

Southern Illinois Illegal Clubs



McClure to Cairo

by Jerry Birl

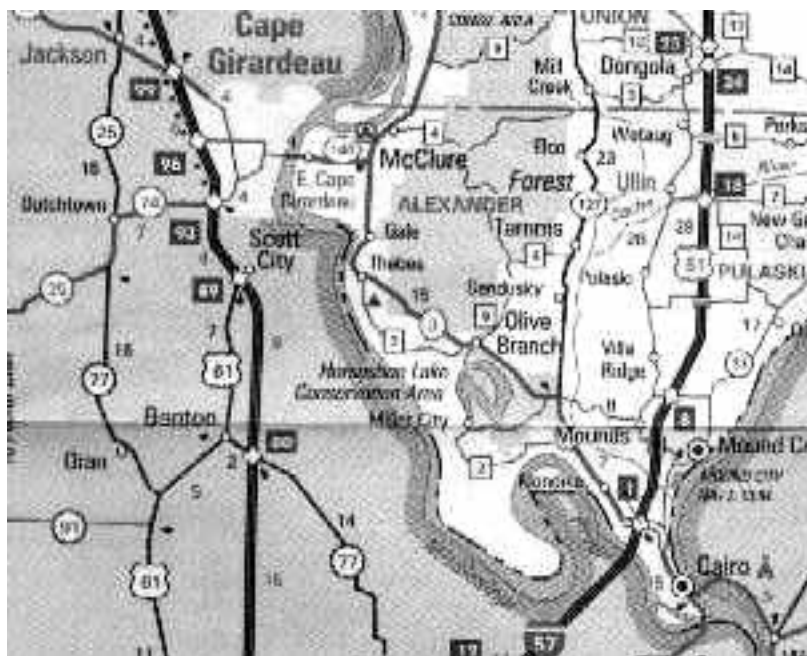
On my way from Jim Kruse's Chip Show in Tunica, Mississippi to Paul Cunningham's Chip Show outside of Detroit, Michigan last November I took a side trip through Southern Illinois in search of information on Illegal Casinos that had operated in that area. I had a couple of chips in my collection from this remote area and I was curious to find out more about the Casinos where they had been used. Not only would I be traveling on the back roads of rural Southern Illinois, but I also found myself transported back in time to an era filled with colorful characters and stories of Fabulous Gambling Halls that today are now just memories. I was fortunate to find two gentlemen each with a different perspective on the Gambling Industry in Southern Illinois. One was an 86 year old former operator of the Thunderbird Club, who made his living on the roll of the dice and the other was a 71 year old retired Illinois State

Trooper who's job it was to enforce the laws of the State of Illinois and to shut down the "Illegal" Casinos of the notorious \$1,000,000 Row.

The saga of full scale high profile Illegal Gambling in Southern Illinois began in the 1930's and ended in the mid 1970's. At one time there were as many as 38 Illegal Casinos in operation on the 30 mile stretch of highway between McClure and Cairo {pronounced K-row) at the Southern most tip of Illinois where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi River.

I crossed the Mississippi River from Missouri into Illinois on an old and very rickety two lane bridge. The bridge was in such horrible shape that the speed limit was only 5 mph!! I felt as though I was going back in time. A new ultra modern bridge is now under construction and will soon replace the old bridge. The new highway leading to the bridge will be built over the site of several of the old Casinos which made up the \$1,000,000 Row, just outside of McClure, Illinois.

Most references on Illegal chips and Casinos list the location of the Casinos as East Cape Girardeau, Illinois when in fact the Casinos were actually located in McClure. McClure is the small town just East of the much smaller settlement of East Cape Girardeau, (which as far as I could see was only a group of about 20 or 30 mobile homes along the side of Illinois Route 146).



In the hay day of illegal gambling the toll for the bridge over the Mississippi was 50 cents and anyone who showed there toll receipt at the Casinos was given 50 cents to cover the toll. Some enterprising would be high rollers would show their receipt at six or seven different Casino and get enough money to begin their day of gambling.

The first big Casino to open in the McClure area was the Villa, a two story hotel and Casino which opened in 1938. Other Casinos which operated in McClure included; the Thunderbird, the Colony (which was the largest and fanciest Casino), Purple Grackle (this place is still in operation as a bar, pool hall and night club, although it has burned down and been rebuilt at least three times), Trocadero or Don's Club, Garden Inn, Curve Inn, Why Not Club, 21 Club and Big Jim Phillips.

All of the Casinos featured Craps, slots, poker and the larger places had roulette tables. The craps games provided the most action with the bets ranging from \$1.00 to \$200.00. When the high rolling cotton farmers from Southeast Missouri came to town the limits were raised in some Casinos to \$300. All the Craps Tables operated with single odds betting.

The Casinos all had their own chips ranging in value from 25 cents to \$100. The Casinos bought a lot of chips and dice from the Taylor Co. in Chicago, these included the T Mold chips which were used at the Thunderbird Club. During my visit the only chips I saw were some of the Brown T Mold chips from the Thunderbird. I also saw a pair of small dice from the Circle Club (which as far as I could find out was not located in this area).

Not only was this area known for Gambling and fine dining, but it also featured big name entertainment including Louis Armstrong, Harry James and Guy Lombardo. The Casino owners paid the top entertainers as much as \$10,000 a day to perform in their Clubs during the 1930's and 1940's. Gamblers by the hundreds packed the restaurants, bars and night clubs run by the Casinos to see the big time entertainers.

Further down the road closer to Cairo were other Casinos including; the Rookery, Becky's Club Charming, Flamingo, El Patio, Cairo Hotel and the Frog City Club among others.

All of these Casinos were raided and closed for various periods of time by the Illinois State Police many

times between 1950 and 1975, but some how the Casino operators would find a way to reopen and begin gambling again. However, the final raid that was conducted in 1975 brought an end to the illegal gaming era in Southern Illinois. The former \$1,000,000 Row and all of it's past glory were gone.

The above information has added to our knowledge of this area's gambling history, but there is still a lot more to uncover. I am still in the process of compiling additional information on the many Casinos that operated in this area. I am also gathering information on some of the colorful characters who worked in these Casinos and also the members of organized crime who exercised a considerable amount of influence over the operation of many of these Casinos. I hope to tell some of these stories in future articles on this very interesting area. ❖

