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## **Green River Island: Kentucky's No Man's Land**

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*Description: On a peninsula between two states, Green River Island used its unique position as a "no man's land" to ply its trade in illegal gambling.*

# GREEN RIVER ISLAND

## Kentucky's No Man's Land

By Ed Hertel

If it seems a coincidence that so many illegal gambling clubs are located on the borders of jurisdictions, it's not. Examples are numerous of clubs being reported as mere feet from the state or county line, and these positions are well calculated.

Stories go as far as to say certain clubs built themselves half into one county and half in another. This way, the craps tables could be pushed to one side or the other, depending on which county's officers were knocking on the door. Whether these stories are apocryphal or not (I tend to believe they are), there is no denying the fact that many clubs were built on the friendlier side of the line, while aggressively poaching patrons from the more conservative.

One such example is a group of clubs that bordered the state line between Indiana and Kentucky in an area called Green River Island. This little sliver of land has been contentious almost from its very inception, but really started throwing sparks after illegal gambling took control.

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### What is Green River Island?

Unless you are local to the area, it's doubtful the name Green River Island means much. For starters, it's not even an island, at least not anymore. Located on a little peninsula between Evansville on Indiana's southern border and Henderson in north Kentucky, Green River Island is one of the unique places that lies north of the Ohio River but belongs to Kentucky.

The confusion goes all the way back to 1792 when Kentucky was carved out of Virginia to make the fifteenth state. Kentucky's northern border was set along the Ohio River and anything south of the northern shore would belong to it. At the

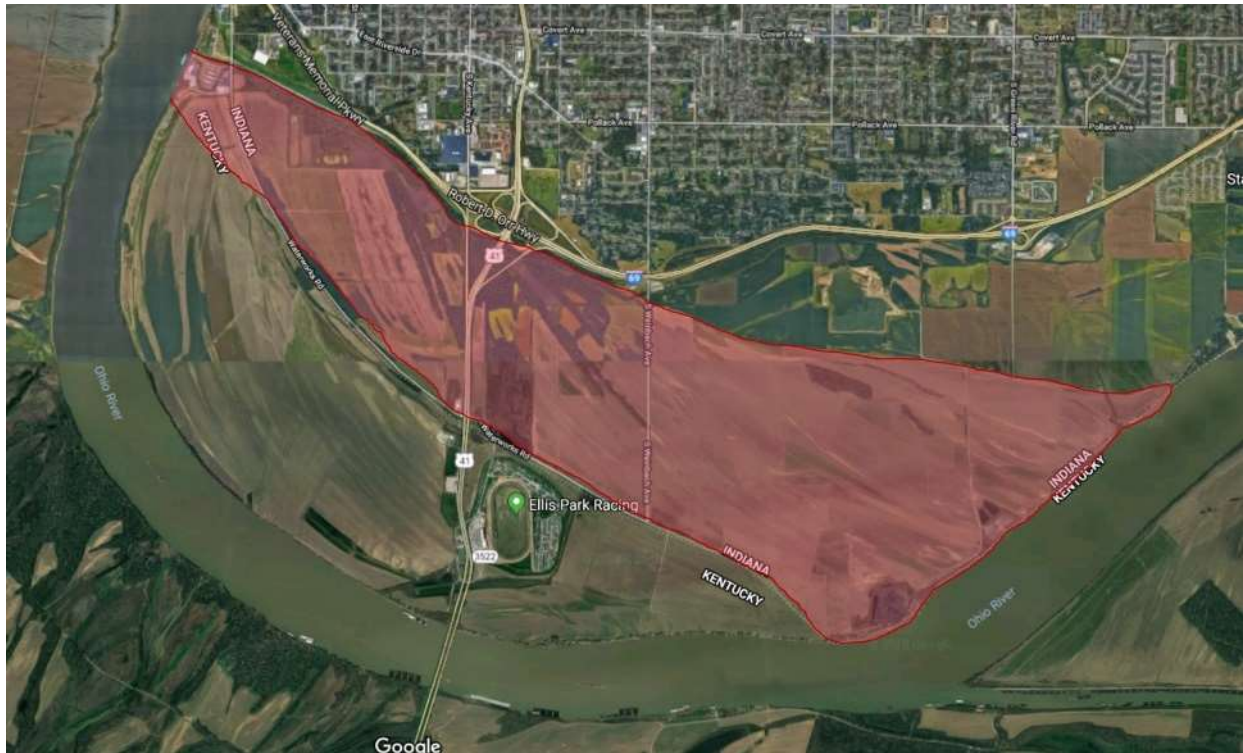
time of statehood, the Ohio River forked along Evansville's south side, leaving a small inconsequential 2,500 acre island before reconnecting and flowing west. Because this

