

Waldorf and Southern Maryland's "Little Vegas" past

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Waldorf, MD - Today many head home to Waldorf, MD and beyond on US 301 and have no idea of the history that they are driving past everyday. It was only this week while researching for a project for a client that I learned about this lively side of Waldorf and Southern Maryland's history. This post is not about the pros or cons of gambling. Instead it is an attempt to point out some of the relics of a time gone by that can still be seen.

US 301 from Waldorf to the Potomac River Bridge was known as "Little Vegas" or "Slot Machine Alley" during the 1950s. Las Vegas had nothing on Southern Maryland as far as the number of slot machines and the revenue from gambling at that time. US 301 was known as Sin Strip — bright lights, lots of celebrities like Guy Lombardo, Paul Newman, Conway Twitty, Dolly Parton. They all performed on the Strip according to an article in the Baltimore City Paper. Waldorf was the Mecca of this Strip and was described in an article as a tiny little truck stop town along a major shipping route that hosted slot machines in every building and restroom along route 301. Casinos were legal in Charles County for about 20 years ending in 1968.

There are two icons that can still be seen today and though many of us pass them few have any idea what they are. One is the sign for Wall's Bakery with the Tepee on top and the other is the Waldorf Motel which is shown in the video above and one of the pictures below. Both are on the right side as you enter Waldorf from the north. Neither will probably be there much longer.

Wall's Bakery known for its eclairs was housed in the Wigwam building after it closed in the early 70's. Gambling ended on July 1, 1968 when the last slot machines were hauled out of the bars, taverns, and roadhouses of Southern Maryland, piled onto trucks, and hauled away to be destroyed.¹ The Wigwam — originally opened as a Native American themed casino. The Tepee-shaped building sported dancing girls, fine food, and performances by Doris Day and Brenda Lee according to Louise Lockhart, an 18 year employee. The Wigwam/Wall's Bakery building has been recently torn down and this sign is all that remains. According to Wikimapia, apartments are planned for this site.

Photo property of Lonnie Dawkins Photography

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The Waldorf Motel was a popular gambling casino and motel. Today it stands empty though in recent years a Rip's Restaurant occupied space in this building. It is probably one of the few casino buildings still standing.

Well, it sounds like Waldorf and the 301 corridor have changed quite a bit since the 50s and the many times I have driven to Waldorf never would I have thought of Waldorf as a Little Vegas. Never! What about you?

Lonnie Dawkins is a Washington, DC portrait and documentary photographer. www.lonniedawkins.com

Do you have photos of Waldorf in the past? Send them to news@thebaynet.com!

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