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 **Author** **Topic: Some history on "social" gambling in Arizona (Read 4019)**

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Some history on "social" gambling in Arizona

< **on:** October 04, 2009, 05:23:01 PM >

Saw this posted by someone called "hpestes" in the Usenet group: rec.gambling.poker and thought it may interest some individuals here, especially with all the controversy regarding the resurgence of the "social" strip mall poker rooms that have appeared.

I'm cleaning out old files on my computer and came across this article from back in the 80s. If anyone remembers what was happening in Phoenix and surrounding areas when they "legalized" social gambling, I thought you might enjoy reading this old article. Now that I think of it, I believe the very first issue of CardPlayer ran an article about Phoenix Social Gambling. The article I quote below was from a local publication, I think put out by Gambler's World, which was a store in Phoenix that sold gambling books and poker tables, chips, cards, etc. I remember the owner, I really liked him, he was a colorful older man who was really fun to talk to. He knew all the scoop about what was going on in Phoenix. He and his son ran the store. I think the son may have written this article. It was a long time ago, and my memory is a bit fuzzy. Anyway, here is the article. Enjoy.

History Of Arizona's Social Gambling

It all started back in August 1987 when the State Legislature updated the Arizona gambling statutes. Along with adding felony penalties to the gambling laws, they added a "social gambling" exemption. The intention was to allow friends to play poker and bet between themselves on sporting events, but it took only a few months for the idea to catch on in the bars that open gambling was now okay. At first only poker was played, and supposedly the players supplied all of the equipment and the bar had nothing to do with the games. Next blackjack began to appear, wherein the deal could rotate to a player if he got a "twenty-one", thus making the game "equal terms" as required by the law. The gambling stayed on a relatively small scale for the first year, with only about twenty bars allowing it and this was mostly in the Phoenix area.

In August 1988 Tommy's Full House opened and this caused a revolution in the social gambling. The first unique thing that he did was to advertise the gambling at his bar. His bar also

became the largest at the time with 13 blackjack tables, 6 poker tables, 2 hold'em poker tables, a

14 foot craps table, and a 20 foot double roulette table. In August 1988 Tommy Cassella, owner of the Full House, was charged by the Arizona Attorney General with attempting to benefit from gambling, a class 2 misdemeanor. The case was heard in Justice Court and the judge ruled in October 1988 that the law was unconstitutionally vague and dismissed the charges. This caused an explosion of gambling throughout the bars now that a court, albeit only a Justice Court, had essentially stated that the gambling activity was all right.

In the Spring of 1989 the State Legislature, at the request of the Attorney General's Office, tried to change the "social gambling" definitions to get the gambling out of the bars. Because of disagreements between the House and the Senate, the bill finally died after almost passing several times in several different forms.

Until the Summer of 1989 it was mainly Phoenix area bars that were offering the gambling, but soon Tucson and the rest of the state started to get into the act of having "social gambling". The Attorney General's Office made another attempt to stop the barroom gambling by filing public nuisance suits against six Phoenix area bars in July and August of 1989. The results of the cases were as follows:

The bars Pool & Brew and McWade's agreed to stop the "social gambling" in their establishments in order to avoid the state's suit.

In the Tommy's Full House case, Judge Stover ruled against the Full House and issued an injunction that prohibited the gambling activity on the grounds that the gambling was illegal and did not fall within the "social gambling" exemption.

In the Lester's Lounge case, Judge Pro Ten Joel Thompson ruled that the craps and roulette were illegal, but that poker and twenty-one were probably allowable.

In the Sweetwater Inn and Tong's Bar case, Judge O'Melia ruled that the "social gambling" statute was unconstitutionally broad and vague and that it was up to the State Legislature to address the "social gambling" issue.

As can be seen from these mixed and varied rulings, the whole question of what was legal or illegal was totally up in the air. The "social gambling industry" continued to grow at an amazing rate so that by the Spring of 1990 there were estimated to be approximately 250 bars in Arizona conducting "social gambling" and the dollar amounts involved were not small. The Phoenix Police Department estimated that in 1988 there was 547.5 million dollars wagered in the Phoenix bars offering "social gambling"!!!

This all lead up to the show down of the "social gambling" bars versus the Attorney General's Office, the Dog and Horse Racing Lobbyists, and Liquor Control in lobbying the State Legislature in the Spring of 1990. This time the bars lost and on May 3, 1990 a new "social gambling" law become effective and most of the barroom gambling shut down immediately. A few bars decided to continue to offer the "social gambling" by creating adjoining "Social Clubs", but on June 1, 1990 Lester's Lounge and the adjacent Lily Pad Social Club were raided by police and closed, along with Jerry Roper the owner of the establishment being arrested.

On August 31, 1990 the Cliff Manor Inn near Tucson was raided by various law enforcement agencies and several people were arrested along with various gambling equipment being seized.

On September 15, 1990 the 16th Street Social Club was raided by Phoenix Police and Department of Public Safety Officers. Arrested was owner Fook Hoi "Steve" Tong and approximately a dozen patrons on gambling and related charges. In a related raid at his south Phoenix home, Samuel J. Jeffcoat was arrested by police for helping to run the gambling operations at Tong's club.


On September 21, 1990 police raided a house located in Paradise Valley and arrested seven people on gambling charges including the people dealing the games of 4-5-6 and blackjack. Police also stated that the cards used at the blackjack table were marked and many patrons noted heavy losses at that game.

In the latest raids, it seems that the law enforcement community is taking the stance that they are not going to tolerate the creation of superficial "social clubs" to circumvent the law. So as a player, you are taking a "gamble" with a possible criminal record if you play at these social gambling clubs.

It will now be up to the courts to decide again what is permissible under the new "social gambling" law. In the meantime gambling is still at an all time high in Arizona with much of the old bar room gambling going underground and into private homes. There are two significant differences with the current gambling situation compared to three years ago before "social gambling" became legal. First, the players now know each other and have a network that did not exist three years ago. Second, there are many

out of state gamblers that have moved to Arizona and will stay here as long as it remains profitable.

and so the appearance / tolerance /shutdown of these rooms seems a bit cyclical, it remains to be seen what, if anything the State does about all these new poker rooms in the current "climate".

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