

A Batch of Illegal Chips from Cicero

by John J. Binder

While I have been interested in Chicago organized crime for years, writing on the subject and also collecting photographs and books, until late 2004 I had no real interest in chips or other gambling paraphernalia. In December 2004 a group of clay poker chips with a Cicero, Illinois pedigree were offered for sale on ebay. This was my entree into collecting illegal chips (at least those from the Chicago area) and researching the “rich” history of illegal gambling in the area.

I purchased the 227 chips in question from John Jeanneret of Western Springs, Illinois. John grew up in Cicero, at 1215 S. 49th Court, and his father, Albert Hengge, worked part-time as a carpenter. On one occasion his father’s crew remodeled a store on 14th Street (1400 south in the Chicago numbering system, which is also used in Cicero), between Cicero Avenue (4800 west) and Laramie (5200 west). This is known as the Grant Works section of Cicero. In the walls Albert Hengge uncovered poker chips and other gambling paraphernalia. Mr. Hengge got some of the chips while (sadly for me) the rest of the items went to other workmen in the crew.

A little background information about the town of Cicero is appropriate at this point. The polite way to describe Cicero is that it was a hotbed of illegal gambling and vice from (at minimum) 1924 onward, after the Torrio-Capone gang moved in and took over, with the assistance of the town’s Republican politicians (see my book *The Chicago Outfit* for further details). A more accurate description would be that a careful ranking of dens of iniquity in the world’s history would begin with Cicero, followed by Sodom and Gomorrah.

With organized crime in Chicago partly closed down during the 1923 to 1927 term of reform mayor William Dever, John Torrio and Al Capone shifted their headquarters to 22nd Street (later renamed Cermak Rd.), just west of Cicero Avenue, in Cicero and opened a number of gambling places. Just west of Chicago, it was a convenient location; accessible to patrons from the city but under the jurisdiction of the corrupt Cicero and Cook County Sheriff’s Police. Newspaper articles and the records of the

Chicago Crime Commission indicate that the gambling, for size and other reasons, tended to be located regardless of the decade on the main arteries in Cicero, such as 22nd Street, 12th Street (Roosevelt Rd.), Cicero Avenue and Laramie Avenue. After Prohibition there were numerous gambling joints in Cicero ranging from handbooks for racetrack betting, many of which also contained slots, blackjack tables and ran poker games, to high end casinos such as the Rock Garden (which is of particular interest here and is discussed further below). These places ran well into the 1960s and, as was true in the case of the Rock Garden, sometimes served as the locations of the Outfit’s famous Floating Crap Game (originally referred to as The Big Crap Game).

According to an article in the Chicago Tribune (denoted hereafter as CT) entitled “Cicero and Burnham Repositories of Folklore from the Gangster Era” (CT, Oct. 23, 1987, sec. 7, p. 7), the strip on 14th Street where the chips were found was dotted with speakeasies during Prohibition. Many of the garages between 14th and 15th Street, from 50th to 51st Avenue, contained illegal distilleries during that era. Capone himself was known to frequent a club/hangout at 1346 S. 51st Ct., which is on the corner of 14th Street. Also, during the 1960s and 1970s there were many social clubs along 14th, according to an old-time Cicero resident, which had active card games. This gives the chips of interest some connection to the gambling places elsewhere in town because there was heavy illegal activity in the area they were found going back to Prohibition.

There are four kinds of chips in this batch and they are all Taylor mold, made by Taylor and Company with the distinctive circle of letter T’s molded around the center. Taylor, a premier supplier of illegal gambling equipment in the United States, was located originally at 4848 W. 25th Street in Cicero and was owned by Chicago mobsters Claude “Screwy” Maddox (real name John Edward Moore), Robert Ansani (aka Robert Ansoni and Bobby Taylor) and Joey Aiuppa. During the 1950s Maddox ran

Cicero for the Outfit. He was succeeded in that position by Aiuppa, who later rose to be Boss of the entire Outfit. The first type of chip is cream colored, with blue inserts and is hot stamped “J&J” (in blue) on one side and “\$1.00” on the other. The other type of cream colored chip has green inserts. It is stamped (in blue) “S&M” on one side and “\$1.00” on the other. The red colored chips are hot stamped “JVT” on both sides. The hot stamp is gold and there is a small dot over the V. Finally, the yellow chips are hot stamped “JV” on each side in blue. While the “J&J” chips were already in collectors’ hands, the other chips were newly discovered.

