The Day the Gamblers Tried to Bribe the Governor of Florida

Hampton Dunn

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune

Recommended Citation
Legalized Gambling: Where Shall We Stop?

THE DAY THE GAMBLERS TRIED TO BRIBE THE GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA

By HAMPTON DUNN

"It is unsound and unwise from an economic, political or moral standpoint to commit the State to a partnership in legalized gambling in any form. If we start with parimutuels, where shall we stop?"

GOVERNOR DOYLE E. CARLTON, SR.

..."interested parties were buying their way through the legislature."
That was the question Gov. Doyle E. Carlton asked in May, 1931, in a message to the Legislature vetoing a proposition that Florida get into the gambling business. The lawmakers, hard-pressed for revenue to finance government during the depth of the national depression, overrode the Governor's veto - by a margin of a single switched Senate vote.

In 1966, 35 years later, the Governor, an active and successful Tampa lawyer, was still asking the question, "Where shall we stop?" He was against the latest idea to extend Florida's gambling enterprises: Creation of a State lottery.

The lottery proposal another in a series of efforts to get the State deeper into the gambling operations. Racing dates have been greatly expanded since the original bill was passed. (At first, it was believed Dade County would be the only place where pari-mutuel betting would be permitted; today there are 14 or more counties involved.) Movements spring up repeatedly to legalize bingo and "Guest", to authorize open casinos, and other means of making a quick buck for the State, and, not so incidentally, operators of the gambling affairs.

The lottery proposal became a reality in Florida in 1987 and will kickoff in 1988. The State of New Hampshire broke the ice in the 1960s and established the country's first legal lottery since 1894.

The additional gambling activity in a tourist state comes despite a long history of scandal that has rocked legislative control of the industry in Florida.

And, when I interviewed Governor Carlton in 1966, he revealed for the first time publicly that an effort was made to bribe him to allow passage of the origin, al pari-mutuel bill in 1931.

The brazen proposition was made by an emissary for the gambling interests who called on the Governor in his office one sweltering day that Summer. Recalling those trying times, Carlton reminisced: "I vetoed the racing bill at that time. As a matter of fact the interested parties were buying their way through the Legislature. I refused to be a part of such methods.

"After the bill was passed I did not sign it although I received letters and telegrams from all over requesting that I do so. Finally, one gentleman came into my office, and asked, 'You know what your name is worth today?'

"I replied, 'I don't know what you mean.'

"He said, 'It is worth $100,000 on this racing bill.'

"I answered, 'If it's worth that much I believe I'll keep it. It's worth more to me than anyone else.' I promptly vetoed the bill."

Carlton added, "If the bill had been passed without purchase and in a straight, honorable way, I might have let it pass without my signature."

The ex-Governor, his alert mind flashing back three and a half decades, recalled: "Frankly, I'm not so bitterly opposed to racing. It provides entertainment, relaxation and is a tourist attraction." He related, with a proud smile, how he won a large trophy for racing his own horse at the Florida State Fair track shortly after he'd been nominated for Governor in 1928.
In his veto message, the Governor stated: "Personally, I love sport, especially racing; have many times wished that this sport might be conducted free from the vicious and corrupting influence of commercialized gambling . . ."

Carlton's message continued, "Certainly any business in which the profits of one are measured by the losses of another, with heavy overhead upon the two; which invites personal delinquency, arouses charges and makes for official corruption; which is known to disorganize, disrupt and destroy the fundamentals of all true progress, earns little right to a permanent place in the building plan of a great state."

In his 1931 message, the Governor also noted that he had received a telegram from the Attorney General of Kentucky urging him to veto the measure. The telegram bluntly stated: "Betting pari-mutuels on race tracks in Kentucky is demoralizing. Advocates of racing active in Kentucky politics."

Although the Legislature overrode him, Carlton received the plaudits from much of the public. One citizen wrote a newspaper editor, saying, "His (Carlton's) stock has skyrocketed in the estimation of multiplied thousands over our great state incident to his noble and far-reaching stand on the race track question. He is every inch a man, and if we had even a tithe of public officials of Governor Carlton's caliber, then we would the more quickly recover from the labyrinth of distrust and nameless confusion in which we find ourselves."

The prospect of easy money had wide appeal during the depression period and the Governor warned the legislators, "We can ill afford to lose our bearings even in times of distress and forsake the principles which have the approval and sanction of the past."

Carlton had cut his own salary, from $9,000 a year to $7,500, and furnished his own car while serving as Governor to help meet the emergency. He recalled that more than 80 per cent of the bonds issued by local governments were in default at the time.