island sat south of the river, it was given to Kentucky.

Rivers, however, are not as constant as state borders, and the northern section of the fork eventually silted up to become farm land. Legal battles ensued throughout the 1800s until the U.S. Supreme Court finally weighed in and settled the

dispute once and for all. In the end, this small piece of land north of the current river was kept under Kentucky's Henderson County jurisdiction.





*Map of Green River Island with the silted up north fork of the river shaded in red. The city of Evansville, Indiana is to the north and Henderson, Kentucky is just off the map to the southwest. Only the Ellis Park Horse track remains today..*

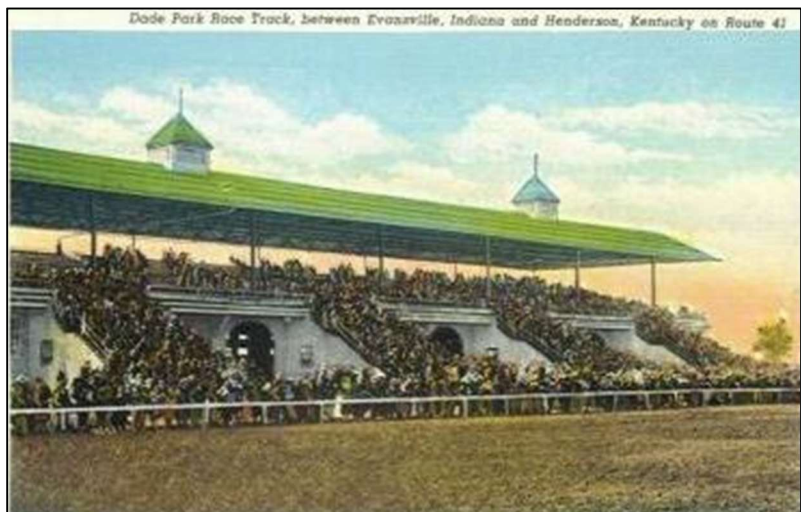
### Let the Games Begin!

It didn't take long for this insignificant splinter of Kentucky to start exploiting its status as a "No Man's Land". It was just far enough out sight from Kentucky, and inchingly close to the large population of Evansville, Indiana.

In 1922, the Dade Park Race Track was built (later renamed Ellis Park Race Track). It was intended to be a premier horse race track that would set the pinnacle of racing, but problems with flooding and inconsistent attendance left it struggling for years.

Green River's fortunes turned however during the second World War as a number

of clubs of varying degree of plushness opened on the "island". Two of the first, and most notorious, were the lavish Trocadero and the barn-like Dells, both owned by a corporation controlled by a gambler named Clarence Woods.







The Trocadero, also called “The Troc”, was definitely the most popular club and located just across Highway 41 from the Dade Park Track. In the early 1940s, it was a night-life destination spot that offered chic dining, the best of Hollywood entertainment and, of course, gambling. In the back room on the first floor, 50-75 slot machines formed two rows that lined the hallway to the stairs leading up to the craps and chuck-a-luck games on the second floor.

