

From Slots to Noodles

Want to Bet? Aussies Do

By PETER DESBARATS
(Second of a Series)

In Australia they call them "poker machines" but when they export them to Las Vegas, as they do in considerable numbers, they are known as "slot machines." They are legal in the state of New South Wales and its capital city, Sydney. So are state lotteries. And off-track betting on horses.

When an outsider talks about the morality of gambling, politicians in New South Wales simply look blank. How else can you balance a government budget? Newspaper editors are equally unhelpful. How could Sydney's three-storey Journalists' Club exist unless it was financed by poker machines? Few clergymen, certainly none of the bingo-minded Catholic clergy, seem to object.

As for the average citizen of New South Wales, he doesn't feel normal unless he has a quid on something. Australians tell a story about a veteran poker-machine player who suffered the worst of all possible accidents. He broke his right arm. The following day, he appeared at his favorite club with a little man in tow.

"He's my puller," he explained proudly as the pair carted a stack of shillings toward the row of one-armed bandits.

It is almost true to say that poker machines are Sydney's answer to communism. The machines' most spectacular creation to date is a sprawling three-storey building in suburban Sydney which surely must rank as the most luxurious workers' club in or outside of the Soviet Union.

\$2,000,000 Club

The St. George Leagues Club, which exists officially to sponsor a professional rugby team, resembles a Canadian neighborhood YMCA that has unexpectedly struck oil in its front yard. The glittering two-year-old clubhouse cost almost \$2,000,000 to construct, air-condition and furnish. Facilities include squash courts, indoor and outdoor bowling, billiards, sauna and steam rooms, cafeteria, a luxurious restaurant that seats 284 people and a ballroom where more than 1,000 people can dance and enjoy international cabaret stars brought in by the club. The building boasts the biggest beer-cooling room in the Southern Hemisphere, a huge basement cavern filled with barrels, plastic tubing and a complicated array of pumps and meters. Every week, more than 4,300 gallons of beer flow from this room to taps in the long bar upstairs.

The lavish atmosphere of the club pervades even the gymnasium where members work out on a wide variety of chrome-plated exercise machines. The gym is carpeted from wall to wall.

But the most unbelievable aspect of the St. George Leagues Club is the annual fee paid by its 20,000 members. It amounts to two Australians pounds a year — a little more than \$5 — and the initiation fee is the same.

Real Revenue Source

How the club can operate on this pittance is explained as soon as one enters the bar. Rank on rank of poker machines fill the room and most of them are working non-stop at maximum revs. It isn't unusual to see one member playing two, three and even four machines at a time, slipping shillings and two-bob coins into slots and pulling handles, drinking beer and chatting, moving from machine to machine and scooping up pay-offs, all without a break in the intricate choreography. Members have their special "lucky" machines. When they have to interrupt their playing for a few minutes, handkerchiefs draped across the tops of their machines warn away other players. There are a hundred and one "systems" and supposedly sure-fire methods of pulling levers. But the expensive clubhouse itself is ample evidence of the unequal battle waged by the 20,000 members against their 150 poker machines.

As one might expect in Australia, the bar is an exclusively male preserve. Wives are herded into the "Dragon Room"—a typical example of the kind of haw-haw humor that Australian men indulge in when referring to "mum."

To keep her occupied, "mum" is provided with her own little rank of poker machines, screened off from the world of the Great Male. A small number of machines scattered throughout other parts of the club are available to those Australians who, through some inexplicable quirk or foreign contamination, prefer to gamble in mixed company.

The club doesn't reveal the membership's total annual investment in the machines. But

The Star's staff reporter Peter Desbarats and editorial cartoonist Ed McNally are on assignment in the South Pacific area.

