

IDAHO: Out, Damned Slot

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After World War II the thinly populated (589,000) logging-mining-farming state of Idaho found itself surrounded east, west and south by a locust-like infestation of rattling slot machines. The one-armed bandits ran legally in Nevada and (until last year) in Washington, and clanged away illegally but just as noisily in Montana and Wyoming. Some of them ran illegally in Idaho, too, but even so, the state legislature began visualizing whole creeks of Idaho money rushing away into the voracious slots of neighboring states.

In the hope of turning the flow inward and damming it into a reservoir to serve the public, Idaho legalized slot machines on a local-option basis in 1947. Heavy license fees were imposed. But the results were weird and astounding. Though the state legally controlled them, the slots acted, increasingly, like a virus in the body politic, dividing Idaho citizens against each other, changing the shape of towns, altering social life, wounding business and giving whole communities a surrealistic civic philosophy.

High Price. Not that the slots didn't put cash in public and private tills. Last year Idaho's 3,438 legal machines pumped \$486,262 into the state treasury, and veritable floods of money into the coffers of smaller communities. Coeur d'Alene collected \$66,000, used the money to resurface streets free of charge to residents. Sandpoint used slot money for a new sewage project. Kellogg spent \$40,000 of slot funds for flood control. On the private side, Coeur d'Alene's Athletic Round Table built \$100,000 clubrooms, donated thousands to the Boy Scouts, and a few weeks ago built the float which Idaho entered in President Eisenhower's inaugural parade.

But Idaho had to pay a price for its new way of life. Almost from the beginning, businessmen began complaining that the slots were siphoning money away from legitimate channels of trade. Doctors & dentists began having trouble collecting their bills. Restaurant owners said that slotclubs were luring away their customers with 79¢ steaks, and luring away the customers' money afterward. As a result, in rapid and indignant succession, Idaho's bigger cities began banning slot machines.

Land-Office Business. This caused another phenomenon. Neon-lit slot-machine satellite towns began springing up just outside city limits—Garden City just outside Boise; Jerome, outside Twin Falls; State Line Village just over the boundary from Spokane, Wash. They did a land-office business. Meanwhile, other slot-machine towns assumed new, weird shapes: the village of Crouch, for instance, pushed its limits out in a strip one foot wide and 10 miles long, to make slot machines legal in a distant roadhouse.

All this set off innumerable differences of opinion. This year Idaho's Governor Len Jordan asked that the slots be banned statewide, and the fight spread to the legislature. The house finally agreed with him, and last week the state senate did so, too. At midnight of next December 31, the clank of the bandits will be stilled, and Idaho will begin trying to get back to normal again after its noisy and neon-lit jag.

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