



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of WILLIAM G. (BILL) BENNETT

November 16, 1924 - December 22, 2002

AMA #L331



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Transcribed & Edited by SS (4/2003); Updated by JS (10/2007), Reformatted by JS (06/2009)

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## Career:

- Held an annual Tournament of Champions modeling contest in Las Vegas, Nevada
- Used his personal and business finances to support and promote model aviation; frequently did things like give discounted rooms to model aviation competitors staying in his hotel during competitions
- Paid to have the Lad Vegas model airplane constructed then donated it to the city
- Was one of America's richest men who owned numerous hotels and casinos, particularly in Las Vegas, including Circus Circus, Excalibur, the Sahara and the Luxor

## Honors:

- 1981: AMA Fellow
- 1996: AMA Distinguished Service Award
- 2006: Model Aviation Hall of Fame

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*The following two letters were written in support of the Model Aviation Hall of Fame application Joe Bridi submitted on behalf of William G. Bennett in March 1982. Copies of the original application and letters can be found in Bill's file in the AMA's Archives. See the AMA's Archivist for assistance.*

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*K&B Manufacturing  
12152 Woodruff Avenue  
P.O. Box 809  
Downey, CA 90241*

*March 28, 1979*

*Attention: Model Aviation Hall of Fame Committee*

*I strongly urge and recommend that the Academy of Model Aeronautics highest accolade "for appreciation of devoted and unselfish service in furthering the progress and aims of model aviation competition" be accorded to Mr. William G. Bennett.*

*Even though his business interests are not in model aviation, I can think of no one who has contributed so generously of his time and financing towards the worldwide promotion and betterment of model aviation.*

*His annual Tournament of Champions contests are now legendary and without a doubt have contributed greatly in furthering the sport of Radio Controlled aeromodeling through the world.*

*This recommendation is based upon personal association with Mr. Bennett and full knowledge of the claims made above.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*K&B Manufacturing  
John E. Brodbeck  
President*

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*Model Builder magazine  
621 W. 19<sup>th</sup> Street  
Costa Mesa, CA 92627*

*February 24, 1979*

*Selection Committee  
Model Aviation Hall of Fame*

*Why William G. "Bill" Bennett should be elected to the Model Aviation Hall of Fame:*

*First, he is always available to do anything to further the cause of model aviation – he will use his personal finances and that of Circus Circus Hotel/Casino to further any worthy cause of model aviation, they are too many to enumerate here, but outstanding among them is the time that the MAC's show needed help with their raffle, it just wasn't coming off, so Bill supplied three three-day all expenses paid trips for two people to Las Vegas as prizes.*

*According to the MAC's management, the raffle took off financially and was a success.*

*On still another occasion, the NMPRA had run out of open doors to sponsor their national championships and he came through with the necessary funding for trophies, etc., and in addition offered to house the contestants and the mechanics at greatly reduced rates at the hotel.*

*And the history of the Tournament of Champions (TOC) is sufficient to warrant the election; however, prior to the TOC Bill was connected with the Mint Hotel and, in 1970, sponsored pylon races at the Mint Gun Club; to do this he put up cash prizes of \$10,000 and in addition had the gun club land leveled and put down a very sturdy asphalt base runway of 200-feet by 300-feet – all of this at his own expense.*

*To further the cause of the TOC he did the same to create the North Las Vegas model airport; had land graded, put down a very heavy asphalt base runway of 200-feet by 600-feet, but before all this was done, an architectural study and a plot plan was made whereas the runway was always or most always in the prevailing wind and at no time have the sun in the eyes of the pilots. He did all this, fenced the field, built a runway and then turned it all over to the city of North Las Vegas with the stipulation that the field must always be available to any modelers who wished to use it.*

*Never did he expect any material gain, either to himself or the hotels as in each case it was at great cost of many dollars just to do these many things, never did he or the hotel ever expect anything other than the financial losses due to these many contributions to the furtherance of our hobby – just for these reasons alone he should be the unanimous choice of the selection committee.*

*His financial contributions added a new dimension to the competitive section of our hobby/sport as we now have a professional category of miniature aircraft pilot; this, however, was not the*

*only contribution as still another dimension was added by the innovative pattern contributions offered to the hobby.*

*These had a very positive effect upon the competition scene not only in the United States but throughout the world. The new TOC pattern maneuvers were adopted in many countries and became part of the organized international competition by becoming part of the FAI schedule of pattern maneuvers. The new 1978 prototype pattern and the Aresti type maneuver schedule has also become accepted as the 1979 British Pattern Championships will have a three-day competition at Woodvale, England.*

*Bill Bennett's contributions to the furtherance of the model hobby have made him an outstanding candidate for the AMA's highest honor, the Hall of Fame.*

*Sincerely,  
Walter L. Schroder  
Publisher/General Manager  
AMA 893, Fellow, Adm. Leader,  
Hall of Fame*

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*The following article about Bill Bennett ran in the Las Vegas Sun following his death in December 2002.*

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## **Gaming Pioneer Bennett Dies**

By Ed Koch

Sahara owner led Circus Circus' rise and was known for giving

Bill Bennett had the Midas touch in gaming.