But with success comes competition, and Clarence Woods' monopoly on Green River Island's gambling didn't last long. Other local clubs such as Green River Gardens, Riverview Beach Club and the Little Commando were also preying on clients over the Indiana border, and they were doing incredible business. As evidenced in a 1950 robbery at the Little Commando, thieves were said to have robbed the patrons for

anywhere from \$20,00 to \$100,000. The large discrepancy stems from a lack of information due to the sensitive nature of the business. While leaving the police station, a reporter asked the Little Commando owner C. H. Fambrough for details about the robbery. His only response was, "What robbery?" before getting in his car and driving off.

[illegible]

*Chips ordered from Taylor & Co in 1942 with a clover hot stamp. Notice the mislabeled address as "Evansville, Ind" instead of Kentucky.*

## Legal Troubles

The action over the border didn't sit well with the upstanding citizens of Evansville, Indiana. Lawlessness was rampant and Indianans were finding themselves the targets of both cheating and violence. Their voices became loud enough that finally in 1943 a grand jury was assembled to look into the problem. After deliberation, they ordered the Henderson county sheriff to check out the clubs and report on his findings. Armed with tax records and locations of 332 slot machines in his county, the sheriff's report was clear, "I visited every roadhouse in Henderson County and found no violations."

This of course came as no surprise to those who knew anything about the local vice in Henderson County. The previous years' race for sheriff had been a contentious one with the incumbent running on a campaign slogan of "Either the law will have to rule the vice element in Henderson County, or the vice element will rule the law." He didn't win.

The newly elected sheriff was Elmer Herron, who three days before starting his campaign had been working in the Trocadero for his brother-in-law Clarence Woods. There would be no real threats to

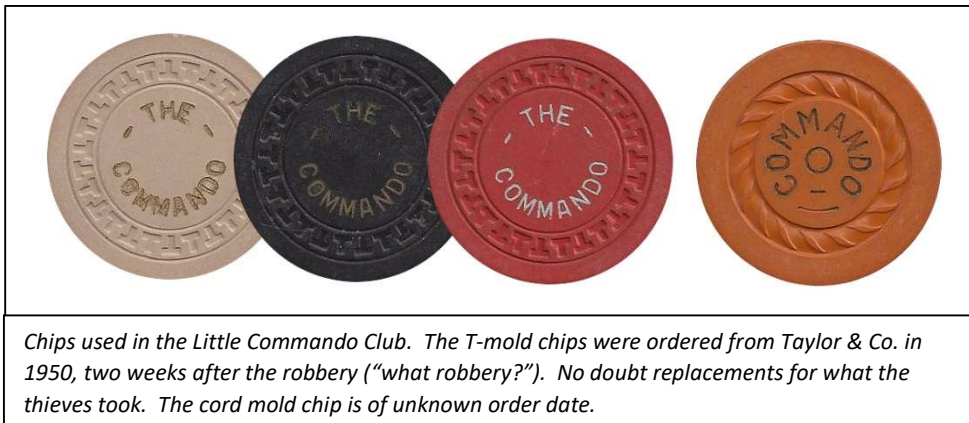
the casinos as long as county officials were deep in the pockets of the vice.

But just like rivers, attitudes also change over time.



As the 1950s rolled around, citizens on both sides of the river were starting to complain about the lawlessness in No Man's Land. Despite the cozy relationship the clubs had with local enforcement, pressure on the state to clean-up the tiny gambling haven grew louder. In April 1952, the state courts ordered a joint raid on the Little Commando involving both the state and county law enforcement.

When they busted into the casino, they found four men sitting around a table,



*Chips used in the Little Commando Club. The T-mold chips were ordered from Taylor & Co. in 1950, two weeks after the robbery ("what robbery?"). No doubt replacements for what the thieves took. The cord mold chip is of unknown order date.*

innocently playing bridge. They had obviously been tipped off.

Undeterred, the state officers searched the premises and found gambling equipment in a back room. Not being in use at the time meant it would be lesser charge, but at least it was on the books. Less than one week later, the Kentucky State Police, alone this time, conducted another raid on the same Little Commando. This time, officers discovered a blackjack game and a craps table crowded with 28 players in full operation.

