

## **Oh, so that's why they call it "G-Vegas!"**

**The Gardner Scene – March 19, 2009**

**By Mike Richard**

Perhaps it was with a touch of sardonic irony that, shortly after the column appeared in this paper pondering the origin of Gardner's nickname "G-Vegas," a police raid of local bars and fraternal organizations revealed several poker machines.

Two weeks ago we asked the question – exactly when did the name "G-Vegas" surface as a tag for the local scene and what did it all mean?

Several readers pointed out that they believed that a penchant for gambling several decades ago, whether it was the glut of BINGO games and other lotteries, had some people labeling Gardner as the eastern equivalent of "The Entertainment Capital of the World."

However, in most cases it was quite the opposite. Many people felt that the title "G-Vegas" was bantered about in a derisive fashion, referring that more people felt Gardner was dullsville.

"It's called G-Vegas because Gardner is known worldwide as the Excitement Capital of the East Coast," wryly noted Mark Favreau, a 1975 Gardner High School graduate now living in Lago Vista, Texas.

His brother Brian is current owner of the Bowlaway and his father E. J. was known as "The Tire King" and owner of several Shell Stations in the city.

Favreau provided the photo of the Entering Gardner sign (across the street from Kay's on Route 2) with the spray painted G-Vegas, which is pictured, that was taken during the winter of 1978-79. The individuals pictured next to the sign were Mike Brouillet, John Woicek and Dave Suchocki.

"The guys in the picture were just posing in front of the sign. Who spray painted it is a mystery to me," he noted. "I cannot tell you the definitive date of origin of G-Vegas, but I have been using the term since around 1976."

He further pointed out that the term was definitely used sarcastically. "It was meant to convey Gardner as 'The excitement capital of the East Coast!' and my friends and I could not wait to explore ANYWHERE else in the country," he said.

In retrospect, Favreau noted that Gardner was a great place to grow up as a kid and looks back fondly on playing pick-up games of baseball at Bickford playground and spending afternoons exploring the woods at Wright's Reservoir.

"I have a number of friends who no longer live in Gardner, but whenever we reference the city of our youth, we always refer to it as G-Vegas; like 'Gotta fly up to G-Vegas for a family reunion,'" he said.

Another reader from the same generation added another jab at the lack of action in the city for the reason behind the name.

"I have no idea where the name came from other than the night life was so exciting back then," said Tom McCullough with a wink, adding, "What happens in G-Vegas stays in G-Vegas!"

In fairness to this city and its activity of the past, I believe this may be a good time for a personal editorial comment.

While the original G-Vegas citizens were experiencing the doldrums of Gardner, I was growing up in the nearby town of Hubbardston. In my youth the greatest amount of

traffic we experienced wound its way through town on Sunday afternoons for the Rietta Flea Market.

If we wanted a soda or an ice cream, we would have to pedal our bikes three miles into town to visit our only three stores in the “downtown” area – the Hubbardston Co-op, Howdy Taylor’s and Si Wheeler’s.

There were no bowling alleys (Gardner had three), no movie theaters (Gardner had an indoor theater and a drive-in), no playgrounds (in Gardner it seemed that every neighborhood had one) and still no fast food restaurants.

Gardner had the Greenwood Memorial outdoor pool for a refreshing summertime dip. We would fill a 50 gallon barrel in our backyard and take turns dunking ourselves.

When it came to Hubbardston night life – the closest thing to a neon sign were the fireflies which buzzed around our backyard.

So while Gardnerites chided their city as “G-Vegas,” we were hardly the “Hub” of activity by comparison. I’m sure many of my Hubbardstonian contemporaries would have traded places with our Gardner neighbors for nightly excitement back then in a Chair City minute.

As far as the origin of G-Vegas, perhaps the best explanation comes from local musician Bill Saulnier, who from the late 70s through the mid-80s was a member of the popular band Black Diamond which played throughout North Worcester County.

Saulnier and Joe Chiasson were the guitarists, Rob Walsh was on the drums and the late Mike Birt was the bassist. They played at all of the local hot spots from Gardner’s Bo Rich and Alan’s Pubb, the Buttercup in Lunenburg, Leominster’s Cinema Lounge, Fitchburg’s Thunderbird and the Mohawk Club in Shirley.

“While I can’t pinpoint a specific person or date, I can say that ‘G-Vegas’ was coined and popularized at Alan’s Pubb by the patrons of Gardner,” Saulnier related. “Alan’s was a small bar that would get so packed on the nights bands were playing that it became a running joke amongst local musicians that Gardner had become the new entertainment capital of the world, finally becoming known as ‘G-Vegas.’”

It got so that whenever the band played outside the confines of Gardner, they would always be introduced as “Black Diamond, hailing from G-Vegas!” The crowd responded favorably to that intro and followed them everywhere they played.

Saulnier recalled that in 1982, the Mohawk Club hosted a Battle of the Bands with some 100 groups competing in weekly run-offs over the year. Thanks to the support of their many G-Vegas fans, Black Diamond advanced all the way to the final four.

On the night of the finals, which was held in the midst of a Sunday night snowstorm, more than 800 fans packed into the little club; more than half of them hailing from Gardner.

“All four bands playing were great and the judges allowed the emcee (a DJ from WAAF) to do a round of applause from the audience to declare the winner,” Saulnier recalled. “Our fans in Gardner wouldn’t let us down and Black Diamond was announced the winner.”

“I remember feeling so excited and holding the first place trophy over my head and yelling ‘Thank you G-Vegas!’” Saulnier noted. “It is one of my favorite memories and just one reason why I like it here in G-Vegas.”

And all kidding aside, while it may not be the acme of the entertainment world any longer, there are many Gardnerites who still like it very much right here in their hometown – and proudly know it as G-Vegas!

*(Comments and suggestions for The Gardner Scene can be sent to Mike Richard at [Rich0725@aol.com](mailto:Rich0725@aol.com). or in writing c/o The Gardner News, 309 Central St. Gardner, MA 01440)*