John Jeanneret rightly suspected that these chips were from illegal gambling places in Cicero, which was fairly clear from their location and the fact they were hidden with other gambling items. But no definite proof of their origins was found with them. The first piece of information — and the key to entire puzzle — was provided by my friend Kenn “Doc” Finstuen, columnist for the now defunct Gaming Times magazine, who identified the “J&J” chip as a well known illegal. According to a record from Taylor and Company, 4000 of them were ordered in 1954 and over 8000 additional chips were ordered again in 1960. The record card, which was purposefully vague because many of Taylor’s customers were illegal clubs, shows that the chips were ordered by the 4807 Club in Cicero Illinois. Not only does this conclusively identify the one type of chip as from an illegal club, but it adds to the credibility of the others because they were probably all used by the same gambling operators at the same or related places.

Based on Doc’s lead, I researched the history of these chips using information from Chicago newspapers, other public sources and research materials on organized crime in my files. It was only when the Taylor records became available on-line recently (after my research had been completed), through the outstanding efforts of David Spragg and Gene Trimble, that I obtained the further information from the manufacturer’s records which is discussed below.

I have not been able to find any newspaper articles or other references, beyond the Taylor and Company record, to a place with the exact name “4807 Club.” But there was for years a major, even by the standards of the Chicago Outfit in Cicero, handbook/gambling operation at 4807 W. Cermak in Cicero, which seems to have operated during its heyday in the building with street addresses 4807-4809 W. Cermak. After an extensive search of the Chicago Tribune on-line archives, it is the only gambling place I have found with the street number 4807 in Cicero.

If that place did not have an explicit name, it likely was simply referred to as the 4807 Club. Just as the gambling place a door or two west of it at 4811 W. Cermak was generally referred to as the 4811 Club (see “Dice Games Richest Source of ‘Velvet,’ Records Show”, CT, October 27, 1941 and the FBI file on Joey Aiuppa) and many other Outfit places around Chicago were referred to similarly. Or a seemingly legal bar in the front of the building, through which one entered the bookie joint in the back, may have been called the 4807 Club.

Admittedly, my search of the newspapers also indicates that there was a J & J Club at 2336 S. Cicero Avenue in Cicero, which was known as the Star Lounge in the 1960s. While it has the same initials as the one type of chip and there was gambling at that location, it seems to have been quite minor in comparison to the action at 4807 Cermak. Furthermore, the initials of the operators of 4807 (discussed below) also explain the monograms on some of the other chips, indicating that 4807 Cermak the location that used the J & J chip.

During Prohibition, 4809 W. 22nd St. was a pool room run by George “K. O.” Brown and is clearly visible on early photos of the 22nd Street strip. Pool rooms in Chicago were historically fronts for gambling operations so it is likely that it was the location of a handbook well before the 1920s. At least one famous gangland killing, of Theodore Anton, was believed to have occurred there and Fred Goetz (rightfully suspected of being a gunman at the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre) was killed as he left the bar next door at 4811 W. Cermak in 1934. On the other side of the building, 4805 W. 22nd Street housed the Little Italy restaurant, which was frequented by Al Capone.

This place was not a run of the mill gambling establishment either. As noted in the attached chronology related to 4807 Cermak, associated locations and individuals, the club was raided numerous times and the newspapers report not only a thriving handbook but also on occasions card games going on, which was not unusual for an operation of that type. After the Rock Garden casino, operated by Capone’s cousin Rocco Fischetti, closed at 2131 S. Cicero due to a fire, it simultaneously operated at two Cicero locations in the early 1940s: 4730 Cermak and the place of interest, 4708 Cermak. The Rock Garden was as “high end” a gambling place as could be found in the Chicago area, giving 4807 quite a pedigree as an illegal gambling club. As the chronology notes, the two locations were linked in various ways and through various individuals over the years. In fact, 4807 may have been tied to the Rock Garden’s location at 2131 S. Cicero as well.

