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Remembering Erving Goffman

Dan Cisin

My Father and Erving Made a Number of Trips to Nevada to Play Blackjack

Dan Cisin, son of Dr. Ira Cisin who taught statistics at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960's, wrote this memoir for the Erving Goffman Archives at the request of Dmitri Shalin and approved posting the present version on the web.

[Posted 07-28-15]

July 19, 2015

Dmitri,

I see from the excerpt of your book that you know the basic story of Ira and Erving teaming up to play blackjack at Nevada casinos. I'm not sure of the time frame, but I think this took place shortly after Edward O. Thorp's 1962 book, Beat the Dealer. I was in my early teens at the time (I would have been 14 in 1962), and my recollections of my childhood, in general, are not real clear or reliable. I probably met Erving several times, as one of my father's friends, but I do not remember him. I do, however, recall some things about the blackjack adventures, as the events were described to me by my father.

My father and Erving made a number of trips to Nevada to play blackjack, and I remember that Ira would come home with pockets full of silver dollars which he would give to the kids. In those days, the casinos used silver dollars rather than \$1 chips. As I understood the venture, Ira was a faster counter and was able to disguise the fact that he was engaged in card counting. Because Erving was not as fast, and was too obvious, Ira actually did the playing when the two were together. Ira was able to do the basic Thorp system of tens/non-tens, as well as also keeping track of aces and fives. Erving was the money man of the team (my understanding was that he was wealthy, and we were not), and Ira was the player. I remember occasions when my father would ask

me just to deal cards as fast as I could so that he could practice counting. We didn't do this much, however, because I wasn't able to deal fast enough to make it challenging to him.

I know that the system worked better when there were fewer players at the table, and that ideally the player was engaged one-on-one with the dealer. Ira and Erving would wait around until the wee hours of the night to get the best playing conditions. I remember my father telling stories about how he and Erving were barred from playing in the casinos, but I do not recall any of the details. Ira was fairly tall and heavy, and I assume Erving was shorter and slender, because I heard them described as a "Mutt and Jeff" team. Apparently they were easily recognizable as a team, and eventually got barred from all the big casinos. They tried playing the smaller places for short while, but soon decided that the venture was no longer viable. I don't think they made a huge amount of money, but did make enough to pay for all the trips. My impression was that they did it more for fun than to actually make a lot of money.

Ira died in 1987, and it was nice to have an opportunity to think back about him.

Best,

Dan

July 20, 2015

Dmitri,

Sorry, I don't have much more info for you. I think Ira and Erving played in Las Vegas most of the time. We moved back to the Washington, D.C. suburbs in the summer of 1962, and therefore it was a long trip for Ira. I don't think they would have added a drive to the end of a long plane flight. Also, they tried to play at the largest casinos with a better chance of getting an empty table. I don't know if Reno or Lake Tahoe had real big casinos at that time.

They were banned from individual casinos. I remember that it was a cumulative process that eventually got them banned from all the very big casinos. I know they tried to play at the smaller places, but soon gave up; I think because it was too hard to find a quiet table. I have no indication that Ira knew of Thorp's work before the book came out, or that he ever had any personal contact with Thorp. I agree with your conclusion that the venture probably occurred between 1962-1964. I knew that Erving worked as a dealer at some point; my father explained to me that Erving was a participatory type of social scientist. I have no idea at which casino(s). As far as I remember, I never met Erving's wife or son, or heard anything about them. I left home for college in 1966, and never again lived with my parents. I don't recall hearing anything more about Erving after the card counting was done.

Best of luck on your book,

Dan

* The Erving Goffman Archives (EGA) is the web-based, open-source project that serves as a clearing house for those interested in the dramaturgical tradition in sociology and biographical methods of research. The EGA is located in the Intercyberlibrary of the UNLV Center of Democratic Culture, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/index.html>. Postings on the website are divided into several overlapping sections: "Documents and Papers," "Goffman's Publications," "Goffman in the News," "Biographical Materials," "Critical Assessments," and "Comments and Dialogues." For inquiries regarding the EGA projects, please contact Dr. Dmitri Shalin, shalin@unlv.nevada.edu. When you cite the materials collected for the EGA, please use the following reference: *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives*, ed. by Dmitri N. Shalin (UNLV: CDC Publications, 2009).