

Jingle of 'Slots' Begins To Worry Politicians

By CHARLES L. HOFFMAN

It is said that in Maryland politics a weakness for beautiful women, fast horses and rye whiskey never cost a man a vote.

There are signs, however, that a touch of the puritan is coming to the gay cavalier approach of the Maryland gentleman politician. The cause: The increasingly loud whir and jangle of slot machines along the shores of the Potomac.

Some of the State's political leaders feel that the current controversy over casinos operating under Maryland licenses just off the Virginia shore is going to be a continuing one and that it could play a part in the next election.

The issue was dramatized by the three-day Potomac River cruise of the State's Legislative Council on Gov. McKeldin's yacht. Despite the assertion by Senator Joseph D. Mattingly, Democrat of St. Marys County, that the cruise was a McKeldin-sponsored "wild goose chase," there is increasing evidence of political concern over the whole liquor-gambling situation along the river.

Gov. McKeldin touched off the current controversy last May when, on return from a trip abroad, he learned Charles County had approved a liquor license for the operators of the "S. S. Freestone," a pleasure ship to be anchored just off the Virginia shore at Freestone Point, Va. Late Friday, Charles County issued licenses to cover an undisclosed number of slot machines on the ship, and the machines were moved in by barge Friday night. The ship is anchored about 30 miles south of Washington, which brings Virginia shore casino operations some 25 miles closer to the Capital than they had been.

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one third are found in the river casinos.

3. Maryland counties—especially those on the Eastern Shore and in Southern Maryland—have guarded zealously their local rights not only in regard to liquor and gambling but also as to the licensing of commercial fishermen and oystermen operating in the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River waters.

4. But of prime concern to the Governor, and to some extent to the legislators who have criticized the Governor in the present verbal battle, is the issue of Virginia-Maryland relations along the Potomac.

River Status an Issue

Maryland is in a peculiar position.

She owns the Potomac but prior to last June 1, under the Compact of 1785, she had given Virginia equal rights to licensing and regulation of the fishing, oystering and crabbing industry in the river.

As of June 1, under legislation passed by the 1957 General Assembly, Maryland abrogated the compact and assumed full control of the river.

Behind the drastic move were numerous failures of the two States to get together on laws on the river, many aimed at conservation and protection of the fish, oysters and crabs.

The legislators, touring the river on the Governor's yacht, were advised by John P. Tawes, chairman of the Maryland Tidewater Fisheries Commission, that the new setup was "working like a charm."

Some Virginia fishermen, fearful that they are being pushed off the river by Maryland, however, are not as happy as Mr. Tawes. They especially don't like buying both Maryland and Virginia fishing licenses.

States Righters in both States are well aware that failure of the two States to get along might bring about Federal intervention and control of the river in its entirety. Neither State would go for that.

This need for more friendly relations between the two states is seen as one basis for Gov. McKeldin's statements lambasting Charles County and chiding the Legislative Council for not handling the gambling and liquor issue separate from the fishing issue.

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refusal of Charles County officials to rescind their approval of the license, dropped the by-then-warm potato in the lap of the Legislative Council. The cruise followed.

The Elements of the Issue

Just what is at stake in the current controversy? Here are the main elements:

1. The casinos themselves are big business, with the biggest, Little Reno at Colonial Beach, operating on a 24-hour-a-day, year-round basis.

Little Reno, just a step up the pier off the Virginia shore in the Charles County (Md.) waters of the Potomac River, offers name dance bands, a cocktail lounge seating 1,500 persons and 385 slot machines to tire the arms of its customers.

The Freestone Point operators envision development of a \$14 million convention center for the Nation's Capital.

2. The four Southern Maryland counties which have voted on a local option basis to permit "one-armed bandits" have licensed some 4,500 machines.

Charles County, for example, gets some \$285,000 of its total \$1.1 million revenue out of these licenses and maintains one of the lowest real estate tax rates in the State. Of Charles County's some 1,650 machines, more than

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The governor feels the Southern Maryland counties are deliberately flouting Virginia's laws by permitting casino operations separated by miles of water from Maryland residents.

Some legislators said they saw no difference between the casinos and any other saloon or tavern established close to a state or county boundary to accommodate thirsty residents from more restrictive areas a stone's throw away.

Educational Trip

Outside of saying they were against any change in the local option practice, however, the legislators finished the tour without reaching any major conclusion on the gambling situation.

But they did pick up a lot of first-hand facts in their inspections of slot machine havens at Colonial Beach.

Although most indicated the places seemed to be well run, about as far as they went publicly was to blister House Majority Leader A. Gordon Boone for scoring the Colonial Beach casinos as "shocking and appalling."

Some of the legislative party, however, privately admitted they were amazed at what they saw, including babies parked on pin-ball machines, a child squawling in a car and youngsters crying and running loose while their parents poured in the nickels.

Even some of the local Southern Maryland delegations off the record admitted a lot of their constituents were behind the Governor in his protest.

One Washington area Democrat said this week he feared the Governor had a good thing which could give the Democrats fits not only in a general election, but in their upcoming primary.

As Senate Minority Leader Harry T. Phoebe repeatedly warned, the fight is a long way from the final bell and if the Legislative Council fails to come up with a compromise that will help sweeten overall Virginia-Maryland relations, the Governor's administration is likely to give them a clubbing at the General Assembly session next February.