

OPINION TOO

Just think where we'd be without gambling

A DIAMOND JUBILEE YEAR just came to an end and few in Nevada noticed it as much as they should have.

The past year marked the 75th anniversary of legal gambling in Nevada. On March 19, 1931, state legislators passed and Gov. Fred Balzar signed a bill allowing most forms of gambling in Nevada.

Some Nevadans, especially with rural roots, have been known to lament the measure. If Nevada had stuck to mining and federal projects (or so the theory goes), the state would be much better today.

Well, not necessarily.

Problem one: The history of gambling in Nevada has strong rural roots. Rancher Phil Tobin, a Humboldt County assemblyman, introduced the bill and later claimed it was all his idea, though that's debatable. The governor who signed it, Balzar, spent much of his life in Esmeralda and Mineral counties. When the bill passed, Nevada was a predominantly rural state.

Nevada's biggest city in 1930, Reno, boasted fewer than 20,000 residents

Sounding Off



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at a time when the state's population barely topped 90,000. Each of Nevada's 17 counties then had one state senator. The bill required and received ample rural support.

Problem two: It's a counterfactual proposition, like saying the world would be different if the South had won the Civil War

(and, contrary to what some think, it didn't). Of course it would be different, but we can't know how.

Granting that Nevada was much smaller, would it have more than one institution of higher learning, or symphonies or art museums — the cultural underpinnings that are, or should be, how we judge a society?

Problem three: Where would we be without it? No one could or should deny gambling may contribute to social ills, from exposure to smoke in casinos to spending by those who should put their money in the nearest mattress. But Nevada's history had been one of boom and bust, thanks to mining, which ran in cycles — from the heady 1860s and 1870s, when the Comstock ruled the state, booming through north-central

Nevada spreading the wealth, to the 1880s and 1890s, when Nevada was deep in the economic dumps.

As tourism increased in importance in the 20th century, Nevada faced a decreasing number of major economic downturns. Gambling was both a contributor to and a beneficiary of the prosperity.

Indeed, tourism and gambling are not only crucial to the present and the future, but a continuation of Nevada's past rather than a break with it. That's true for a variety of reasons. As that boom-and-bust cycle suggests, Nevada's economy always has been built on luck — the luck involved in finding ore and the luck involved in gambling.

Both involve a great deal of skill, whether in knowing where to find the ore or how to run a casino. Mining and gambling have attracted an assortment of characters, some highly reputable, some obviously not.

Gambling also goes back even further in Nevada life than the recently completed diamond jubilee. The 1869 Legislature approved legalized gambling, which survived until progressive reforms ended it in 1910 ... and if you think that eliminated gambling, you would play poker with a man named Ace.

Both mining and gambling have also dominated the state in their time.

For good and ill, one industry almost always dominates Nevada politically and economically. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was mining and railroads.

When the gambling bill passed, it was not meant to combat the Great Depression. It was part of a plan to attract tourists to Nevada who might in turn become residents or investors. As McCarran International Airport passes 46 million travelers a year, gambling revenue climbs, Project CityCenter sprouts and Echelon Place waits to be built where the Stardust just stood, the plan certainly seems to have worked.

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None of this would have been possible without that legislation passed in March 1931. As we end March 2007, we cannot imagine Nevada without gambling and tourism any more than those behind legalization could have imagined what Nevada is like today. Those of us who are living it have enough trouble believing it anyway.

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