

**Excerpted from *Beverly Hills Country Club*, by Earl W. Clark and Allen J. Singer.  
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## Beverly Hills Country Club Introduction

Ten minutes south of Cincinnati, the most luxurious showplace in the Midwest sat atop a grassy hill off U.S. Route 27 in Southgate, Kentucky. Every night of the week in the 1950s, sellout crowds flocked to Beverly Hills Country Club to watch the world's greatest entertainers perform. No secret to café society, this nightclub attracted local clientele and high rollers flying in from New York and Chicago.

From the 1930s to the early 1960s, Northern Kentucky was replete with nightclubs and gambling. Local businessman Pete Schmidt opened the Beverly Hills Club in Southgate in 1935 with a casino and live entertainment. An organized gaming group, the Cleveland Syndicate, wanted it. When Schmidt refused to sell, the club burned down. Arson was suspected but never proven. After he rebuilt it, Beverly Hills Country Club reopened in 1937, and Schmidt finally sold out.

The Cleveland Four (Moe Dalitz, Morris Kleinman, Louis Rothkopf, and Sam Tucker) ran Beverly Hills like the Desert Inn they operated in Las Vegas. They put in a rotating chorus line, and their connections brought in headliners from the major entertainment circuits. With affordable dinners, the draw of big stars, and the lure of the casino, customers came pouring in. After 20 successful years, crackdowns and grand jury indictments closed all gambling in 1961.

Beverly Hills stayed open without gambling, and business consequently plummeted. New budget cutbacks cancelled all shows and shrank the orchestra by half. The employees lost their jobs. The show people moved on.

On New Year's Eve 1961, Beverly Hills closed. Eight years later, local businessman Dick Schilling bought it and renovated it. Before it could open, it was completely gutted by fire. Schilling rebuilt it and opened it in 1971, without a casino.

The new Beverly Hills Supper Club was grand and plush. As before, there was dinner and a show, but the club also catered to proms, weddings, birthday parties, graduations, and conventions. Then, on May 28, 1977, Beverly Hills came to a tragic end when the club caught fire. A capacity crowd had come to see headliner John Davidson. One hundred, sixty-five patrons, musicians, and employees lost their lives in one of the nation's worst nightclub disasters. The site stands vacant now except for a historical marker commemorating the deadly event.

Modern generations equate Beverly Hills with tragedy, and understandably so. However, its legacy should be that of happiness. Decades before the fire, it was an unforgettable place to visit, and equal to the best clubs in Las Vegas, Miami, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Two entertainment-packed shows went on every night at Beverly Hills, three on Saturdays, seven days a week. A four-course dinner costing \$2.95 was served with high style in the Trianon Room before and after the show. At 8:00 p.m., the lights dimmed and the curtains swept open.

The audience applauded as a dazzling production number filled the stage, opening the show with a line of dancers high-kicking to music provided by the Gardner Benedict Orchestra. Afterwards, the first act, possibly a juggler or tap dancer, took the stage. The second act could be a comedian or a singer. A ballet number followed. The featured headliner then came on for 45 minutes. A "flag waver" finale closed the show.

After giving a standing ovation, audience members then played bingo or followed the headliner into the casino. While the orchestra took a break, some of the audience danced on stage to the music of the Jimmy Wilbur Trio. The second show started at 11:30 p.m., and if it was Saturday, the third show began at 1:00 a.m. Two weeks later, a different headliner would appear, along with an entirely new show.

Thanks to gambling, Beverly Hills could afford to bring in high-class entertainment like movie stars, opera singers, Broadway actors, and the day's top recording artists. Also crossing the stage were lesser-known acts: comedians, jugglers, vocal quartets, dance teams, animal acts, balancing acts, and even roller skaters. Some big names were not booked. Though Frank Sinatra did not perform at Beverly Hills, he did visit. After he caught a show, Sinatra reportedly spent \$30,000 at the gaming tables.

Beverly Hills catered to the over-30 crowd; the musical acts were chosen based on what they preferred. Young adult record store patrons bought sophisticated music—full of romance and lush orchestrations recorded by the day's top crooners. These were the sorts of performers who tended to headline at Beverly Hills. This music held little appeal to the early-1950s teenage bobby-soxers, who coincidentally were too young to gamble in Beverly's casino. But rock-and-roll numbers were hitting the charts in 1955. By 1958, most record buyers were teenagers. The popular music scene was changing.

Despite this, Beverly Hills never featured any rock and roll. Cleveland booking agents Frank and Rocky Sennes handled the talent and did not consider the tastes of a potential young crowd.

Those who patronized Beverly Hills found it an unforgettable place to visit. The employees enjoyed it immensely. One waiter reminisced, "It was a fabulous place to work."

In 1951, saxophonist and author Earl W. Clark joined the Gardner Benedict Orchestra. Starstruck by all the talent, he began taking his Argus C3 35-millimeter camera to work. For the next decade he photographed everyone from the top stars down to the novelty acts. His subjects frequently posed in the backstage dressing rooms. Other times, surprise candid shots were taken while the entertainers chatted or relaxed, often while holding a cigarette.

Clark took the pictures during intermissions, sometimes moments before the start of the show. Many were taken beside one of the three couches backstage underneath the walls of photographs, like the headshots that graced the walls in Hollywood's Ciro's. Clark even snapped a few from the orchestra during a performance when not busy reading the score.

Thirteen years worth of wonder were captured during those fabulous nights. The images were made into slides so Clark could project them onto a screen. Over the coming decades, some slides deteriorated, resulting in a reddish hue. Frequent handling caused scratches and spotting in some. Flaws or no flaws, the images are imbued with a distinct 1950s flavor and reveal a unique view of life behind the stage at one of the nation's leading showplaces.

Clark played with many fine orchestra musicians at Beverly Hills over the years and has never forgotten them. Within these pages are: Frank Bowsher, sax; Carl Grasham, drums; Wally Hahn, trumpet/violin; Andy Jacob, violin; Jim Langenbrunner, tenor sax; Harold Marco, drums; Charlie Medert, trumpet; Bill Mavity, trumpet; Al Miller, tenor sax; Fritz Mueller, trumpet; Bill Rank, trombone; Bud Ruskin, bass; Glenn "Hap" Seaman, tenor/baritone sax; Wilbur "Shooky" Shook, drums; George Thomas, sax; Ted Tillman, drums; Marty Weitzel, sax; Dick Westrich, trumpet; Bob Wheeler, alto sax; Pierson DeJager, trumpet; and the Jimmy Wilbur Trio, including Dick Garrett, Bill Kleine, and Frank Gorman.

Thanks to the Internet, modern readers can experience the entertainers presented in these pages. Most acts in this book can be seen or heard on YouTube. Readers are urged to visit the Web site and experience entertainment that was, for many years, a mainstay of the nightclub scene and has been largely overlooked by recent generations.

The era has ended, but it has left behind a great legacy. In Clark's own words, he reflects, "It was a wonderful time and a long run for us, here in Northern Kentucky. A time which will never return.

Gambling is now legal in some places, but not bearing the glamour of the Beverly surroundings. The clientele has changed from the once well-dressed and well-groomed. The songs have ended, too, but the memories linger on.” And so they shall.