Much later, in the 1950s and 1960s, 4807 Cermak was known as the Aloha Grill because a grill operated in the store front on the street side that served as an entrance to the gambling operation. Sometimes there were 100, 200 or even 300 patrons gambling there. For example, an article on March 8, 1950 (p. 12) notes that investigators from the State's Attorney's Office found 175 patrons and 27 (!) employees at that location. From 1952 to 1963 the Chicago Crime Commission sent 65 letters to various authorities complaining about gambling at 4807 Cermak, putting it near the top of that organization's "watch list" during this period. In 1959, an FBI informant described the Aloha Grill as probably the biggest handbook on the 22nd Street strip in Cicero. It was frequented by Joey Aiuppa, the Outfit's overseer of Cicero rackets in the 1960s.

It was common for the owners/operators of illegal gambling places to put their initials on the chips used there. The fact that two individuals with the first initial "J" (see the chronology), John Varlas (or Varlos) and Joseph Vaccaro (aka Joseph Vacco or James Vaccaro), were often arrested as the "keepers" (operators) of 4807 or the sister location at 4730 W. Cermak explains the "J&J" stamp on the chip already linked to the 4807 Club by the Taylor & Co. records. It represents the first initials of these two individuals. It is possible that Vaccaro ran the handbook operation, taking the bets on the horses, while Varlas managed the card and other games. This information also links the chip stamped "JV" with the 4807 Cermak address. "JV" is simply the first and last initials of Varlas (most likely, given his later stature in the Outfit) or/and Vaccaro.

Additional newspaper information also ties the chip stamped "JVT" to John Varlas. A computerized search of obituaries and other newspaper articles indicates that Varlas is a very uncommon name in the Chicago area. However, a burial notice (CT, 11-30-48) for Anthony T. Varlas of 2110 S. 49th Ave. in Cicero mentions a brother, John T. Varlas. Because the name is uncommon — which is due to the fact that this was not the original Greek surname, the family having changed it from Varellas (as the parents' obituaries indicate) — and he is from Cicero itself, this is almost certainly the John Varlas of interest. More conclusively, two other Tribune articles (Sept. 24, 1952 and Aug. 18, 1953) list John T. Varlas as one individual who applied for a federal gambling tax stamp in Cicero during the years 1952 and 1953.

Further information finalizes that the Varlas in question was legally known as John T. Varlas. A July 18, 1963

report by the Intelligence Division of the Chicago Police Department, listing some 150 (mostly higher echelon) individuals involved with the Chicago Outfit along with their addresses and motor vehicle registration information, has an entry for John T. Varlas (and his wife, Nina), who lived at 3040 Harlem Avenue in Riverside, Illinois. This reinforces the information from the obituary discussed in the preceding paragraph, because later obituaries for the same family (i. e., John Varlas's brothers), list John's wife as Nina. The red "JVT" chip is, therefore, most definitely stamped with John Varlas's monogram, the T representing his middle initial.

The Taylor records which are now publicly available confirm these conclusions beyond any possible doubt. Slightly more than twelve thousand of the "J&J" chips were ordered from 1959 to 1960. The record shows the order was placed by Johnny Varlos, for the 4807 Club, also called the Rock Garden on the card. The same information is on the record card for the "JV" stamped chips, of which over 12,500 were ordered in a variety of colors between 1952 and 1957. A single order for 2020 of the "JVT" chips was placed for the Rock Garden/4807 Club (with no mention of Varlos's name on the record) in July 1957.

These quantities certainly indicate that 4807 Cermak was the queen of the Cicero gambling places. In fact, the only chip orders (based on existing records) rivaling these are of "OC" stamped chips by the mysterious J. Barnett. I was recently able to tie the latter, totaling (as in the orders by the 4807 Club) roughly twenty-six thousand chips shipped to the Jerome Hotel in Hammond, Indiana, to an employee of the Owl Club in Calumet City, Illinois named Joe Barnett. The action at the Owl Club apparently matched that at some Las Vegas casinos in the early 1960s, providing another measure (based on the similar size chip orders) of what the 4807 Club must have been like in its heyday.

While Vaccaro faded from history, Varlas/Varlos gained some prominence in the Outfit. Later newspaper articles note that he attended Tony Accardo's Independence Day bash in 1956 and that he was closely associated with Cicero Mob boss Joey Aiuppa during the 1960s. He was also tied to Joe Ferriola and James "Turk" Torello, prominent members of the Outfit's Taylor Street crew, by informant Lou Bombacino (as noted in the chronology). In fact, Bombacino first met Ferriola, Torello and Varlas at the MGM Lounge in Cicero, owned by Nick Kokenes, a well known Mob figure. (Kokenes was likely a cousin or uncle of Varlas, because the mother of the John T. Varlas mentioned in the 1948 burial notice was born Kokenes).

