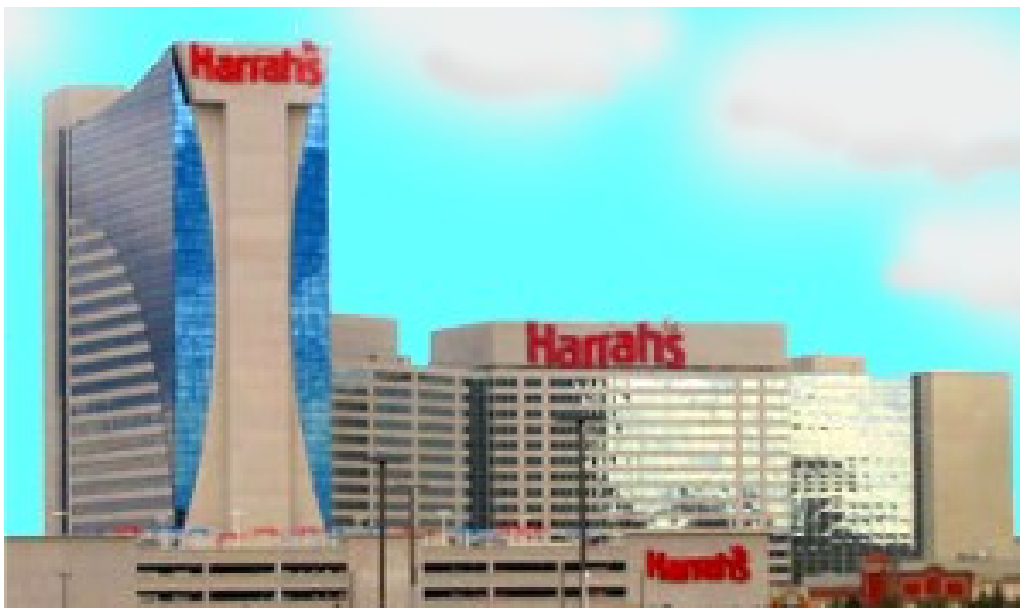


Last year we were at Harrah's Atlantic City for my brother's 85th birthday party. It was the first visit to that hotel for my spouse and me, but because we always stay at Harrah's Las Vegas and are Total Rewards Platinum cardholders, we were comped. With season prices at Harrah's AC up to \$300 a night for a room, we couldn't have found a better bargain.

Although we've lived in the Arizona desert for 20 years, we were born and raised in Philadelphia. I first went to Atlantic City at age two, but I don't remember much except the 1920s wool bathing suits all the women wore. My most vivid memories of the resort town were right after World War II.



My mother's sister owned a little hotel on Atlantic Avenue two blocks from the Boardwalk. Because we won the war (almost) all by ourselves, my brother (Air Force) and I (Navy) were given a free room for a week by our kindly kin. It was a tiny alcove right behind the check-in desk, but we were grateful we didn't have to pay the enormous \$8-a-day room rate.

Harrah's wasn't yet built then. In fact, the original hotel's name was the Holiday Inn Marina Casino when gambling came to Atlantic City in the mid 1970s. It became Harrah's Atlantic City in 1980. The hotel, enlarged and modernized, is in the Marina area, a mile or so hike to the Boardwalk or a quick ride on the hotel's free shuttle.

There's a variety of rooms at Harrah's, including Marina Towers for ordinary folks like us, and pricey Bayview, Harbour and Atrium for those who want more room and amenities. My brother's family had a beautiful Super Suite, where we all gathered several times a day for drinks,

snacks, mingling and finally, the night of the big birthday cake blow-out.

Our favorite restaurant, among the eight throughout the hotel, is simply called The Deli. It reminded us of the little eateries in South Philly and New York's Greenwich Village from the 1950s. It served real ethnic food and enormous portions. We had matzoh ball soup, reuben sandwiches and artery-busting slices of cheesecake, all washed down with Dr. Brown's Root Beer.

Among the high-priced places at the hotel were Bluepoint (try the oy ... I mean ... ersters), McCormick & Schmick's, the Steakhouse and Polistina's Italian Ristorante. Of course, like Las Vegas no casino hotel would be genuine without the all-you-can-stuff buffets. Harrah's has delightful ones overlooking the ocean called, what else, the Waterfront and Fantasy Reef Buffets.

The prices aren't the same as they were in the 1950s, but the quality is good, and when gabbing with relatives we hadn't seen in years, it was a lot of fun. The food court has the usual chain eateries you'll find in shopping malls, and the limp food is just as plain.

The casino area is big, flashy and varied, with rows and rows of all the usual table games and hundreds of slot and video poker machines throughout. When we left Harrah's, after three days and nights of celebrating, we all made sincere promises that we'd all gather together again in good old Atlantic City for my 85th birthday in 2010. Let's hope we can all make it.