

“Oklahoma Johnny” Hale. *The Life and Times of a Gentleman Gambler*. Las Vegas: Poker Plus Publications, 1999. 127-132.

Benny Binion, a Classic BB

Let’s start with a famous B.B., Benny Binion. I first met Benny in the young to middle ‘60s at the Stapleton International Airport in Denver, Colorado. It snows in Colorado, a lot, and the snow even drips down of the Rockies into Denver. On this frigid day in Denver at the mile-high airport we were snowed in, couldn’t fly anywhere.

I was sitting on a bench at the airport next to a man who was glancing at the pages of a newspaper. He was sort of a pudgy fellow with a cowboy Western look about him and I noticed that he had gold coins for buttons on his shirt. I instantly related to him and since there was nothing else to do, I introduced myself to him saying that I was traveling from Tulsa to Las Vegas. “Well, I’m going to Las Vegas, too,” he said. “I own a little club out there.” And then he told me all about his “little club,” the Horseshoe Club in Downtown Vegas. “My wife really doesn’t enjoy me wanting to play poker,” he said, “but occasionally on a Saturday afternoon, a few of the fellas - mostly Sunday school teachers, a couple of professors, old ranchers, a retired judge or two, and a few of the elite of the town - will gather up and come over to my club for a little game.”

Of course, he was talking about the beginning of the World Series of Poker ... these “old-age school teachers and retired preachers” that came by to play with him were none other than Johnny Moss, Amarillo Slim, Bill Boyd, Puggy Pearson, Curt Gaudy (the sports announcer), Dolly Brunson and Titanic Thompson (the pool hustler) ... just a few of the good ol’ boys. “Now, Mrs. Binion don’t like for us to play,” he repeated “but she allows us to have a game once in a while, and I’d like you to come on down and play with us.”

Benny was flying first-class and it just so happened that I was, too, because I’d already made a few dollars back in Oklahoma by then. I came to Las Vegas to relax and enjoy myself and I had a considerable roll on me to play with when I came to town. This was back in my salad days when I played with the dice, the blackjack and sports betting ... I had all the bad habits except for drinking. So, Benny and I visited together on the plane and he told me about his little ranch he had up in Montana and a few other personal stories.

“One time it became necessary and I toked myself into prison” he said. It seems that he had bribed a governmental official. This story reminds me of when my daddy used to say, “Money ain’t heavy to carry.”

“So when they sent me up,” Benny continued, “I just took a supply with me, \$1 million or so, just so I could have the comforts of home while I was there and perhaps even take my way out.”

Then he talked about how he had shot a man in Texas and, most unfortunately, had been forced to leave the state rather hurriedly, but now he was back at home in Las Vegas. You see, Benny was one of the old-time road gamblers who had run some illegal poker games and casinos in Texas and Louisiana. He wasn’t always legitimate, or at least he didn’t have a license to do what he was doing.

Playin' Poker with Benny and the Boys

A couple of days later I found myself in Benny's little club where a group of men was assembled around a poker table in the old part of the hotel where the baccarat room is today, the room where they first held the World Series of Poker. The boys invited me in, I dusted off a chair, took out \$500 and settled in to play a few hands. I noticed that the chips in Benny's little club had his picture on them with the initials BB.

I took my \$500 and I played rather carefully like my daddy had taught me, with some degree of skill and some degree of luck - against some degree of foolishness on Benny's part. He was playing any two cards ... a 2-9, a 3-K, any two cards he got a hold of, he'd play. And I was able to quite smartly move my \$500 up to \$1,000, the \$1,000 to \$2,000, then to \$3,000. One of my rules is that when you make a satisfactory win, you quit. But this was good! Every time I'd bust Benny, he'd just reach back and get another rack of BB's. He didn't care what he was playing ... and the others sitting around there were enjoying themselves, too. Benny was putting on a party.

Pretty soon I got myself up to \$3,000. Then all of a sudden, I looked down and I had two magnificent black kings staring back at me. I like 'em! I tease the pot a little bit ... Benny teases it back ... I kinda hit it a lick ... and Benny puts some more money in the pot. This looks like an opportunity for me to really do well, so I drag my money by the ear into the center of the table. Without any reluctance, he pushes all his chips in, too. I turned over my two black kings, and Benny turned over his two red aces! I knew immediately that I was in trouble, but I couldn't extricate myself from it because my chips were already in the pot.

Well, Amarillo Slim, Puggy Pearson, Johnny Moss and Bill Boyd started up a heated argument about insurance on the hand. They wanted to insure Benny's hand. This was the first instance that I had ever learned about poker insurance, so I didn't know what they were talking about. "Well, he's 20-to-1," one of them was saying. "Naw, I won't give you 20-to-1, I'll give you 10-to-1 or maybe 12-to-1," the other one answers.

A good insurance man always makes a profit, you know. On the flop in no-limit hold'em you get three cards, then you get one card, and then you get another card. If I could just catch a king on one of those five cards, I knew that I could beat Benny's two aces. Or if I could catch one of his aces to make a straight ... you see, there was the possibility that my hand wasn't completely dead. And of course, I could make two black flushes.

Slim, Puggy, Johnny and Bill began to argue about what the real odds were. All I knew was that the odds said that I was in trouble. They finally settled their insurance arguments and laid some bets on which hand was going to win. Of course, I went busted. The two aces stood up, so I stood up, dusted off my chair, checked to see if there were any more BB's around me that I hadn't put in the pot, and excused myself saying, "I certainly have enjoyed playing with you fellas, and if I can go borrow some more money, I'm gonna come back." I was just teasing them a little bit.

Benny's Brainstorm, the World Series of Poker

That was my first experience with Benny and our friendship continued through the years. He developed the World Series of Poker in 1970 and it has continued ever since, but I was back there in the '60s playing with these boys in the game that the Series

evolved from. Later, they got together and made a \$ 10,000 freeze-out from the nucleus of that group of “old age school teachers and preachers” that Mrs. Binion didn’t want playing poker - including Johnny Moss, Curtis Skinner, Joe Bernstein, Puggy Pearson, Charlie Hendrix, Amarillo Slim, Doyle Brunson, Jack Straus, Bob Hooks, Natey Blank, Bill Riddle, Titanic Thompson and Doc Greene. They didn’t have a cardroom at that time, but she kindly allowed them to have this little series of games, the World Series of Poker.

I’ve played in the World Series for many years and have entered the \$10,000 championship event seven times, but these days I only play in the Big One if I can win my way into it through a \$200 satellite. You see, with 300-plus players entering it, the tournament has gotten so big that if you’re an excellent player, the math on winning the championship title comes down to something like this: If you’re at the top of your game and there are 300 players - and if you’re good enough to be in the top 10 percent of all the players in the world - the chances are that you have a dead-even chance to win it one time in 30 years! But the last time I played, I outlasted more people than had ever played in the game before.

The first time I played the World Series in 1980, Eric Drache was the director and I won the honor of being named the “Best All-Around Player” (at that time, it was called the “Most Valuable Player” award). As in a rodeo when you finish the highest in a number of events, I made the final table in five games: I finished second in ace-to-five lowball, third in high-low split, third in =, fourth in stud and fifth in hold’em. In 1981 Chip Reese won the award, but then it was discontinued so we’re the only two players ever to win solid gold bracelets for being “Best All-Around Player” at the World Series of Poker.