



A view from the window in the Thunderbird Lodge overlooks Sand Harbor.  
PHOTO/JERI DAVIS

# Lake legacy

## Thunderbird Lodge

**Millionaire George Whittell, Jr., built the** Thunderbird Lodge estate on six and a half acres of Lake Tahoe's east shore between 1936 and 1941. But, at one time, he owned some 40,000 acres—purchased from families that had owned the lakeside sawmills that fed the Comstock silver rush and were eager to liquidate these assets during the Great Depression. Whittell had pulled some \$50 million out of the stock market weeks before its crash. Much of his land would later become of the property of the State of Nevada and preserved from development, but visitors can still tour the historical estate.

According to the Online Nevada Encyclopedia, "George Whittell died on April 18, 1969 with [his wife] Elia at his side. The multi-millionaire tycoon left a legacy of pristine shoreline along with many colorful stories surrounding his tenure in the Silver State." The entry makes no mention of how much of that shoreline and surrounding land was acquired by the state through eminent domain over Whittell's objections. Nor does it mention that in purchasing it, Whittell had jilted a man named Norman Biltz, a land developer in the early 20th century—sometimes called "the Duke of Nevada" in his day. Biltz, who'd been looking to purchase the land with a partner, turned to Whittell for financial backing.

"Well, Mr. Whittell taught me a very great lesson," Biltz said during an interview with the University of Nevada Reno's Oral History department. "He said, 'Norm, I don't like partners; I don't want to get involved.'"

Biltz had already put down somewhere between \$60,000-\$70,000. Whittell agreed to loan him that same amount and then allow him to participate at 25 percent of the land sale profits once his investment—plus 3 percent—was returned. Biltz and his partner had 30 days to close on the land deal and so took Whittell's offer, saying it was "like

a gift from heaven." But only a few months later, Whittell informed Biltz he would halt all sales of the land, leaving Biltz without the full profits he expected.

Thunderbird Lodge Preservation Society docent Scoti Gower has lived in Incline Village for more than four decades. During tours, Gower explains that the estate has changed hands three times since its construction, but the preservation society has been responsible for its \$1 million a year upkeep for more than 20 years. The nonprofit raises funds in part by renting out Whittell's famous mahogany boat, also called the *Thunderbird*—and tours of the estate, including the 600-foot long rock tunnel that leads to said boat.

A retired school teacher, Gower quizzes tour participants on various estate-related factoids during the hour-and-a-half-long tour. And she doesn't sugarcoat things, noting that Whittell had no children—and that he and his wife had separate lodge bedrooms. She also discusses his near obsessive desire for privacy, the surveillance cameras at the estate's entrance, a two-way mirror in the lodge, a siren Whittell could use if he felt boats were getting too close to his estate—and, of course, his fearsome pet lion, Bill.

In the tunnel, she explains how drunken visitors in Whittell's day would be tossed into the "dungeon"—a small cell blasted out of the rock—and left to sober up with Bill. They weren't the only ones. Newspaper sources recount the story of a journalist who was invited to the lodge under the pretense of a party and found herself locked in the cell with Bill until she agreed to recant writings to which Whittell had taken offense.

Hearing these kinds of stories—and looking through the bars into the small, cold cell—it's easy to form a negative opinion of George Whittell. But looking at the east shore of Lake Tahoe, it's hard not to appreciate the actions he took that kept it undeveloped. □

Learn more about the Thunderbird Lodge, 5000 NV-28, Incline Village, by visiting [thunderbirdtahoe.org](http://thunderbirdtahoe.org).



# SUN'S OUT FUN'S OUT

## EVENTS

- **CELEBRITY GOLF ROTARY BREAKFAST**  
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JULY 10
- **BATTLE OF THE INK: LIVE TATTOO EVENT**  
JULY 12
- **COCKTAILS WITH JERRY RICE**  
JULY 13
- **COOKING WITH CHEF MOONEN**  
JULY 13
- **NAPPY ROOTS**  
JULY 26
- **MATT GILMOUR BAND WITH THE CUCKOOS**  
AUGUST 3
- **TERRY PARRETT: HYPNOTIST**  
AUGUST 30 & 31



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