



Photo illustration: New Times

West Valley Poker Rooms Raided in Gaming Investigation; Chips, Tables and Cash Seized

RAY STERN | DECEMBER 14, 2013 | 7:00AM

Five storefront poker operations in the west Valley were raided on Thursday evening as part of a months-long investigation into suspected illegal gaming.

As

New Times

reported last December in our cover story, "Off the Reservation," numerous poker operations around the Valley -- almost all on the west side -- have remained open in the

past few years despite warnings by authorities and the successful prosecutions of poker activist Harold Lee and others in the business.

With these new raids, it looks like the Arizona Department of Gaming is once again getting serious about the off-reservation game-playing.

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For-profit poker tables can only be operated on Indian reservations with gaming compacts that allow them, officials say. Yet enthusiasts like former Justice of the Peace Lee claim that poker is still legal under Arizona law, and if it's not, it should be. Police disagree: Following a raid on a Surprise poker room affiliated with Lee, he was charged with conspiracy, illegal conduct of an enterprise, and giving advice or assistance to a gambling operation -- all felonies. As our article details, Lee was convicted in February of 2012.

In the latest raids, agents from the Arizona Department of Gaming, Maricopa County Attorney's Office, Phoenix Police Department, Department of Public Safety and the Glendale Police Department took part in the enforcement action. The locations raided were:

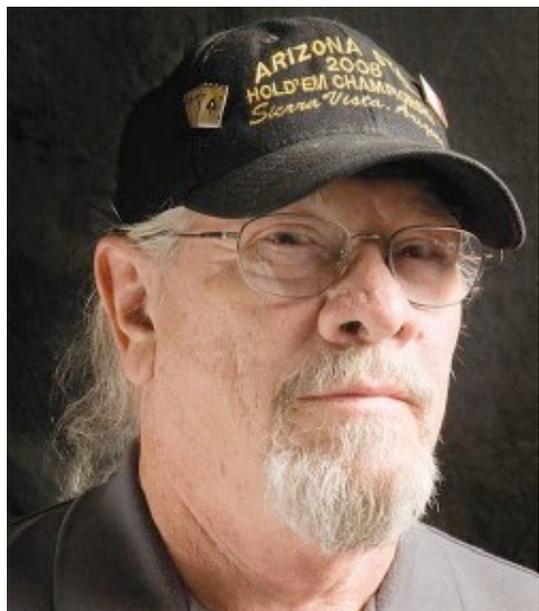
Pocket Rockets (13048 W. Rancho Santa Fe Road, Suites 115 & 117, Avondale); Cracked Aces (15224 N. 59th Avenue, Suite 14, Glendale); AZ Poker Supply (6003 N. 43rd Avenue, Phoenix); Poker Play (4494 W. Peoria Avenue, Glendale); and Joker Social Club (3519 W. Northern Avenue, Phoenix).

Poker tables, chips, about \$5,000 in cash and other equipment from the clubs were seized, the gaming department says. Two people were arrested on charges unrelated to the clubs, but cops are gathering names and evidence for potential prosecution, clearly.

The investigations began under the regime of former gaming department director **Mark Brnovich**, who's now running for state attorney general. After he resigned to pursue his candidacy in September, Governor Jan Brewer appointed interim director Daniel Bergin in his place. Bergin's position was made official this week. (Jelena Momich, gaming

department spokeswoman, says the fact that the raids happened the same week Bergin was made the official director is a coincidence.)

Whether the five raids will chill the many other active poker rooms on the west side remains to be seen.



Harold Lee

Image: Victor J. Palagano III

John Schnaubelt, Lee's friend and a fellow poker activist, has been trying in the past couple of years to convince local cities that they can legally authorize poker rooms outside of the reservations. None have moved forward with the idea. In the meantime, Schnaubelt has waged a crusade against several of the clubs, accusing them of operating illegally -- even though he once ran a similar club. Though some in the industry accused Schnaubelt of trying to get revenge on his former competitors, Schnaubelt claims his strategy is to force closures of the apparently illegal clubs in order to drum up support among poker players, who he figures will be upset when they have no place to go but the reservations.

Schaubelt runs a website, [phoenixpokerclubs](#), that has details about many local clubs, including several of those involved in Thursday's raids.

Poker purists don't like reservation poker, Lee and Schnaubelt say, because the dealers are allowed to skim off the jackpot for the casino and players must pay per-hand to play in some cases. But state law states that no one outside of the authorized tribes is permitted to profit, directly or indirectly, from poker.

In other words, you can play with your buddies for poker, but you can't take a cut for the house, sell food or merchandise, or do anything else that creates a profit.

The apparent quasi-legal nature of some of the clubs -- are they just a bunch of guys and gals playing cards for money who chip in to pay rent for the storefront, or savvy business-people running mini-casinos? -- has probably helped make enforcement difficult.

If the past is any indication, several people involved in the recent raids may face charges or end up with convictions -- and things will quiet down again for the remaining clubs, at least for a while.

Got a tip? Send it to: **Ray Stern.**

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