Interestingly, one Ciceroian I met dated a young lady in the early 1960s, who he acknowledged was the daughter of a Greek gambler named John Varzos (as he recalled the last name). The “Varzos” family lived in Riverside at the time according to this gentleman. It was a common practice for people engaged in crime to change a letter or two of their last name to create an alias, so perhaps the family used the name Varzos at the time. A newspaper article in 1966 again gives Varlos/Varlas’s address as on Harlem Avenue in Riverside, indicating that John “Varzos” is very likely the Varlas/Varlos who ran 4807.

John Varlas also seems to have faded away, or at minimum out of the newspapers, over time. At least I have found no references to him after 1966 in regard to gambling or other criminal activities. Social Security death records show, however, that John T. Varlas (born on November 11, 1915) died on May 25, 2000 in Westchester, Illinois (just a few miles directly west of Cicero on Cermak Rd.). A search of the internet indicates that he or his family were apparently parishioners of Holy Apostles Greek Orthodox Church in Westchester.

Similar perusal of the Social Security death records finds several Vaccaros named Joseph (the usual first name appearing for him in newspaper articles) or James who died in Illinois or had a social security card issued there, including one who lived in Cicero at the time of his death. But, the birth date for this Vaccaro is not consistent with Vaccaro’s age as given in newspaper articles listed in the chronology. However, a Joe Vaccaro residing in Tampa, Florida appears on an FBI list of organized crime figures dated January 1969 and has the appropriate birth date, indicating that the Vaccaro of interest had moved to Florida by that time (to further the Outfit’s gambling interests there). There is no matching Vaccaro in the Social Security records, but this is not surprising as many hoods did not apply for Social Security. Consistent with this, there is no Social Security number shown for Joe Vaccaro on the FBI list.

What about the chips stamped “S&M”? Until recently they have remained a bit of a mystery. The Taylor and Company record indicates that 4027 of these were ordered on May 20, 1958. The card has no information on who ordered the chips, which usually indicates that it was a (local) walk-in order and picked up rather than mailed. The most likely explanation is that “S” and “M” are the initials of the individuals who ran the sister operation of 4807, at 4730 Cermak, at one time or another. For example, when 4730 Cermak was raided in 1955 (CT, 11-15-55) police dispersed 250 patrons and arrested three men as operators of a gambling house, including John Sarno, age

39. A better fit for the letters “S” and “M” is found in an earlier article. When 4730 Cermak, during its days as the Rock Garden, was raided in 1944 (CT, 3-21-44), Constantinos Mologorisis was named as the operator and John Strathakoz’s name appeared next among the list of employees in the article.

And, what about the town of Cicero itself? Well, times change. The public in the Chicago no longer tolerates what it once did, such as open, illegal gambling. Coupled with legal (albeit limited) gambling in Illinois, the Outfit run gambling places hosting casino type games – which were once as abundant as gas stations or convenience stores – are a thing of the past, in Cicero and elsewhere. A drive through Cicero reveals that the strip joints of yesteryear are also all gone.

But those affected by nostalgia need not be too remorseful. A recent Cicero town president, Betty Loren Maltese, was convicted along with other public officials of working with the Outfit to loot the town of some \$12 million dollars. The jury is still out on whether the Cicero of today has seen any real political reform.

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Chronology of Newspaper Articles (from the Chicago Tribune) Related to 4807 W. Cermak, the Rock Garden Club and Various Individuals

Date of Article	Details
10-17-35	Gambling facilities on the second floor of 2131 S. Cicero, the famous Rock Garden Casino owned by Rocco Fischetti, and at the rear of the tavern at 4807 Cermak (referred to hereafter as 4807) were reported to be similar and causing parking congestion in the area. 2131 Cicero was once the location of the Ship, a Capone place that was a major casino during Prohibition.
12-02-38	4807 is raided.
09-16-41	Raid on the Rock Gardens finds 6 games of blackjack and poker.

