

ONCE AROUND THE NORTHWEST WHITHER LA CENTER

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There is a small town just over the Oregon border which is known in the area for one thing only: card rooms, and a lot of them. This is La Center, Washington (not L.A. Center in case any of you Californians are thinking of making the trip north) and it is home to about 500 people. But the population doubles on busy days as players from the Portland area make their way across the Columbia River to partake in the action. It is a short 20-minute drive along Interstate-5 and it is the closest gaming to the Portland metropolitan area. Here's why.

Like many other cities in the West, Portland was once home to numerous downtown clubs and cardrooms. Though never expressly legal, local authorities usually turned a blind eye to the proceedings. This all started to change in the 1960s as reform-minded politicians decided that it was time to "clean up" the city. This included the cardrooms. Before too long there were few remaining, even after the state of Oregon passed a statute which allowed cardrooms to exist with "local permission." By the early 80s all the clubs had disappeared. But there are nearly one million people in the Portland area and they needed a place to play. At first the slack was picked up right across the river in Vancouver, Washington. There, cardrooms were covered under the 1973 Washington statute which legalized poker and related gaming. This did not last, however, as the city of Vancouver started having problems with local law enforcement. The city decided that the solution was to outlaw the cardrooms, which it was permitted to do under the state ordinance. Again there was a move and this time the clubs ended up in La Center, the closest municipality that would have them. It proved to be a boon to the city. The clubs have flourished ever since and have provided an important tax base.

There are several small poker clubs in the city (like Gardena, California once upon a time). They derive most of their income from the games and are primarily designed to be cardrooms (as opposed to the restaurants, bowling alleys, and bars that one also finds around the state). Each features certain games and limits so that the customers have a wide variety of choices. They have even devised an ingenious way around the five table limit imposed on each room by the state of Washington. Waiting lists are situated at central locations and players are called around the clubs when their names come up for a particular game.

I have included illustrations of chips to be found in the La Center clubs as well as a few older ones from the Portland area. Any questions or comments are always welcome by "Mr Pacific Northwest" at PO Box 3162 Moscow ID 83843.

