

Once again Ed Hertel has not only found new Illinois illegal chips for us, he has given us the history to go with them. *vbg* This is our 50th trip through Illinois and its illegal club operations. Two brand new joints to me.

Take it away Ed:

If Illinois' shape can be described as an Indian spear head, the razor sharp point would be the town of Cairo. (Pronounced with a long "A" sound, like "care" with an "o" at the end.) The most southern city sits in the convergence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, just across from both the states of Missouri and Kentucky.



This area is well known for gambling, with East Cape Girardeau and McClure just a short drive to the north. It should have been no surprise to anyone that a crackdown on gambling would inevitably find its way into Cairo. It was one of those raids, and the chips confiscated from it, that would send me looking into its history.

Vice had been a part of Cairo history for long time before gambling became widespread. With its unique position on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, as well as its various borders, bootlegging was big business during prohibition. Shipments could be funneled into different states quickly, and depending on what state was actively prosecuting at the time, it could be changed just as quick.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, illegal speakeasies came out from the dark and opened legitimate businesses. However, it did not take long before they realized that legitimate businesses needed

licenses and pay their taxes, and Cairo wasn't exactly a booming town. Other revenue streams were sought, and one, gambling, proved to work.

The growth of the gambling business did not go unnoticed by the Illinois Liquor Commission and in 1936 they started their crackdown. In January, the Commission found that 32 of the 35 bars in Cairo had slot machines and other gambling equipment. The owners were summoned to appear in the capital of Springfield and explain why they shouldn't have their liquor licenses revoked.

The story the bar owners told was one of a city built on vice. The bar owners needed the revenue from the machines to pay their bills, and the city needed the revenues from the gambling fines (around \$5,000 a year) to pay theirs. It was a quid pro quo system built around gambling.

The Commission gave a warning to shut down the illegal activity and sent them on their way. Back at home, the bar owners moved their slot machines to the back of the buildings and continued their business behind closed doors. No longer tolerated, gambling was moved into the shadows where it simmered quietly.

By the early 1950s, the sleepy town of Cairo was starting to wake up. Its location on the rivers made it an ideal source of cool flowing water which provided perfect conditions for a new atomic power plant being constructed on the north side of town. Not only did this provide jobs and security for its citizens, but the influx of 17,000 construction workers gave the city a new opportunity of provide services to them.

Almost overnight, dozens of clubs popped up offering workers, and their overflowing wallets, anything they desired – be it booze, women and of course gambling. However, as with any increase in vice, there are those who choose to fight it. In this case, enter the Cairo Citizens' Committee. With a loud voice, and at least some of the police force behind them, they started a war against vice that started with threats and escalated into raids, ultimately resulting in liquor license suspensions and investigations into the police force.

Gambling was once again driven underground and Cairo settled into a new period of peace and quiet.

Below are chips found together in what was probably the result of a police raid. As far as I know, this is the first time these chips have been seen in the hobby.

Smith and Groves Tavern



SGW2

The first chip I was able to identify was a Mason hub mold that went to:

Smith, Groves & Weldon
Cairo, IL - 1936

Immediately, the initials on the chip are given in the names. It didn't take long to realize I was dealing with a chip from one of Cairo's most famous, and longest lasting, gambling clubs. Located on the corner of 8th Street and Commercial Avenue, Smith and Groves Tavern was an institutional landmark in Cairo from its opening in 1933 until it finally closed in 2005. For over seven decades the bar served drinks and stood as a meeting place for Cairo's citizens.

It was originally owned by A. T. Smith and R. C. Groves, who were both well-known gamblers in Cairo. Much of the early gambling history for the Smith & Groves is quiet. It isn't until the 1950s, along with the entire town, that the heat turned up and the club found its way into the limelight. It was reported in 1952 that A. T. Smith had purchased a gambling tax stamp. One month later, the Smith and Groves Tavern was raided along with another local club called the Tower.

Two More From Cairo Face Gambling Charges

CAIRO, Ill. (UP)—Two more Cairo tavern operators faced gambling charges today as a result of raids by local officers.

Two local constables raided the Tower tavern and Smith and Groves tavern early Saturday and confiscated punchboards and other gambling equipment.

A.T. Smith, operator of Smith and Groves, and Geort H. Steger, operator of the Tower, were charged with possession of gambling devices.

State police raided 16 Alexander County taverns, including six here, Oct. 31, and their owners now face gambling charges.

