in business.

He does not even play the machines he invented.

Just last week he sold Si Redd's Oasis Casino in Mesquite, which he bought as the Peppermill 20 years ago.

"I had lost touch with who I was -- my thing was tinkering with machines. I was never really a casino owner," said Redd, who also crafted the highly successful Megabucks slot machines with multimillion-dollar jackpots.

"The Oasis was a good idea and it was fun, but it never really was a money maker because it was not managed right."

When it comes to slots and machines like pinball and the jukebox, Redd has had a knack for finding new markets and furthering his Horatio Alger-like success story that began as the son of a dirt-poor Mississippi sharecropper.

Early on, Si's mother steered Redd in the direction of getting a good education, but he admits the business world had a tight grip on him.

At age 18, Redd, then a poolroom shoeshine boy, invested \$16 in a Bally's Goofy pinball machine and installed it on a wooden frame in a hamburger joint that had dirt floors. His first week's take was \$32, and Redd was on his way.

By the time he was attending Ole Miss as a pre-law student, Redd had a thriving coin-operated machine trade that he admits left him no time for his studies.

In the late 1930s Redd made a deal with the Wurlitzer Co. to buy outdated jukeboxes, and in little time he and his Northwestern Music Co. had thriving routes in the small Illinois towns of Sterling and Dixon.

"That period and when I first arrived in Reno (in 1967) were the happiest times in my life," Redd said.

"In Sterling my brother-in-law and I built a business that stretched all the way to Chicago -- but not into Chicago because the boys (mob) controlled the jukebox trade in that town. We'd go to Chicago to watch the Cubs play and then get back on our route. It was just a great time."

So impressed was Wurlitzer with Redd's salesmanship, the company gave him a lucrative route in Boston.

Eventually Redd returned to Chicago and talked with officials at Bally's, who sent him to Reno, where Redd fell in love with the "Big Bertha" style slot machines that he marketed there with great success. Redd still has dreams of seeing a 15-story Big Bertha slot machine built in Las Vegas.

Si Redd's Bally Distributing, the company he formed to sell the Bally products, soon became a driving force in gaming, spreading to Carson City and into Las Vegas. His theory for slot and video machine success was simple yet shocking for its time -- make the devices more liberal with more jackpots. The thinking of that time was for slots to be tight.

Redd's concept of the 99 percent payout on dollar slots drew millions of people who otherwise never would have put a coin into the one-armed bandits.

All the while, Redd had to overcome his knowledge that his mother did not approve of the fortune he was making off customers of the gaming industry.

"I kept sending her more and more money, yet she would just give it away to people as poor as she was," Redd said. "When I started giving away money for education, she began to accept what I was doing. She said if I wasn't going to spend the money to educate myself, I should help others get educated."

Redd credited his success in gaming in large part to luck. He also credits that luck with a satisfying personal life.

Redd married his high school sweetheart, Ivy Lee, whom he said was "the greatest woman who ever lived" because she never had an unkind word for anyone.

After her death, he married his second wife, Marilyn, whom he called "a real go-getter. She was real good at making real estate investments." In 1996, after 21 years of marriage, she died, leaving an estate "worth nearly as much as mine," Redd said.

Shortly after Marilyn died, Redd met Tammy, a registered nurse about half his age, who came to his front door at the Las Vegas Country Club to offer her condolences. She had cared for a neighbor of Redd's who also had just died.

"I got to talking with her and soon after, I invited her to dinner," said Redd, who made her his third wife. "I know people say that she latched on to ol' Si because I have a little money and I'm getting on in years. But what I say is I know I'm getting old, so I decided to buy myself a nurse!"

Redd will turn 90 on Nov. 16.

"I am unquestionably the luckiest man in the world," Redd said. "I've had a great mother, three wonderful wives and a lot of fun from Mississippi to Illinois to Massachusetts to Nevada."

Over the next decade, Redd said he will turn his attention from gaming to the establishment of the Las Vegas International Cultural Trade Center and Wild Animal Conservancy, which he fondly calls "Noah's Ark."

Redd is a key financier for the project that is planned for 2,000 rolling acres on the southeast side of Interstate 15 in Jean, just three miles from a new regional airport slated for completion in the next decade.

Redd talks glowingly of the project he says will include an endangered species research facility, an animal refuge, the Safari Villas time-share condos, a desert sky amphitheater, a spa and two world-class golf courses.

Best of all, such an undertaking undoubtedly would impress his mother.

"I think she would approve of it," Redd said. "Yes, she certainly would."