

# How it all began...

As the General Manager of Montecasino, I deal with everything from hospitality to events, theatre productions and hotels. But the area about which I'm most often questioned is the Casino. It got me thinking that many people are unaware of the origins of this fascinating industry, so here is a brief summary of how it all began.

Although the exact origin is unknown, gambling has existed since ancient times and is generally believed to have been present, in one form or another in almost every society. Since he was able to, man has gambled for money, for pleasure, for the outcome of wars.

Some early highlights include the first "official" account of gambling by the Chinese in 2300BC, a pair of ivory dice made sometime before 1500BC found in Egypt and evidence of modern day gambling discovered in the Pyramids where tomb paintings showed the deceased playing a dice game called Jackals and Hounds.

According to Greek mythology, Fortune, the daughter of Zeus and Tycho, was the Goddess of Chance. She ironically invented several games of chance and even had buildings constructed specifically for playing these games. It is believed that Fortune had these buildings illuminated on the outside to attract passing travellers. Perhaps one could argue that these were indeed the first casinos.

Over the years, casino gambling has evolved and developed producing a wide range of games and game-types which can be divided into two broad categories, Table games and Slot machines. To avoid getting too carried away, I decided to focus on the history of Slot machines and the two most popular Table games – Roulette and Blackjack.



## ROULETTE

Despite considerable research (thanks to my able assistant, Google), I have not found any reliable evidence or documentation on the true origin of the game. However, it is widely believed that Roulette, came to the west via China but the story has several different versions. One theory was that it was introduced to Europe by traders who dealt with the Chinese. Another was that it was Dominican monks who brought the game to France. Another story has its origins in ancient Rome, where soldiers tipped their chariots and spun on one of the wheels – both for amusement and to divide riches won in war.

No matter its beginnings, by the time Prince Charles of Monaco implemented the roulette wheel as a means of counteracting the financial problems of his kingdom in the late 18th Century, its popularity had skyrocketed. Roulette, which means 'small wheel' in French, has remained a casino favorite to this day.

## BLACK JACK

The origin of Blackjack is as 'murky' from a scholarly perspective as that of Roulette. Italy, France and Spain all claim to be the "inventors" of the most widely played casino games in the world.

Today it is commonly agreed (other than by the Italians and Spanish that is) that the first roots of Blackjack appeared during the 17th Century in France – where a game called Vingt-Et-Un, which means "21" was introduced into French casinos. The "idea" of Blackjack (and Poker) came from the practice of shuffling papers and money in about 900 AD. This evolved into card playing which eventually made its way to Europe via the Mameluke Empire. Being practicing Muslims, the Mamelukes did not decorate their cards with human forms – but rather with beautiful intricate designs.

When the cards eventually made their way to Italy and Spain, card makers began distinguishing cards with the ranks of men who held power in the Royal Court – which probably explains why the Queen of today's decks did not appear until the 1500's when the French got hold of them and "swopped" out a male card.

## SLOT MACHINES

Finally – a game who's origin is clear! The first mechanical Slot machine was invented in 1895 by a 29 year old car mechanic, Charles Fay, in San Francisco. He began manufacturing them by hand and placed them in local gaming halls on a 50% rental basis – making him not only the inventor but also the first Slot machine operator.

Fay's machines were a huge and immediate success and he couldn't keep up with the demand in his small shop. He refused many offers from equipment manufactures and his invention remained an exclusive California phenomenon for thirteen years until 1907, when Herbert Stephan Mills, a Chicago manufacturer of arcade games, began production of a similar Slot machine called the "Operator Bell". The symbols on the Operator Bell were cherries, plums and bars – making it the first in a long line of Slots to be called "fruit machines".

These early twentieth century mechanical Slot machines gave way to electronic Slot machines in the mid-1960's. Today, at Montecasino we have over 1700 slot machines, offering more than two hundred games types or choices that have been purchased from over eight different manufacturers around the world.

By now I'm sure you'll agree that the Casino industry is certainly a fascinating one!

Steve Howell