09-19-41	Operators of 4807 and 2131 S. Cicero are fined in court for gambling, following recent raids.	01-13-51	4807 is raided again. Charles Casie is fined as keeper of this location (see his tie to 4730 Cermak below).
10-27-41	The Chicago Crime Commission's survey of gambling places in Cook County in June and July notes 100 patrons at 4807. The Rock Garden is noted as the most expensive of all the gambling places with over 100 well dressed patrons.	07-11-51	4807 raided yet again. 300 patrons are dispersed and Joseph Vaccaro is again arrested at this location, as keeper of the establishment.
10-23-43	Cook County State's Attorney ordered Sheriff's Police Chief McCarthy to raid 4807.	07-29-51	4730 Cermak is raided by the Cook County Sheriff. It is named as the second location of 4807.
10-31-43	Rocco Fischetti, owner of the Rock Garden, is charged with aiding and abetting gambling. The Rock Garden is noted as having two locations : 4730 Cermak and 4807 Cermak. Virgil Peterson, in an article published on 11-04-56, confirms this with regard to operations in 1943. This explicitly links the two places, which is suggested or implied by some of the articles above. An article dated 10-10-43 notes that the 2131 location burned down a few years ago, seemingly in late 1941, and that 4730 Cermak is one of the current locations for the Rock Garden.	08-08-51	State's Attorney will seek an injunction against four often raided gambling places, including 4807.
		08-12-51	4730 Cermak is raided and Charles Casie , previously arrested as the keeper of 4807, is booked as the keeper of this house, again linking the two places.
		10-06-51	Raid on 4807 finds 90 customers and six employees.
		10-16-51	State's Attorney asks Western Union to no longer furnish the telegraph wire service racing results to 11 places in Cicero, including 4807 and 4730 Cermak. Western Union revokes their privileges.
02-28-50	State's Attorney's investigators find open gambling at 4807.	10-27-51	A Cook County grand jury singles out 18 individuals in indictments related to gambling in the county. Along with future Mob Boss Sam Giancana, the list includes James Vaccaro and Carl Cannata , who were arrested many times at 4807.
03-08-50	State's Attorney's investigators find 175 patrons, 27 employees, four card games and a handbook running at 4807.		
07-03-50	Both 4807 and 4730 get horse racing news by telegraph from Continental Press. The same individual, G. Park, is listed as the subscriber at each place.	09-24-52	Federal gambling tax stamps were recently issued to Joseph Vaccaro and John T. Varlas , as well as Charles Casie (could this be Carl Cannata, who gave an address of 4807 Cermak?). All three gave 2131 S. 47 th Ct. as their address.
10-10-50	4807 is raided. John Varlas is arrested as the keeper, along with seven others including Joseph Vaccaro and Charles Casie .		

08-18-53	Federal gambling tax stamps again issued in Cicero to Joseph Vaccaro and John T. Varlas , as well as Charles Casie .	party in 1956, along with various Outfit heavyweights. These functions were attended by higher ranking Outfit members.
08-25-54	State's Attorney Gutknecht names 4807 Cermak, the front of which is now the Aloha Grill, as a gambling place.	01-04-62
02-17/18-55	Poker game is raided at Aloha Grill at 4807. Three poker tables seized.	06-25-65
07-29-55	Aloha grill raided again. 200 patrons dispersed and two keepers seized. The restaurant is one of six entrances to the gambling place in the back.	Joseph Vaccaro AKA Joseph Vacco found guilty of keeping a handbook after a June 15, 1961 raid on 4730 Cermak. Other individuals were booked as keepers of the casino games.
10-23-55	Aloha/4807 raided again.	John Varlas is at the MGM Lounge, at 1839 S. Cicero Ave. in Cicero, with Joe Ferriola and James "Turk" Torello. This is according to testimony by mob informant Lou Bombacino . Ferriola and Torello both later bossed the Outfit's Taylor Street crew, which ran the Cicero area. Varlas later testified on behalf of Ferriola, Jack Cerone and other defendants, to rebut testimony by Bombacino, in a gambling case brought against them. The MGM was owned by Nick Kokenas/Kokenes, managed by John Kokenes, and was long known as an underworld hangout (CT, 08-05-70)
04-09-56	John Varlas of the Aloha Grill address, identified as a gambler, appears in a line-up related to a murder.	02-26-66
07-24-56	Raid at the Aloha disperses 100 customers.	John Varlos , described as a protege of Cicero Mob overseer Joey Aiuppa, is arrested in connection with gambling at 5535 W. 22 nd Place.
11-18-56	Virgil Peterson, Operating Director of the Chicago Crime Commission, notes that John Varlos , who had been arrested as the keeper of 4807, was at Mob Boss Tony Accardo's July 4 th	