



research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

OUR MISSION:

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail abgaming@ualberta.ca or phone 780.492.2856.

Alberta Gaming Research Institute Board of Directors, 2003

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From vice to popular pastime: A history of gambling in Alberta

AT FIRST GLANCE, it seems a long way from studying the popular culture of 19th century Britain to the history of gambling in Alberta, but to Dr. Chris Hosgood, Associate Professor of History at the University of Lethbridge, it has been almost a natural evolution. A social historian by training (he earned his PhD at the University of Manitoba after an Honours BA at the University of Victoria and an MPhil at the University of Leicester, UK), Chris's work over the years focused on particular groups within the lower middle class: small shopkeepers, commercial travelers, clerks and shop assistants. More recently, he has concentrated on the emergence of a consumer society — specifically, the role of shopping in a popular culture increasingly influenced by department stores and, even more recently, shopping malls.

In fact, says Chris, "it was these ongoing research interests that led naturally to my interest in the social history of gambling." Although long a part of popular culture, gambling, he believes, is particularly well suited to the ideals often associated with modern consumerism, particularly the notion that financial success could be achieved by luck rather than hard work.

Chris Hosgood is completing a project, funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, which examines the social and cultural history of gambling in Alberta from the days of the early European settlements until 1970, when provincial legislation opened the doors to much wider forms of gambling. Research into the history of gambling in Alberta, or indeed Canada, has not been well documented. Chris believes that it is important to understand gambling's place in society as a means of comprehending the evolution of Alberta's "vibrant yet divergent popular cultures."

His interest in the history of gambling in Alberta was also caused in part, Chris explains, by recent debates in the province about gambling issues, including discussions about the revenues raised through gambling and the speculation about 'problem' gamblers. "As an historian," Chris says, "I was fascinated by what struck me as the possibility of a remarkable shift in public opinion on gambling issues. While there are clearly many strongly held views about the role of gambling in modern society, the historian of popular culture in me was taken by the apparent function of gambling today as a mechanism for bringing together groups of varying economic, social and cultural backgrounds. Gambling appeared to provide a common ground enjoyed or experienced by a majority of Albertans."

The "common ground" noted by Chris was not always positive; in fact, much evidence exists to illustrate the tremendous opposition to gambling that once was a feature of Alberta's social milieu. Chris cites an example in an attempt by the Royal North West Mounted Police to close down a gambling den in Granum, a small town south of Calgary, just prior to World War One. It was clear that gambling divided communities such as this one into a multitude of hostile camps — aligned on social, religious, moral, ethnic, and economic grounds. Despite great efforts, including the use of paid informants, the intercession of moral reform societies, and a midnight raid on a cold winter evening, the police were ultimately unable to break the dens in Granum. Chris has concluded that the failure to stamp out such activities was as much a result of lack of political will as poor or corrupt policing.

This, suggests Chris, illustrates that gambling was clearly a divisive social force in Alberta. Accordingly, the question that his project ultimately seeks to resolve lies at the heart of Alberta's emergence as a province accommodating a great variety of cultural perspectives. How did gambling move from an activity promoting such divisiveness to one that today engages a large majority of Albertans in one way or another?



"fascinated by ... a remarkable shift in public opinion on gambling issues."

Chris's study focuses on two different but interconnected issues. The first is identifying the changing societal perceptions of the nature and role of gambling. In some respects, Chris says he is chronicling the transformation of "gambling" into "gaming," a word with fewer negative connotations. In this context the study focuses on the declining influence of moral reformers, and the changing hopes and aspirations — social, political and intellectual — of various groups in the province. Second, the study is charting the changing nature of gambling itself; that is, it is creating a "map" of gambling habits, and the evolving gambling interests of Albertans, over the decades. Quite apart from their other functions, says Chris, police crime reports provide us with a glimpse into the gambling schemes popular at various periods, and the role of gambling with the popular cultures of the province.

One feature that has made this project particularly appealing to Chris is that it has provided a rich and valuable research opportunity to many Alberta students. The research has involved a great deal of time-intensive and complex archival work. Because gambling was illegal for a long period of time, the historical record was accordingly weighted in favour of appropriately supportive evidence. Chris's research team members have examined police and court records to determine the way in which the authorities, federal and provincial, court and police, dealt with gambling in its various forms.

University of Lethbridge undergraduate student Allison Anderson, for example, spent two summers in the Provincial Archives and the City of Edmonton Archives sifting through police reports and court proceedings. Kriston Rennie, a former University of Lethbridge student now in graduate school in Britain, examined Royal North West Mounted Police records in Ottawa. But because the evidence they examined was generally one-sided, usually supporting the illegal elements of gambling, the research

team has also attempted to present a balanced view by reconstructing the social and cultural experience of gambling, by examining other archival and printed sources that complement and perhaps counter the more traditional ones.

In this respect, Maren Wood, another University of Lethbridge undergraduate student, spent much of one summer combing local newspapers, particularly in small southern Alberta towns, in an attempt to determine and reconstruct the diverse attitudes to gambling that existed. Heather Steel, also a University of Lethbridge undergraduate, searched the City of Calgary Archives and the Glenbow Archives for evidence of the variety of gambling forms prevalent in the province — slot machines, horse racing, poker, and lotteries, among others. Sheila Bannerman, a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge, spent the summer of 2003 examining the fascinating place of bingo in Alberta's gambling history.

The project has a scheduled completion date of December 31, 2003. All of the archival research has been completed, says Chris, and work is well underway on the detailed narrative that will constitute the principal product of the project. Two papers incorporating project material have already been presented, a scholarly one in Las Vegas and another, a keynote presentation, at the 2003 Alberta Undergraduate History Students' Conference.

"Ultimately," says Chris, "I would like to think that this project is of value because in some small way it has contributed to our understanding of gambling in the province. While there is no doubt that most gambling research is naturally focused on the role of gambling in the economy today, as well as the social consequence of gambling, particularly the number of 'problem' gamblers, this project will remind us that gambling has a history in the province and by reconstructing that history we might better understand its contemporary social and economic role."

Upcoming Event

Dr. William Eadington, Director of the Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming at the University of Nevada, Reno, will be in Edmonton in November. Professor Eadington is also affiliated with the Centre for Gambling Studies at the University of Salford (U.K.) and the Australian Institute for Gambling Studies (University of Western Sydney). He has edited several publications dealing with casino gaming issues, as well as proceedings of the international gaming conferences he has organized.

On Monday, November 24, 9 – 11 a.m., Dr. Eadington will speak at the University of Alberta on "Research challenges around gambling: What we need to know, and how to get there." Please check the Institute's website or call 780.492.2856 for the specific venue.

The following scholarly works focus on various themes relating to the history of gambling in North America:

- Brenner, R., & Brenner, G. A. (1990). *Gambling and speculation: A theory, a history, and a future of some human decisions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fabian, A. (1999). *Card sharps and bucket shops: Gambling in nineteenth-century America*. New York: Routledge.
- Gabriel, K. (1996). *Gambler way: Indian gaming in mythology, history, and archaeology in North America*. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books.
- Hosgood, Christopher P. "Policing Gambling in Alberta to 1939." Western Social Science Association Annual Conference. Las Vegas, NV. April 10, 2003. (available at www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/documents/research/Policing_Alberta.pdf)
- Morton, S. (2003). *At odds: Gambling and Canadians, 1919-1969*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Reith, G. (1999). *The age of chance: Gambling in western culture*. London: Routledge.

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