

Laughlin all the way to the bank



A SEARCHLIGHT MOON SHINES ACROSS THE desert. A Las Vegas station plays Tony Bennett: Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise ...

Along a dark bend of the Colorado River glitter the casino lights of Laughlin. Thirty years ago, these riverbanks were sand and tamarisk bushes. Now they are Nevada's third largest tourist attraction. Don Laughlin put in his quarters and pulled the handle, and an American paradise was born.

"I was flying my Cessna," Laughlin says. "From up high you could see Kingman, Bullhead City, Needles. And I thought I could make a casino go here."

Laughlin, the founder of Don Laughlin's Riverside Resort Hotel and Casino, and hence the founder of Laughlin, Nevada, has the gold jewelry and mahogany tan you expect of a casino king. It is the accent that surprises you: small-town Minnesota—*Minnesoda*—a voice one associates with grain silos and Lutheran church suppers. But he started his career there.

"Gambling was never legal in Minnesota," he says. "But it was winked at. If you went into any bar or restaurant, it had a slot machine." While in high school, Laughlin trapped mink in the woods around his hometown of Owatonna. With the proceeds from the pelts, he bought slot machines, which he installed in local clubs, restaurants, and bars. Then the state of Minnesota cracked down, making gambling a felony, and Laughlin hightailed it to Nevada.

It was 30 years ago that Laughlin started his casino on the river 90 miles southeast of Las Vegas. "All my Vegas friends came down here and laughed," he says. They don't laugh now. Today, Laughlin has a population of 8,000. Its nine casino hotels draw 5 million visitors a year. Laughlin owns only 124 acres of the town he began. But he's doing all right.

"Our visitors tell me, sure we like Las Vegas," says Steve Selke, Don Laughlin's personal public-relations manager, "but the pace here is so much more relaxed." Selke is giving me a tour of the resort. We have seen Don's Hide-A-Way Lounge, and Don's 1,000-seat Celebrity Theatre. Now we are admiring Don's collection of classic motor vehicles, which includes Steve McQueen's Indian motorcycle, displayed in a glass case beside snowshoes dating from Laughlin's mink-trapping days.

"Lots of people call Laughlin blue-collar and low-roller," Don Laughlin says. "I resent that. You can find people playing black \$100 chips every day, just like in Vegas." Still, it is true that Laughlin is known as the smart shopper's gaming mecca, with \$16.95 hotel rooms midweek and \$4.95 buffets. In winter come the snowbirds from the Northwest and the Great Plains. In

summer come the Southern Californians. Ninety-seven percent come to gamble, on average five to six hours a day.

I am showing my age when I say these statistics surprise me. Or, to be more accurate, what surprises me are the people who make up these statistics—the sheer size and ordinariness of the crowds engaging in what was once an exotic and scandalous pursuit. I am old enough to remember when gambling possessed an aura of sin—when Las Vegas was glamorous and dangerous, and the blackjack table was the arena of Bugsy Siegel or some villain from James Bond. Now legalized gambling is a \$40-billion Ameri-

can industry. And here in Laughlin, the people pumping change into the Megabucks, Dollars Deluxe, and Cool Millions slots appear as sinful, and as glamorous, as parishioners lining up for those Lutheran church suppers.

"Those who live in the midst of democratic fluctuations have always before their eyes the image of chance; and they end by liking all undertakings in which chance plays a part." So said Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, arguing that Americans were gamblers by temperament. In his history of American gambling, *People of Chance*, University of Washington professor John M. Findlay takes Tocqueville one step further. Findlay

argues that modern American gaming is a uniquely Western creation. "It's the speculative mentality of frontier people," Findlay says. That mentality, combined with a Western gift for the gaudily high-tech, created the Strip in Las Vegas, the Indian reservation poker palace, and Laughlin. "A lot of people are made nervous by the gambling boom," Findlay says. "But taking the long view, there have been other times in our society when gambling was widespread. We've come back to that."

I drift across the casino trying to think about Tocqueville and the long view. But neither of them can compete with the metal whoosh of quarters avalanching out of slot machines, the chirp and whir of video draw poker.

Back in Minnesota, Laughlin remembers, "there were a lot of people who looked down their noses at gambling. Preachers used to raise holy hell about it. We had one preacher who would go around with an ax, chopping up slots." Today, that preacher could probably be found feeding Laughlin's slots.

As for Don Laughlin, he's too busy to spend much time gambling. But he knows the thrill. "It's an excitement," he says, "the anxiety of not knowing whether you win or lose. It's like life. If you knew when you were going to die, you'd go crazy." ■

Laughlin lies 90 miles southeast of Las Vegas via U.S. Highway 95 and State 163. For brochures and lodging information, call the Laughlin Chamber of Commerce at (702) 298-2214.



Thirty years ago, Don Laughlin built himself a riverfront paradise on the banks of the Colorado River.