

Omaha's Gambling History

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(Intro) Gambling goes back to biblical times and beyond. It helped finance the original 13 colonies, plus Harvard, Yale and Princeton. It's woven into the mystique of the American west, and "Statewide's" Annie Mumgaard discovered gambling has a colorful history in Omaha too.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) There is an element of the old west here. Almost a decade ago Omaha was declared where the west began. There's a reason for that.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) Omaha native Jim Fogarty is an old newspaper hound and Nebraska history buff. Years on the police beat gave him a street-wise knowledge of gambling.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) Omaha, Council Bluffs and Carter Lake have one whale of a history of gambling. Omaha was begun in 1854. It was a hardscrabble place. But in any case it was an oasis for people who were traveling west or people crossing the prairie or people who were farming and doing things and had no urban experience and when they would come to town they would have their first urban experience and that would involve very frequently liquor, companionship and gambling. And those things were provided enthusiastically.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) Some gambling researchers have noted that gambling's very definition, to take a risk to gain some advantage, is similar to the frontier spirit. Omaha has never lacked frontier spirit.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) This is Carter Lake, Iowa, because in the 1800s became no mans land as it were because the Missouri river changed its course and left this little strip of Iowa in what was Nebraska, and History shows it was a pretty lawless and joyless area and we're near what would have been the Chez Paree.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) The Chez Paree, the dice rattling hot spot of the 30s and 40s. Here you could listen to Sophie Tucker, have the best prime rib in town and enjoy a gambling raid or two.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) The Chez Paree here in Carter Lake was quite the gambling place. I'm told by older relatives of mine that will remain nameless that this was a place that you could bet on any horse race in the United States and it was once described as the most active Casino between Chicago and the west coast.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) As Omaha aged it became known as the land of beef, Boys Town and bookies.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) This is what would have been the heart of the downtown Omaha commercial district in the 40, 50 and early 60. This is 16th street between Dodge and Leavenworth. It was the center of banking, the center of retail. And it was also the center of bookmaking.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) By the mid-20th century Omaha reportedly had more illicit gambling per capita than any other city in the nation. Former moral squad captain Joe Friend conducted some of that reporting.

(Joe Friend/Omaha Police, Retired) One time we raided a crap game and we went in and I was you might say stunned because there was a city councilman in there, and he got arrested just like everyone else.

(Jim Fogarty/Former Omaha Reporter) It was almost seen as a harmless vice. And as a matter of fact from the personalities of the bookmakers that I interviewed in the 70s they were not your classic movie leg breaker types. They regarded themselves as business men.

(Marty Conboy/Omaha City Prosecutor) They were arrested pretty frequently and it was just sort of a part of business to come down here and be arrested and pay fines.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) Omaha City Prosecutor Marty Conboy has shared a lot of courtroom dates with Omaha's gambling establishment, especially when Omaha decided to put the heat on the games.

(Marty Conboy/Omaha City Prosecutor) For two reasons. I think one the crimes associated with those activities increased tremendously. And there was a lot of complaints about assault threats drugs, guns and assorted vice sorts of crimes. And also I think they got to be so open and notorious and it got to be if the bad guys knew it was there they assumed we knew it was there and it nobody was doing anything about it and that sent a bad message and people got fed up.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) Gambling analysts have noted that through the ages, though there is a public demand to gamble, there is often no public demand to legalize gambling.

Gambling prohibition has existed for a long time. The nature of those laws, how they're written and how they're enforced is governed by the atmosphere of a community at a particular time.

(Annie Mumgaard/Reporting) Throughout the ages society's tolerance of gambling, both legal and illegal, has swung with the winds of economic need, scandal and sense of moral deprivation. In Nebraska, the odds are it's about to swing again. The question is where will it land. For "Statewide," I'm Annie Mumgaard.

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