

'HRMs' better known as 1-arm bandits

SLOT MACHINES HAVE arrived in Virginia.

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. But there they were on the floor of Colonial Downs racetrack in New Kent.

Slot machines on the eastern edge of the Bible Belt! Old Satan apparently sneaked in when no one was looking.

The crazy thing is that these slots are legal in a state that swears slot machines are illegal. I mean, we just don't have casino gambling here in Virginia. Well, brother, we've got it now.

The slot machines are there with the blessing of the Virginia General Assembly, with only one vote cast against them. And the legislation slipped through quietly and under slightly false pretenses.

Here's how it went down. Colonial Downs, Virginia's only thoroughbred racetrack, closed down several years ago after about two decades of operation. The track, built in a rural area just off Interstate 64 between Richmond and Williamsburg, couldn't make enough money on horse racing.

While Virginia horsemen, who had long lobbied for the track, lamented its demise, Colonial Downs, which boasts one of the finest turf tracks in America, was sold. The new owners wanted a source of revenue that would sustain the track when the horses were not running.

So they lobbied for "Historic Racing Machines" to bring in the people and their dollars.

The "Historic Racing Machines" were billed as machines that allowed patrons to bet on races run in previous years at various tracks. The

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horses would have no names and no history, only numbers. The tale was that handicappers would come and bet on these machine races.

Being somewhat of a handicapper, I knew from the beginning that this was a ludicrous idea. Handicappers study the horses, their previous records, their jockeys and their pedigrees. No handicapper worth his salt is going to bet blind.

The General Assembly, at the insistence of Virginia horsemen, bought the tale and voted to allow "Historic Racing Machines." What they wound up with is two floors of slot machines.

Make no mistake about it. These are slot machines. I have visited any number of casinos in my time and I know a slot machine when I see one. And, according to the lady at the cashier's window, there are 600 of these at Colonial Downs.

Can you play "Historic Races?" Yes, you can. If you bring your bifocals or a magnifying glass you will find a little box down in the left hand corner of these machines that allows you to activate them. In the hour I was in the casino, I did not see one "Historic Race" activated.

What I saw were screens with 7's and other games typical of the slot machines in every other casino in America.

Not that I have anything against slot machines. As I said, I have been known to throw a \$20 bill into a slot machine from time to time.

What bugs me is the underhanded manner in which this form of



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A gaming machine at Colonial Downs. The General Assembly says these are 'Historic Racing Machines', but the columnist recalls them by a different name.

gambling was brought into Virginia. If our state legislators didn't know these were slot machines, then they either didn't bother to look at them or they're pretty ignorant.

Yes, these slots have brought racing back to Virginia. Colonial Downs will feature a whopping 15 days of racing this summer and there will be off-track betting at Colonial Downs all year.

In exchange for 15 days of live racing, patrons will be able to play slots each weekday until 2 a.m. and until 4 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

This same thing happened in West Virginia. In the mid-1990s, Charles Town Racetrack closed down because of lack of revenue. The company that owned it said that it would be reopened only if slots were allowed.

But in West Virginia, the legislators had enough respect for their constituents to hold a referendum and let the people decide the issue. The Virginia General Assembly circumvented the people, likely because they did not want the Baptists and the Methodists and the Holy Rollers to scream bloody murder.

When the slots, which saved racing at Charles

Town, became established, the track owners pushed for table games and, by referendum, got them. Table games will undoubtedly follow in Virginia.

As I said, I have no problem with casinos in Virginia. The Pamunkey Indians have plans for a big casino, likely in the Virginia Beach area. And the state can't stop them.

The slot machines at Colonial Downs will bring in state revenue and New Kent County will now be able to build new schools. And some of those Baptists, Methodists and Holy Rollers (I've seen them on the floor) who have been playing slots in West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania will now be able to lose their money at home.

Still, it is not right for state legislators to tell us they are allowing "Historic Racing Machines" when they are really legalizing slot machines without a state referendum.

Folks, the General Assembly has conned us. There is no other way to put it.

By the way, I came out \$40 to the good playing those Colonial Downs slots.

Don't tell the preacher.

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Penny's demise is change we don't need

FOR YEARS NOW, there has been talk of doing away with the penny.

Nothing is a penny anymore, not even penny candy, which probably costs 50 cents today.

About the only thing pennies are good for is making change when paying sales tax. Almost every convenience store has a small container for pennies when the total bill, with tax, comes to \$1.01 or \$1.02.

Just pull a penny out of that container so you don't have to break a dollar and walk away with a pocketful of change. Conversely, if you get a few pennies back in change, just toss them in the container.

Many people don't even bother to bend over and pick up pennies on the sidewalk or in a parking lot anymore. I suppose they figure that such a small amount is not worth the effort.

Being tight, I take Ben Franklin's advice literally and pick up every penny I can find. In fact, I consciously look down for coins when I get out of my car. You seldom find anything but pennies anymore, but I grab for each and every one I notice, even those with "tails" up.

Heads up supposedly means good luck and tails up denotes bad. To me, finding a penny with ei-

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ther side up is good luck.

I don't want to see the penny go the way of the dodo bird. I like pennies. In fact, I began collecting them when I was a child and still look for wheat pennies in my change.