Whether it was turning several money-losing casinos into winners or whether it was building megaresorts such as the Excalibur and Luxor, Bennett struck gold during a career that touched five decades.

In the process, he never strayed from his vision to develop a Las Vegas that was friendly to the not-so-wealthy gamblers and welcoming to families.

William G. Bennett, former chair and co-founder of Circus Circus Enterprises and owner of the Sahara Hotel, died Sunday at Desert Springs Hospital following a lengthy illness. He was 78.

Services for the Nevada resident of 37 years are pending.

One of America's richest men, Bennett was a noted local philanthropist who gave millions of dollars to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and fed Culinary Union workers on the picket lines at the Frontier Hotel during the six-year strike in the 1990s.

From 1965 to the present (2002), he served either as an executive, chairman or owner for a dozen gaming properties: Sahara Tahoe, the old Mint, the Sahara, Circus Circus, Circus Circus Reno, Slots O' Fun, Silver City, Excalibur, Luxor, the Edgewater and Colorado Belle in Laughlin and Circus Circus Tunica in Mississippi.

“I think that my father was the most influential individual in making Las Vegas the true business entity that it is today,” said his daughter, Diana Bennett, president of Paragon Gaming. “He took all the mystique out of it and made it a business. That is what he brought to this town.

“He was a very private man – dedicated to his company and to his family. He didn’t live his life for anybody but the standard he set for himself.”

Bill Bible, former chair of the state Gaming Control Board and president of the Nevada Resort Association, said Bennett was one of the founding fathers of Las Vegas.

“He was really the pioneer of gaming as we knew it today,” Bible said. “He was very respectful of gaming regulators and he had an awful lot of respect for the way Nevada regulates gaming.”

Mel Larson, a friend since the 1950s who worked with Bennett for years – including as an executive at Circus Circus – called Bennett “very talented and dedicated to the industry.”

“He was a perfectionist but he hired good people to do the job and pretty much turned them loose,” Larson said. “He was very good to the people who were loyal to him.”

Bennett’s death comes on the heels of the death of his good friend, Ralph Englestad, owner of the Imperial Palace, who died on November 26, 2002.

Bennett’s Gordon Gaming Corporation bought the Sahara in 1995 from Paul Lowden for \$193 million. Bennett was president and shareholder with his wife, Lynn Bennett. At the time, he also bought the adjacent land leased by Wet ‘n Wild amusement park.

Bennett had bought Circus Circus with William Pennington from Jay Sarno, its builder, in 1974 and later took the company public.

Circus Circus was among the first family-themed resorts, with attractions such as circus acts to bring in customers. Bennett used the theme and its family-friendly atmosphere to build the business.

“He had to look at what its potential was,” Diana Bennett said. “He viewed it as any other business he had run. You had to make certain you offered the best product at the best price, and you would get a lot of people to come in.”

She said, to that end, her father offered \$19 room rates, low-price buffets and, making the best of the space that was there, moved the circus activities away from the casino floor to keep children out of the gaming area.

Although Circus Circus Enterprises grew to generate \$1 billion a year in revenues, it had a rocky go in the early 1990s when stock values declined as the company failed to establish itself in other states that allowed gaming.

Bennett was later sued by other board members when he attempted to buy the old Hacienda Hotel at the same time his company tried to purchase it. He resigned in March 1995. As part of the agreement, he signed over legal rights to the Hacienda, which was demolished. Mandalay Bay today stands on that site, and Circus Circus Enterprises is now the Mandalay Resort Group.

“Bennett’s vision was instrumental in turning the Last Vegas Strip into a worldwide tourist destination,” said Glenn Schaeffer, president of Mandalay Resort Group.

“When he took Circus Circus (Enterprises) public in 1983 it became the first institutional stock in the gaming industry and one of the most successful IPOs (initial public offerings) of the 1982 to 2000 bull market.”

Born November 16, 1924, in Glendale, Arizona, Bennett served in the Navy during World War II. After the war, he built a chain of furniture stores in Phoenix, which he sold for \$40 million and became an investor, only to lose millions of dollars and seek bankruptcy protection.