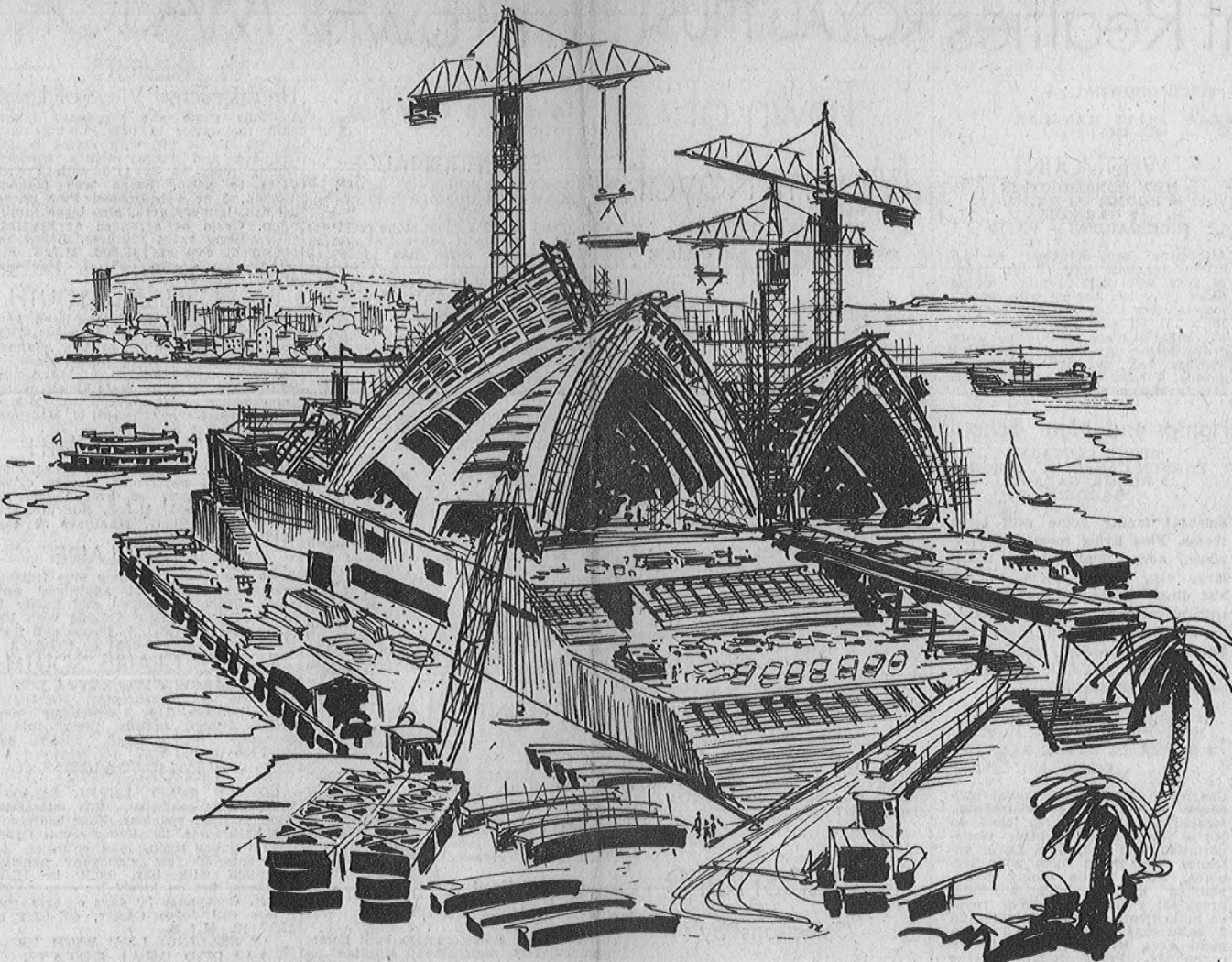
the government's "jackpot" in taxes from the club's three and four-wheeled bandits last year was in the neighborhood of \$300,000.

The government itself operates the biggest "machine" in Australia — a huge revolving barrel in an auditorium on the sixth floor of an office building in downtown Sydney. The barrel contains 100,000 numbered "marbles" of silver sycamore wood, each marble representing a ticket in a lottery operated by the state of New South Wales. Tickets are sold in four denominations, ranging from 70-cents to eight-dollar tickets, and as soon as a lottery in one denomination is bought up, it is drawn and a new lottery started.

At least one lottery is drawn every weekday morning. At 8.45 a.m., lottery director Charles Tallentire—he and 450 other civil servants in the lottery organizations are among the few Australians who don't buy tickets — enters the auditorium and prepares to give away thousands of pounds.

