

# Corn-fed casinos

*Iowa's version of Las Vegas manages to copy city's glitz, but not glamour*



Story by **TOM FOSTER**

Photos by **MIKE WARREN**

**HARVEY'S CASINO** dealer Kelly Steskal jokes with John Horst (left) of Edgar, as Karl Kerst of Crete, L.H. Evans of Pottstown, Pa., Sally DiBase of Omaha and Lloyd Hoban of Mifflinburg, Pa., all play a game of Let it Ride at Harvey's in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

*"I'm all about getting something for nothing."*

*— Aaron Dupree  
sophomore theater performance major*

Council Bluffs, Iowa -- A woman in a shiny red blouse strides by, hair afloat at least 10 inches above her head.

The sparkles on her blouse outline a spade, heart, club and diamond, all red. Her jeans hug her tightly, as does her companion, an equally sharp dressed man with tightly cropped white hair. They survey the scene and head off in the direction of 1,000 blinking slot machines.

It's Memorial Day weekend, Sunday night, and a severe thunderstorm rages outside the Bluffs Run Casino in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Inside, lightning and thunder give way to the calls of more than 1,200 slots, live entertainment, dog racing, thousands of people and of course, money. Heaps of money.

Every day, 24 hours a day, people converge in Council Bluffs with hopes of getting lucky. In addition to Bluffs Run, a growing casino corridor along the Missouri River includes the Ameristar Casino and Harvey's Casino Hotel.

Similar gambling havens have sprung up in other nearby cities, including Kansas City and Sioux City, Iowa.

The casinos do a brisk business in Council Bluffs, and the money seems to keep flowing in. A May 13 press release from Ameristar reported net revenues of \$24.1 million in the first quarter of 1998 alone. That compares with \$21.7 million in the same three months of 1997. A March 23 news release from Harvey's reported remarkably similar numbers, with first quarter net revenues of \$26.6 million in 1998 and \$22.6 million in 1997. Comparable figures were not available from Bluffs Run.

But while the glitter of Las Vegas has invaded the heartland, the glamour seems to have escaped. A look around Council Bluffs' gaming community provides several examples.

Although Harvey's and Ameristar each have hotels attached, many gamblers opt for less expensive accommodations. The casino parking lots, complete with giant truck spaces, are packed with 18-wheelers -- the kind with sleeping quarters in the cab. A nearby RV park offers \$17 single stalls and \$20 doubles. Several inexpensive motels line Interstate 29 near the casinos. And of course, the surrounding cities and countryside are the home of most Council Bluffs gamers.

The scene inside Council Bluffs' casinos reflects that ease of access. The throngs of people are clad mostly in the work clothes of middle America. The billowing silk shirts of Las Vegas are replaced by faded, black concert T-shirts, many emblazoned with heavy metal and country music icons. Polished shoes are replaced by sneakers. Here, denim is the fabric of choice.

Every flat surface is polished to a reflective sheen. Plastic shrubbery sprouts from large planters. And brass railings run along the walls throughout. Harvey's and Ameristar both make their homes on elaborate riverboats, complete with late 1800s-style architecture and countless neon lights.

While Bluffs Run specializes in slots and greyhound racing, Harvey's and Ameristar offer traditional Las Vegas-style gaming tables. Craps, blackjack, Spanish 21, Caribbean stud and roulette are among the favorite pastimes of Council Bluffs players. And for the game-weary or broke customers, some sort of free entertainment is usually happening.

Outside, under the great blinking awning at Bluffs Run, Ed Salazar of Omaha waits for his wife of 46 years to finish playing the slots.

"The Misses, she gambles, but I don't," he said. "I just come here because they feed good."

Salazar said he waited outside to encourage his wife to hurry. She has never won big.