He took great pride in the fact that he eventually paid every creditor.

Bennett entered the gaming business at Del Webb’s Sahara Tahoe as a casino host in 1965, and a year later, he was in charge of saving the company’s ailing Mint, which today is part of Binion’s Horseshoe.

In 1971, he left Del Webb, joined forces with Reno gamer Pennington and the two sold gaming machines to casinos. Three years later, they bought the Circus Circus Hotel. In 1978, they opened a Reno property and bought the Laughlin Edgewater in 1983. Pennington retired five years later.

In 1990 Circus Circus Enterprises opened the \$300 million Excalibur and in 1993, the \$375 Luxor. Under Bennett’s reign, Circus Circus Enterprises became the state’s largest employer with 18,000 employees.

During the Frontier strike in the 1990s, it was estimated that Bennett spent about \$1 million a year to feed the picketing workers.

“He was a giant in the gaming industry in town and for us he was unbelievable, especially during the Frontier strike,” said D. Taylor, a Culinary Union official. “One of the vital things that kept the strikers going was Mr. Bennett feeding them three times a day. You never forget that kind of generosity.”

In January 1998 an estimated 200 Frontier strikers gathered in a Sahara ballroom for a surprise party to thank Bennett.

At the Sahara, Bennett, who had a longtime love of auto racing, brought in a \$15 million Speedworld attraction that provided simulated Indy car rides. It was part of a \$100 million renovation at the Strip resort.

“We feel it will draw people here,” Bennett said at the time. “Anymore, everybody needs some type of attraction to draw people because the town has become so competitive.”

Also, Bennett and Englestad financed the \$200 million-plus Las Vegas Motor Speedway and were its original owners. They sold the track in December 1998.

In 1997, Forbes magazine, in its list of the nation's 400 richest people, estimated Bennett's worth at \$630 million. In 2001, Forbes said Bennett was worth \$675 million.

In 1997, Bennett gave the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) a \$2.2 million gift to fund a development center for training of teachers who work with at-risk students. In November 1999, Bennett gave UNLV's College of Education a \$5 million gift to build a new preschool campus that the university hopes will become a model for preschool education in the nation.

Bennett also gave \$2.7 million for the College of Education's Professional Development Building.

"I think the community has lost a man who has been a terrific symbol for Las Vegas," said John Gallagher, UNLV vice president for development. "At UNLV, we have lost a very good friend. He has been at the top of the gaming and resort profession for so many years it's almost hard to imagine Las Vegas without him."

Bennett founded The Bennett Foundation for charitable needs. Diana Bennett said a lot of charity work her father did was not known to the public.

"Most of the things he did, he did quietly and behind the scenes," she said. "He had various causes. Anything to do with animals. People don't know the school he set up for children of fallen police officers. He did everything quietly and behind the scenes. All he was doing was helping."

In addition to his daughter and wife of more than 40 years, Bennett is survived by his son, William A. Bennett of Las Vegas; a sister, Betty Spittler of Arizona; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

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*The following memorial of Bill Bennett ran in the April 2003 issue of Radio Control Modeler magazine.*

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**William G. Bennett**  
**1924 – 2002 In Memorial**  
By Pat Crews

On December 22, 2002, with the passing of William (Bill) Bennett of Las Vegas, each and every one of us in the modeling world lost a great crusader and promoter for our hobby. For so many of us who had the privilege of knowing him, we lost a true friend. I will leave it to others to try and list all of the accomplishments that he achieved and the contributions to our hobby he selflessly made. I know it will be a daunting task.

I just wanted to let our readers know what a wonderful friend Bill was to me and RC Modeler magazine over the years. He was so willing to listen to me and offer guidance and assistance. And when needed, a shoulder to cry on or a laugh to share. The greatest things Bill gave me were his unwavering friendship, loyalty and the introduction to his wonderful wife "Sam"; who no matter the distance and time has been my best girlfriend for so many years.

I know the Las Vegas newspapers will have many testimonials to him, and I am sure that will all be well deserved. I also realize that Bill must have had many more lives than a cat, and he

needed them to do all the things he did. I just took for granted that he would always be here and I just can't comprehend not being able to pick up the phone and have him to talk to.

No matter how long it was between calls or getting to see one another, he was always there for me. He was my World War II hero, my favorite pilot and ship's captain. My dear friend, Bill, I will always picture you now with a long lost cat on your lap and a dog named Scooter waiting for you to play ball with him...

With love and a heart full of memories,  
Pat Crews

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