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Special Report - Breakaway: Focus on Small Business

Jethro's Alive, Aiming for a Casino

Keeping busy after years of early retirement

By TODD W. CARTER

Jethro Bodine, "The Beverly Hillbillies" television character whose brain suffered from frequent brownouts, always had dreams of making it as a big-time Hollywood producer.

Now, Max Baer Jr., the 62-year-old actor who portrayed Jethro for nine seasons, is looking to become a big-time casino operator, playing off his old hillbilly character.

"Jethro's Beverly Hillbillies Mansion & Casino," a projected \$175 million project that would include a hotel and time-share property, has stalled in Reno, Nev., during the past year.

But Mr. Baer hopes that it will still be built there, or in Las Vegas, or just about anywhere else near his homes in Las Vegas, Reno and Beverly Hills, Calif. (Mr. Baer has had several "bad experiences in aircraft" and won't fly. He wants the casino to be built within driving distance of his homes so he can visit it frequently as though it were "my local bar.")

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"Max is motivated by his dream," says longtime friend and business partner Roger Camras. Mr. Baer, he adds, is "a great marketer."

The partners already made one fortune together, producing movies in the 1970s. Mr. Baer had turned to screenwriting while still appearing on the "Beverly Hillbillies" in the early 1970s, because he suspected his acting opportunities would be limited after nearly a decade of playing a backwoods buffoon. "I played Jethro, but I aren't him," he likes to say.

'Macon County Line'

The pair produced a gritty road picture, "Macon County Line," for less than \$1 million, based on Mr. Baer's script. It was a surprise hit on the drive-in theater circuit, dominating screens in the summer of 1974, and made both Messrs. Baer and Camras wealthy. They went on to make several other films before getting out of the business.

"I made a lot of money," Mr. Baer says. "I bought a lot of real estate, and I retired in 1979 and I don't have to work anymore."

Messrs. Baer and Camras are now jumping back into moviemaking. They're working on a movie about Mr. Baer's father, Max Baer Sr., the heavyweight boxing champion who was part Jewish. Entitled "Max vs. Max," it's about the senior Baer, who wore the Star of David on his trunks, knocking out the German boxer Max Schmeling in 1933, soon after Adolph Hitler took over Germany.

For Max Baer Jr., projects like the movie and casino are ways to keep busy after years of early retirement.

The proposed casino also requires him to acknowledge the popularity of the TV show and the character he played -- after two decades of keeping his old role at arm's length.

Roll of the Dice

The casino project is far from a sure thing. It requires the cooperation of the owner of an aging mall located adjacent to his proposed parcel in Reno -- and that may be a snag.

Macerich Co., the Santa Monica, Calif., real-estate investment trust that owns Park Lane Mall, at first supported the idea, but changed positions last fall. Mr. Baer is hopeful that it will either embrace the casino, or sell out to another

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company that would. Macerich has "no comment about this," a spokeswoman says.

Mr. Baer already successfully fought to rezone the property for gaming in 1998 and 1999. He even persuaded the Federal Aviation Administration to allow the casino, which would be close to an airport, to include a 240-foot oil derrick with a 70-foot shooting flame. The oil derrick, of course, is part of the theme of the TV show, about a comic backwoods family striking oil and moving to Beverly Hills.



Sampsel/Preston

Max Baer Jr. on 'the Strip' in Las Vegas

The casino also would include "Granny's Shotgun Weddin' Chapel," a "Cement Pond" swimming pool and "Jethro's All You Ken Et Buf-fet."

The reaction by Reno to the proposed casino project has been mixed. "It really doesn't bring anything new to Reno," says William Eadington, director of the University of Nevada, Reno's Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming, "unless Max Baer has much more up his sleeve than has been revealed.

Mr. Camras says his partnership has sunk about \$500,000 (Mr. Baer says it's more than \$750,000) in seed money to initiate the casino project, which began about 10 years ago when they secured rights to license the TV show for gaming- and food-related products and services.

They will generate their first licensing revenue from slot-machine manufacturer International Game Technology Inc., which is releasing three models based on "The Beverly Hillbillies" theme. They'll be available in casinos next year.

Mr. Baer also has a long list of potential foods and beverages he'd like to market, including "Jethro's Crawdad Crunch Ice Cream" and "Elly May's Buns."

--Mr. Carter is a writer in Allendale, Mich.

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