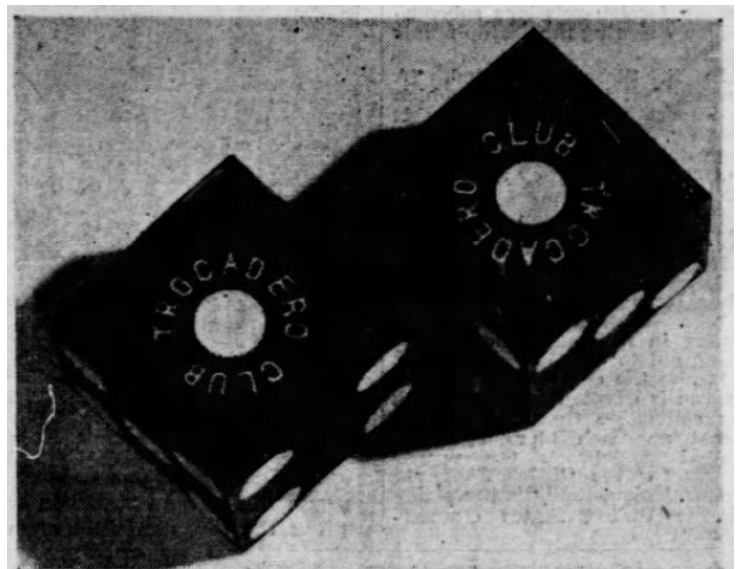
News of the raid prompted a member of the watchdog group Good Government League to remark, "We're happy that the state officials have better eyesight than the local officials."

The days of open gambling on Green River Island were coming to a close. Once a good friend to the clubs, County Sheriff Elmer Herron was impeached from office and became a beer distributor. State officers were harassing the clubs and their patrons to the point customers just stopped coming. While bench warrants for club owners were being issued, liquor licenses were being revoked. The dominos fell quickly and gambling all but disappeared.

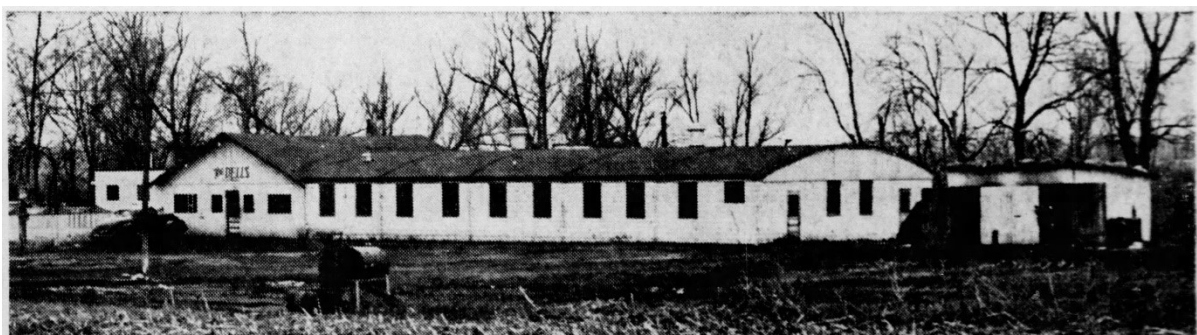
Soon, the once bustling crescent shaped island became quiet once again. The race track that ushered in the gambling element was all that remained, and still does to this day.

# 66 Indicted In Henderson Gaming Drive

## 260 Charges of Operating Slot Machines Name Dells, Trocadero and Other Clubs



Courier-Journal Photo  
"SNAKE EYES," reads this pair of dice, souvenirs from the Club Trocadero at Henderson. The Trocadero was among places and individuals named in 39 gambling indictments returned yesterday by the Henderson grand jury.



*The barn-like Dells Club, operated by Clarence Woods.*