Marbles representing the main prize-winners are drawn from the barrel by a man or woman selected by Mr. Tallentire from a list of candidates who have proposed themselves as potential "drawers." Sometimes tourists who wander into the lottery office are invited to draw the marbles. When cartoonist Ed McNally and I witnessed the draw, the job was done by a middle-aged Finnish-Australian housewife who simply liked the idea of drawing a marble worth more than a quarter of a million Canadian dollars and having her name read out on the radio with the winning number.

The formal ritual of the early-morning ceremony—the great brass-bound drum, the silver plunger used by the drawer to select the winning marbles from the drum, the silver ladle with which Mr. Tallentire takes the marbles from the tip of the plunger, the guards, the serious government accountants, the small congregation in the auditorium—creates a strange pseudo-religious atmosphere. There is absolute silence in the auditorium as the great barrel begins to turn every morning and the thunder of 100,000 seething silver sycamore marbles is broadcast to Australians sitting in offices and homes, transistor radios clapped to their ears, wonder-



Sydney's new Opera House rises slowly on Bennelong Point, near the city's famed Harbor Bridge.

ing if their marble is going to be drawn at last by the pudgy housewife or clerk or visiting sheep-shearer who represents, for a few moments, the God of Luck.

Established For Hospitals

The lottery was started in New South Wales in 1931 to pay for hospitals. Since then it has produced about \$200 million for the state government at an ever-increasing rate. The return to the government last year was in the neighborhood of \$20,000,000, which now simply goes into general revenue.

Standing apart from the run-of-the-barrel lottery is the special Opera House Lottery. Mr. Tallentire's crowning achievement. The new Opera House under construction near Sydney Harbor Bridge is going to be the architectural wonder of the decade but as far as Mr. Tallentire is concerned, it is simply a pale reflection of the intricate lottery which he designed to finance it. The tickets sell for approximately \$8—three times the cost of the most expensive ordinary ticket—but the first prize is more than a quarter of a million dollars and one out of every 14 ticket-holders wins a cash prize of some sort.

Mr. Tallentire launched the Opera House lottery with a massive advertising campaign in 1957 and it now produces more than \$250,000 every 10 days. It has to. The new Opera House gobbles it up like gumdrops and keeps asking for more.

The Opera House is really a cultural centre which will contain a multi-purpose main hall seating 2,800 people, just a shade smaller than the Grande Salle of Montreal's Place des Arts, a "minor hall" seating 1,100, chamber music room, experimental theatre and restaurants.

The winged design of Dan-

ish architect Joern Utzon was selected in 1956. It was a breathtaking plan but for a time it appeared to have one minor flaw. No one seemed to know how to build the kind of structure that Mr. Utzon had envisaged and a number of engineers stated flatly that it was impossible. Undeterred, the Danish architect proved on computers that his design could be built.

Then it became evident that he had underestimated the cost by a slight margin — something in the range of 700 per cent. This is where Mr. Tallentire entered the picture. The new lottery was organized and construction of the Opera House began in 1959. It has not gone up nearly as fast as its cost — about \$65,000,000 at the latest count—and the original opening date of 1963 has long past. But even the delays and horrifying expenses have become matters of civic pride in Sydney.

Melbourne residents, quietly building a smaller cultural centre, claim that the Sydney design is ostentatious. In Canberra, a federal government official grumbled, "Think of the roads we could build with that money." But in Sydney, workers commuting on ferries across the harbor in the morning look at the white concrete "wings" of the Opera House rising from Bennelong Point and think, not about Verdi or Strauss, but whether they can scrape together three quid for another chance at the jackpot.

It is interesting to wonder why the Australian gambling instinct isn't duplicated in Canada. Of course there is a certain amount of illegal gambling in Canada, and French Canada particularly has tended on occasion to regard Lady Luck as a minor saint, but on the whole Canadians are in the penny-ante class compared with the British or Australians.

Despite the prevalence of legal gambling in many parts of Australia, there is still widespread informal activity. Simple coin-flipping, sometimes with large amounts of money involved, seems to have a great attraction. On some streets, the "pick-a-pack" seller, retailing "mystery packets" which might contain either the Crown jewels or junk, appeals strongly to the Australian's instinct to take a chance. Guess-your-weight artists are prevalent. Several years ago, police discovered that professional gamblers were wagering on toy-boat races sailed along a drainage ditch in Sydney's Centennial Park. Australians bet on the way in which a barmaid will place change on a counter, on the number of noodles in a bowl of soup or on which of two flies will leave a wall first.

