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June 19, 2001

Casinos Redefine 'Up the River' in Boom City

By PETER T. KILBORN

JOLIET, Ill. — Joliet's listless black canal once carried treated sewage from Chicago, 40 miles to the north, through the core of a decrepit downtown where gangs roamed freely. Well into the 1980's, with the city's steel and machinery factories vanishing, unemployment reached 20 percent. About the only noteworthy thing left in Joliet was its maximum-security state prison.

But in a single decade, this once-dismal relic of the rust belt has burst into the ranks of the nation's boom towns.

Joliet's population has leaped 38 percent since 1990, to 106,000, nearly three times the national rate, according to the 2000 census. With the sole exceptions of Joliet and two other Chicago-area cities, Naperville and Aurora, all 50 of the fastest-growing cities with populations exceeding 100,000 are far away, in the South, Southwest and West.

Hispanic immigration contributed to Joliet's growth, as did spillover from Chicago, where the population grew 4 percent in the decade. But the real spur to Joliet's growth is an industry that sprang from the banks of the old sewer and barge canal: riverboat gambling.



Todd Buchanan for The New York Times
Before the casinos arrived in Joliet, Ill., 16 houses were built there each month. In May, a record 220 were built.

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Joliet's casinos attract 400,000 visitors a month. As the city's biggest employers, with 3,400 workers, the casinos pay \$100 million in wages and have helped drive unemployment down to 6 percent. The city has used its flush treasury to wipe out its debt, cut its share of homeowner taxes by 30 percent, freeze water fees and eliminate a \$25 tax on automobiles. With subsidies and tax breaks, it has lured a 75,000-seat Nascar race track to its outskirts.

"We have fought so hard to overcome the prison reputation," said John M. Mezera, Joliet's city manager. Today, banners on telephone poles proclaim Joliet a finalist in the All-American City competition.

"It's our time," said Robert D. Fraser, the city's treasurer and budget director. "We're finally feeling it."

People here acknowledge that the transformation has come with costs. Schools and jails are bursting, and the city's rapid sprawl is gobbling surrounding farmland. Roads are torn up, clogged with traffic, detour signs and digging machines.

"There's been a profound change in how we look at ourselves," said Stephen Belford, a lawyer downtown. "We were always trying to achieve something better, to move on up." But with the gambling-driven spread of new subdivisions, "we've become an advocate of suburban sprawl."

There are social costs, too, both here and in the surrounding towns, where Gamblers Anonymous groups have cropped up as fast as the subdivisions.

But to some people here, concerns about sprawl and out-of-control gamblers seem a luxury, compared with the dark days before the casinos.

With nine riverboat casinos, including the Empress and Harrah's in Joliet, the Chicago region has become the nation's third-largest gambling area, after Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Illinois's plunge into gambling came in response to fears that it would lose businesses to neighboring Iowa, which legalized riverboat gambling in 1990.

Later that year, the Illinois Legislature approved casino gambling in its rusting river towns. Unlike Iowa, which set a \$200 limit on a gambler's daily losses,



Todd Buchanan for The New York Times
Harrah's, one of two casinos in Joliet, Ill., has helped reverse the fortunes of the town, which is one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States.



Todd Buchanan for The New York Times
John M. Mezera, the city manager, left, and James M. Haller, director of community and economic development, herald Joliet's freshened image.

Illinois set no limit.

Within weeks, casino companies were courting Illinois cities like Joliet, Aurora, Alton and East St. Louis. By 1992, Joliet had the Empress, and a year later, Harrah's.

The typical gambler here lives 25 miles away and does not leave the casinos to patronize the city's merchants, according to the latest state gambling data. He or she loses money — an average of \$125.45 per visitor at Harrah's in April, the state data show — and then is directed by signs in the casinos' garages to Interstate 80, the fastest road out.

The city charges a dollar-a-head admission tax from the casinos and another tax on the money wagered, collecting more than \$200 million over nine years — and currently \$30 million a year.

Though the downtown is lined with abandoned stores, the canal has been cleaned. Nobody calls it the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal anymore; it is the Des Plaines River. Ground has been broken on a minor league baseball stadium. Renovation of the abandoned Louis Joliet Hotel into 60 apartments is under way, and a sports bar will soon open in the restored but still barren Union Station.

"We're becoming an entertainment venue, a destination place," said James M. Haller, director of community and economic development.

To aid growth, the city has been pushing water and sewer lines into cheap farmland where developers have been caving subdivisions of three- and four-bedroom homes that sell for \$100,000 to \$200,000, well below prices closer to Chicago.

Before the boats came, Joliet built 16 new homes a month. In May, said Mr. Mezera, building began on a record 220. An unabashed promoter of such growth, he said: "It's the house top count. When it gets high enough, you get all the good things." The next good thing, he said, might be a Starbucks.

Yet the homeowners, predominantly young families, sell almost as fast as they buy, said Doug Geissler, a real estate broker. "There's a ton of turnover," he said.

"Developers want to develop every square foot in sight," Mr. Geissler said. "The houses they're throwing up now — three-inch walls. People don't care about how the houses are built."

Joseph L. Mikan, chief executive of Will County, whose hub is Joliet, said: "You have to question the quality of life. People have the idea that they're getting into the country, and all of a sudden they see home developers with 100 and 150 acres who put 400 homes on them, or more."

In the Lakewood Falls subdivision, Van Eldridge, 30, manager of a tire store,

paid \$118,000 two years ago for a three-bedroom duplex. He doubts that he and his wife and their children will be there for long. "Two years ago," Mr. Eldridge said, "we were pretty much out of the congested area, and now we're not."

Some longer-term residents of Joliet are worried about other, less visible problems associated with the gambling boom. In Chicago and its surroundings, compulsive gamblers attend weekly Gamblers Anonymous meetings in 43 communities, all of which have opened since riverboat gambling began in Joliet. Tom, an automobile sales manager who is in his mid-50's, attends every Monday at Joliet's First Presbyterian church. Attendance, he said, has climbed from 3 or 4 six years ago to more than 20.

Experts say that addicted and pathological gamblers make up 2 to 5 percent of all gamblers; 2 percent of the 400,000 admissions to the Joliet casinos is 8,000.

Three years ago in Joliet alone, John Renzi, a lawyer here who specializes in personal bankruptcy, said he would file three or four gambling-related bankruptcy petitions a year. "Now," he said, "it's one a month."

Patrick O'Neil, coroner of Will County, attributes "eight or nine" suicides in the 90's to gambling. He said the last was a 48-year-old chemist who drank acid after losing \$177,000 at Harrah's and the Empress.

Dr. Alex Spadoni, a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction treatment at Provena St. Joseph's Medical Center in Joliet, said he saw several gambling-related suicide attempts a year.

"They don't say they gamble," said Kim McCarl, a counselor at the Family Counseling Agency for Will and Grundy Counties in Joliet, which helps debt-ridden clients come to grips with their bills. "They say, 'My interest rates on my credit cards are so high I need help paying them off.' Then you see a huge cash advance on the bottom. You ask why. 'Oh, I go to the boats.'"

Mimi Kambic, the agency's credit counseling manager, said, "The problem we see — people don't see they have a problem. We know it's out there, but they're not coming to us for assistance yet."

She said, "We're trying to make Joliet the not-the-prison town, and to be known for riverboats. I don't know if that's so good either."

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