If we are going to do away with any American coin, why not the dime? In case you haven't noticed, dimes are the least circulated coin in this country today. I'm not sure why, but that's the way it is.

Almost every time you get change from a coin-operated machine, you get two nickels instead of one dime. Check your loose change every night. More often than not, you won't have a dime among the coins in your pocket.

Dimes just are not all that popular.

Maybe one reason is that the price of practically every product ends in an uneven number. Everything is 99 cents or \$2.29 or \$3.69. Nickels and quarters can handle most of your change, but you need those four pennies to handle the rest. I'm beginning to wonder if some coin machines even have slots for dimes.

If you can't buy penny candy for a penny, think what you can't buy for a

dime. If you go to Starbucks, a 10-cent cup of coffee is \$4.

Put a dime in the pay phone? Hey, grandpa! What's a pay phone?

It used to be that you could buy a newspaper for one thin dime. Thank goodness that's not still the case or I'd be poorer than I am today!

So when you come right down to it, dimes are all but obsolete. Two nickels can accomplish anything a dime can. True, they're a little bulkier, but rubbing two nickels together makes you feel richer than fiddling around with one dime.



I don't want to see the penny go the way of the dodo bird. I like pennies.

Of course, they say we're headed for a paperless, coinless society anyway, so the decision to eliminate any particular coin might well be a moot point. Pretty soon, there may not be any jingle in your pockets.

With credit and debit cards being used more

and more, we're pretty far down the road toward a paperless, coinless economy already. Members of the next generation may live their entire lifetimes and never touch real money.

Now I really wouldn't care if they took away paper currency, but I'd hate to see coins go. You can't play with dollar bills, but you can almost play a tune with a pocketful of coins.

And what would life be without change jars (I've never heard of a paper currency jar)? Every night, I toss a portion of my change into an old candy jar and when it is full, I take it to the bank and I've got two weeks' worth of lunch money.

Then there are piggy banks that some of us remember. Shaking a piggy bank that contains no coins is about as exciting as wringing out a wet dishrag.

What about coin hunting behind the sofa pillows? That would be like an Easter egg hunt after they've done away with eggs.

Nope, America doesn't need to do away with its coins. We need to hear our economy jingle.

But if we have to lose one coin, let it be the dime. They are almost obsolete already.

Or turn the dime into a \$4 piece so we can once again buy a cup of coffee with one coin.

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Religion not one of public schools' three Rs

A RECENT statement by President Trump that he favors having the Bible taught in public schools prompted a lively discussion on Facebook the other day.

Some thought it was a good idea; others didn't.

A few wanted to "return" the teaching of the Bible to public schools. I'm not sure where they grew up, but the Bible was never taught in any public school I attended. Until the Supreme Court made its ruling in 1962, we did recite The Lord's Prayer every morning, but that was the extent of our public school religious training.

People—our president included—make wide-ranging generic statements and often have no idea what they're saying.



"We should teach the Bible in public schools."

Okay, which Bible? The Hebrew Bible? The Catholic Bible? The Protestant Bible? Do we add the Book of Mormon?

Older Americans would prefer the King James version. The younger generation would probably want a revised edition.

Who would decide? Well, the government, of course. Public schools are government schools paid for by tax dollars. And all taxpayers are not Southern or evangelicals, the two groups that push hardest for teaching the Bible in public schools.

If the members of the school board in your district were predominantly Jewish, they might order that the Hebrew Bible be taught. A School Board with a majority of Catholics might opt for that denomination's Bible, which includes books not in the Protestant Bible.

Suppose the neighborhood was predominantly Muslim? The government could determine that the Koran should be taught in that district's public schools.

In other words, if we get the government involved, there is no telling where "teaching the Bible in public schools" might end up. The Baptists might suddenly find Buddhism being taught to their children.

And that's what the framers of the Constitu-

tion understood when they opted for the separation of church and state. They had seen the Church of England shoved down their throats and they wanted Americans to have the freedom to worship as they pleased. America would have no official religion, not Catholic or Episcopalian or Methodist or Baptist.

And if Jews and Buddhists wanted to worship in their own way, well, that was alright, too. We are a nation built on freedom of religion.

Yes, the pilgrims and Puritans taught religion in their schools, but they were church schools, not public schools. Today, many denominations still have their own schools that teach religion and that is how it should be. Leave the religious teach-

ings to religious entities.

That's exactly what one teacher who took part in our discussion said. Leave the religious teachings to churches and parents. That's their responsibility.

Parents these days want to shift every aspect of child-rearing onto schools. How many times have I heard a mother tell an unruly child, "I can't wait until you go to school so they can teach you how to behave!"

We want the public schools to teach behavior, manners and now religion.

But if the schools punish students for bad manners or behavior, teachers get sued. And if the schools teach the "wrong" religion? Well, let's not even go there. Don't today's parents feel they have any responsibilities?

When you start mixing

religion and government, you start treading on dangerous ground. If churches start telling government how to run public schools, then government might start telling churches how to run their services.

As for prayer in schools, any student can pray all he wants. The school just cannot designate a prayer to be recited by all. If it did, it might choose a Muslim or Buddhist prayer and then all hell would break loose in the Bible Belt.

I agree with my teacher friend. Leave the religious teachings to the churches and the parents and let the public schools deal with reading and writing.

The separation of church and state is a good thing. Let's keep it that way.

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