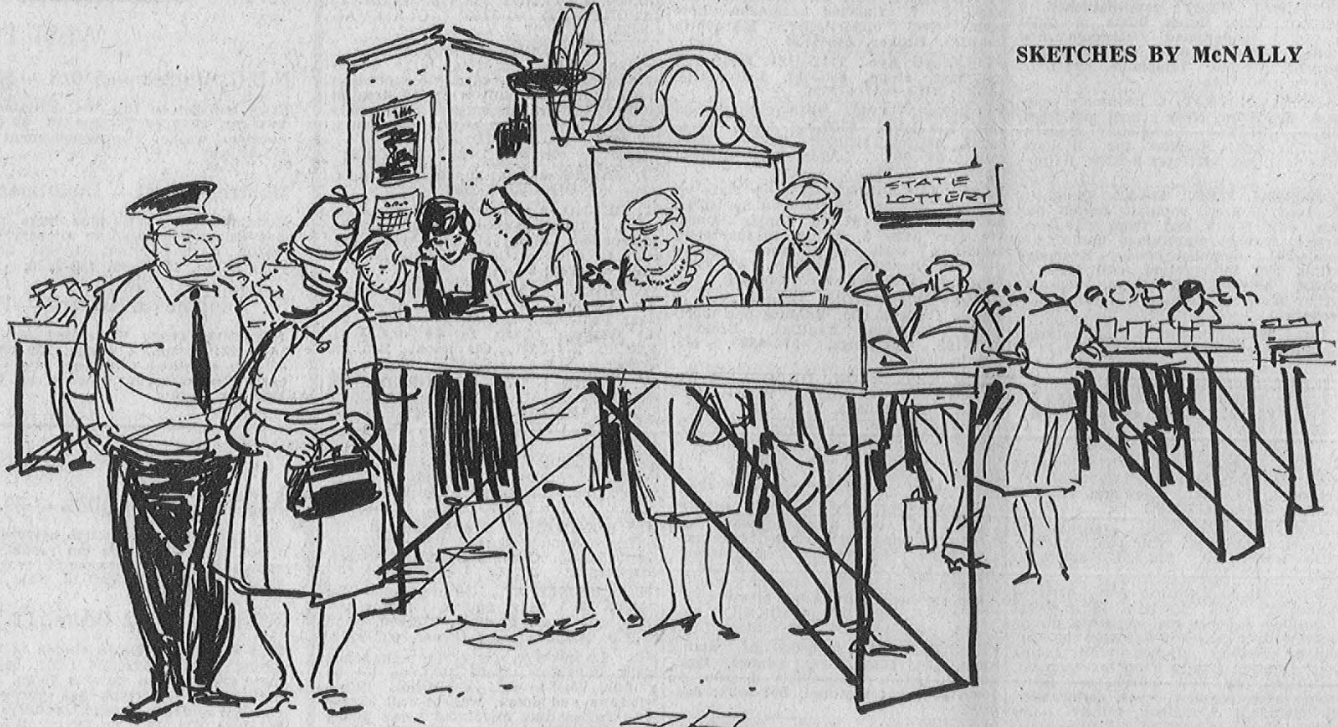
They Love to Wager

A Sydney journalist estimated in 1960 that Australians wagered about \$25,000,000 annually on freak bets. Another journalist promptly offered to bet that they didn't.

Yet at the same time there is a strong "blue" streak in Australia (the local term is "wowserism") that accounts for such things as 6 p.m. pub closing in some states, the banning of books by D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and (for a time) Mary McCarthy, attempts to convict a clever satirical magazine of obscenity and campaigns to boycott products advertised on a satirical television program that dabbles in mild ribaldry and criticism of various churches. This sort of thing is familiar to Canadians but it makes it even more difficult to explain why the anti-gambling "lobe" of the Canadian social conscience is so underdeveloped Down Under.

Tomorrow: Yankee Stay Here!

SKETCHES BY McNALLY



Typical state lottery "addicts" buy tickets in Sydney headquarters of the New South Wales lottery.