SGW3

A. T. Smith would continue to run the tavern for over 50 years, eventually passing the torch of a local named Duke Washam. With its heydays firming behind it, the Smith and Groves Tavern deteriorated quickly. In 2005, city inspectors closed the doors for good when it was found to be dangerously dilapidated and unstable.



SGW4

Condemned Smith and Groves Tavern building.

F & F Club



SGW5

Without the “SGW” chip to hint at where to look, I might not have associated the rectangle-heart chips with Cairo. However, it sure didn’t take long to find out that they fit nicely.

The F & F Club was located at 220 Eighth St in Cairo. In 1942, the same R. C. Groves that owned part of the Smith & Groves Tavern ordered chips from Taylor & Co with “F & F” on them and had them sent to the address of the club. (I’ve never seen the Taylor chips. I suspect the rectangle hearts chips were ordered later, probably following a raid.)

Name		Address		Town		State		SPECIAL MONOGRAM	
R. L. GROVES		820 8th STREET		CAIRO		ILL.		F&F \$100 50¢ \$500	
Per	Amount	Color	Initials Both Sides	Style Type	Initials One Side	Other Sides	Style Type	Monogram Color	Date Shipped
	500	DK. BLUE		Script	F&F	50¢	SCRIPT	Gold	4-18-43
	480	OR. BROWN		"	"	"	"	"	7-8-43
	1400	Pink		"	"	\$1.00	"	Red	"
	370	G. Green		"	"	\$5.00	"	Red	"

SGW6

My note: We need the T mold F&F. Cough them up if you have traders. *vbg*

This club would be one of the many that were harassed during the crackdown in the 1950s. In 1951 the F & F Club was raided along with the El Patio and Wade's Tavern. In 1952, a reporter investigating Cairo's gambling scene had this to say about the F & F Club:

At the F and F tavern, Eighth between Washington and Commercial, a craps table was operating in a back room and two \$50 limit poker games were going full blast. In the bar proper, another smaller stakes poker game was going, a baseball ticker tape was clicking away and the bartenders were doing a flourishing business in baseball pool tickets, lucky jars and punchboards.

SGW7

In November of the next year, the liquor license would be temporarily suspended for the F & F following a raid on it and twenty other establishments in Cairo. As a result of the flagrant lack of law enforcement up to that point, the Cairo chief of police was also put on suspension.

Just another blip in the business of Cairo.

Turf Club



SGW8

The Turf Club in Cairo is not new. Gene has mentioned it before and helped move the attribution of the above type chips from Florida to Cairo. The \$5.00 variety above is new as far as I know and its inclusion with the other chips should put to rest any doubts about it belonging in Cairo.

The Turf Club was located at 204 Commercial Avenue in Cairo and operated by Art Garner. Chips were also ordered from Taylor and Co for the Turf in 1946, although I have never seen an example of these harp mold chips chips.

Name		Address		Town	State	SPECIAL MONOGRAM			
Art Garner of Turf Club		204 Commercial Ave		Cairo	Ill.				
Per Harp									
Amount	Color	Initials Both Sides	Style Type	Initials One Side	Other Side	Style Type	Monogram Color	Date Shipped	
1000	Yellow	T.C.	scrips				Blue	7-11-46	
1000	Gray						Blue	7-11-46	

SGW9

My note: We need the TC Harp mold. Cough them up if you have traders. *vbg*

The Turf was one of the clubs raided multiple times during the 1950s and also got its license suspended along with the F & F and others in November 1953.

Cairo Police Chief Gets Month Suspension Following Gambling Raids

CAIRO, Ill. — As a result of the raid on gambling and vice establishments here Saturday night, Mayor Egbert A. Smith has suspended for 15 days the city liquor licenses of six tavern operators and he also has handed a 30-day suspension to Earl Shepherd, Jr., chief of police here.

The six suspended taverns are: The Turf Club, Kentucky Tavern, F. & F. Tavern, Wade's Tavern at 130 Poplar St., Wade's Tavern at 2814 Poplar, and Fred's Tavern.

In suspending the Cairo chief, the mayor said Chief Shepherd had shown energy and efficiency in clearing up crime and bringing criminals to justice, but had not carried out instructions against gambling and disorderly houses.

SGW10



SGW11

The Turf Club building today, far past its prime.

My note: I doubt, in my lifetime, we will ever see an end to new illegal clubs identified in Illinois. IMO, there are still many to identify in Cairo, let alone the whole state. *vbg*