Many a greenback has slipped through the windows since race track betting was legalized. It has brought in considerable income to the counties, which split the take evenly 67 ways, and has provided many "goodies" for the small counties, especially. It is generally accepted that the rural counties "sold out" in the race track fight to insure their counties a pile of easy money each year.

Florida did not stop with the legalizing of pari-mutuel wagering. In 1935 - still in the throes of an economic depression - the State legalized slot machines, the notorious "one-armed bandits." What happened? A legislator who led in the fight to repeal the slots in the 1937 session was LeRoy Collins, later a Governor (1955-1961). Collins described the result of legalizing the "bandits": "Gamblers and unsavory underworld characters infiltrated the state from all over the country. Crime rates jumped. Delinquency increased. Disrespect for law spread over our state in a wave. One could almost feel the moral strength of the state ebbing away."

P.T.A. members appeared before legislative committees telling of small children going hungry because their nickels and dimes went into the slot machines in the corner grocery on the way to school. State Rep. Raymond Sheldon of Tampa shocked fellow House members with the revelation that a Hyde Park woman had killed herself after she
poured $600 she had borrowed to consolidate her debts into the one-armed bandits.

When the 1937 Legislature rolled around, public pressure was so intense the slots were outlawed, and the then Gov. Fred P. Cone signed the bill with the pronouncement: "We don't want slot machine revenue! We don't need it!"

Gambling remained prominent in the official news off and on through the years. The 1947 and 1949 sessions of the Legislature were rocked by scandals concerned with efforts to pass anti-bookie legislation.

One of the most surprising, if not most jolting, developments on the gambling front came in September 1958, when the Dade County Commission passed, 3 to 2, on first reading, an ordinance authorizing legal casino gambling. One of the promoters of this effort was the popular former world's heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Dempsey.

Collins was Governor then. He hit the ceiling.

"What on earth have they been smoking down there?" the Governor screamed from Tallahassee. The Miamians quickly retreated and Dempsey and his pals were knocked out.

Collins publicly proclaimed: "Florida, so long as I am Governor, will never permit itself to be turned into a vast gambling casino after the Las Vegas model." He also added that our mutuels are "clean" and he was not crusading to abolish them, but "I have said frankly, and I will say it here again, that Florida would be better off if it had no parimutuel betting."

Collins lumped the gambling lure for tourists in the same category as "quickie" divorces. He asked the Legislature to take the State out of the quickie divorce business. Collins reported later: "What we lose in income, we shall gain in integrity."

And former State School Superintendent Floyd Christian once cited history showing that a lottery was authorized around 1831 by the Territorial Assembly to establish a public school at Quincy and another school at St. Augustine. But history doesn't record any funds collected from the lottery, he said. It has been reported that a lottery financed the first court house for Duval County.

Lottery advocates quote former President Truman's remark, "When the Federal government gets behind it (a national lottery) and everybody knows it is absolutely fair, it isn't gambling."

Opponents have some favorite passages to quote, also. Lord Chesterfield in the 18th Century admonished: "A lottery is a tax on all the fools in creation." George Washington branded legalized gambling as "the child of avarice, the brother of iniquity, and the father of mischief." And Thomas Jefferson scolded: "Gambling corrupts our dispositions and teaches us a habit of hostility against all mankind."

Legalized lottery got a bad name in this country from the experience of the notorious Louisiana Lottery. That was chartered by the State in the chaos following the Civil War and operated for 25 years, reaching a $50 million gross. The Lottery paid only $40,000 a year to a New Orleans hospital, while the profits were in the millions and the operators reportedly bribed and chiseled their way into control of the state government.
Besides the sordid story of political manipulation, the lottery presented the pathetic spectacle of two impoverished Confederate generals - P.G.T. Beauregard and Jubel Early - selling their services and heroic names to the lottery company for salaries of $30,000 a year each. They drew the lucky numbers. Finally, by 1892, the stench got so bad it took on nationwide proportions and the charter was revoked.

The lottery company moved its operation to Honduras. But the company turned out its official tickets from a large printing plant in Port Tampa City in Florida. The company also operated a steamship, the Sweet Water, out of Port Tampa. The company's president, Paul Conrad, made his home in Tampa during the time that the lottery operated in Honduras. The State Legislature took a dim view of the operation in Florida and passed a law providing stiff penalties for "the setting up or drawing of lotteries, or aiding by writing or printing in the setting up of lotteries in this state." (The State Constitution had always prohibited lotteries.) So the plant was dismantled, the equipment shipped away, and the building passed along to the Catholic Church for a school, on the site of the present public school.

And so goes the story of legalized gambling in Florida. Like the weather, the subject seems to always be with us.

And many Florida citizens still echo former Governor Carlton in asking the question: "Where shall we stop?"