

# 100 MOMENTS

## ROLLING ON THE RIVER

By Rob Winchell (1994-2021)

I was born and raised in Dubuque and, being a Midwestern boy from a Mississippi River town, I agree with Tina Turner, that “I never saw the good side of a city until I hitched a ride on a riverboat queen.” That’s where it all began for many of us working within DCI’s Special Operations Enforcement Bureau, pulling duty on a riverboat casino cruising the mighty Mississippi and Missouri Rivers or navigating various inland waters of Iowa. In fact, many sworn officers presently working within DCI, DNE, SFM, ISP and DOI, at one time or another, began their careers with DPS with the gaming bureau. Although the days of “hitching rides on riverboat queens” are long gone, the casino industry is still here, seemingly always changing and expanding into new ventures with every year that passes, and the Division of Criminal Investigation’s Special Enforcement Operations Bureau (formerly Gaming Operations Bureau) has been there every step of the way ensuring public safety, enforcing Iowa’s gaming laws, and doing its part to maintain the

integrity of a multimillion-dollar business for all citizens of the State of Iowa.

When I started my first year of high school in 1980, in the Dubuque Tri-State area, there was a saying going around that expressed the reality of the hardships being felt by many Dubuque land residents, “The last person to leave Dubuque, please turn off the lights.” For you see, as with many parts of Iowa and throughout the United



MISSISSIPPI BELLE II CASINO, CLINTON

States, at this time, the early 1980s meant very high unemployment levels and a poor economy in Dubuque and people were leaving the city to find greener pastures. After high school, I, too, left the area to enter military service; foregoing college until later. Something had to change and one of those

changes came in the form of legalized gambling. It certainly was not the final solution to everyone’s economic and financial problems, but legalized gambling delivered a jump start that was needed and it ultimately provided employment opportunities to many for careers in law enforcement with the Department.

In May of 1983, the Iowa Legislature passed the Pari-Mutuel Wagering Act, which opened the door for pari-mutuel wagering on horse and greyhound racing in the state. Right or wrong, the future of gambling in Iowa had begun. Prior to the early 1980s, legal gaming in Iowa was non-existent. Dubuque wasted no time and opened the first greyhound racing track within the state on June 1, 1985, becoming the nation's first nonprofit greyhound track. DCI agents were soon staffed at Iowa's newly licensed racetrack. Other race tracks were soon to follow in Waterloo and Council Bluffs.

In April of 1985, the Iowa Legislature passed the Iowa Lottery Act forming the present-day Iowa Lottery. It was at this time that the Department of Public Safety's, Division of Criminal Investigation became the primary state enforcement agency responsible for criminal violations for the new pari-mutuel and lottery laws. DCI agents assigned to the newly-created Pari-Mutuel/Lottery Unit within the DCI conducted background investigations on race track employees and were mandated by law to conduct background investigations on all major vendors doing business with the Iowa Lottery.

Iowa's Excursion Boat/Casino legislation became effective on July 1, 1989. This new legislation allowed for competing private entities to apply for licenses to operate excursion gambling boats on Iowa's navigable waters. At this same time, to ensure public confidence and trust in Iowa's expanding gaming industry, DCI created the Gaming Operations Bureau and immediately began gearing up for this new venture in Iowa by assigning personnel to complete due diligence background investigations on riverboat operations/entities and personal investigations on key employees working on the riverboats. This work was performed by Special Agents. The act also authorized the DCI to hire "Gaming Enforcement Officers" to oversee gambling and maintain public order and safety on newly licensed excursion boats. Over a 10 plus year

period, the DCI hired, trained and deployed large numbers of Gaming Enforcement Officers just to keep up with the need to staff a rapidly growing number of casino facilities located throughout the state. Original state gaming law and operational plans required a state peace officer to be on casino property the entire time the casino was open to the public. At some properties, this required nearly a 24/7/365 staffing scheme provided by the Gaming Enforcement Officers, with most officers working 10 to 12 hours shifts.

Over the next two decades, Iowa's gaming industry continued its rapid expansion and lobbied state legislators to change Iowa's gaming laws to meet customer and industry demands. The laws changed to allow excursion boats to limit the number of cruises annually to 100 and to eventually not having a cruise requirement at all, permitting excursion boats to be permanently moored. The "Riverboat Queen" days for Iowa's casino/excursion boats had ended. Eventually, with the advent of additional changes to Iowa's gaming laws, many of Iowa's licensed gaming operators built and moved their operations into expansive land-based casino and entertainment venues, the types of casino facilities seen in Iowa today.

In the years 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2014, in response to city and county referendums, the Iowa Racing & Gaming Commission opened the door for gaming expansion in the State of Iowa. Over these years, six (6) more casino operator licenses were granted by the IRGC, bringing the total number to nineteen (19) Iowa gambling facilities geographically dispersed around the state in 14 different counties.

Throughout the course of this rapid gaming expansion that took place in Iowa, along with maintaining its ongoing responsibility with handling all criminal investigations, DCI agents completed the rigorous background investigation processes for all of these projects. Special Agents conducted extensive business entity and individual background investigations

and the findings of these detailed and comprehensive investigations were presented to members of the Iowa Racing & Gaming Commission so that appointed Commissioners could make decisions as to the suitability of licensure for business entities, key personnel and employees working in the industry. Also during this expansion, DCI agents continued to provide expert guidance and advice to casino operators in terms of security risk assessments and proper security measures. Agents also completed comprehensive inspections of newly commissioned digital surveillance/CCTV systems installed in all of Iowa's casinos to ensure said systems met minimum standards as outlined in gaming administrative rules.

In 2013, private gaming industry leaders in Iowa wanted to see a change made to the organizational structure of DCI's Gaming Enforcement Bureau. In June of 2013, Governor Branstad signed into law Senate File 447 which made significant changes to the overall mission, responsibilities and staffing levels of the gaming bureau. The Gaming Enforcement Bureau was renamed the Special Enforcement Operations Bureau and over the next three years (by July 2016) the bureau was required to eliminate nearly 50 front-line enforcement positions from within its ranks (formerly the Gaming Enforcement Officer). Currently, three (3) Special Agents are assigned to each casino facility to provide the ongoing needs and satisfy the mission requirements of the Special Enforcement Operations Bureau on behalf of the citizens of the State of Iowa.

In addition, in 2019, new Iowa legislation permitted casino operators to enter into agreements with private companies to open onsite and online/mobile Sports Wagering operations. This new legislation did not allow for any new enforcement positions within the DCI even though sports wagering was an entirely new form of gambling in Iowa and consists of hundreds of millions of dollars in new gaming revenue to the casinos and the State of Iowa. As

of April of 2020, all but one of Iowa's casinos operates Sports Wagering/Sports Book within their overall casino gaming operation. DCI agents completed the extensive business entity and individual background investigations on the various Sports Wagering vendors and the findings of these investigations were presented to members of the Iowa Racing & Gaming Commission. After more than a year of operations, sports wagering is proving to be a very large and highly patronized gaming option in the state, far surpassing many of the early revenue projections. Today, SEOB agents are expanding their knowledge and investigative skill sets to deal with investigations involving online mobile wagering.

Over its 30+ year history working within Iowa's gambling industry, the Iowa DCI has experienced and adapted to the many changes within the gaming business. Iowa casinos have evolved from excursion riverboats to expansive 1000's+ capacity, land-based casino/entertainment facilities offering a wide range of traditional and new wagering products, such as onsite and online sports wagering. Most Iowa casinos now operate 24 hours a day 365 days per year. DCI agents have been there every step of the way. The enforcement of Iowa's gambling laws and regulations by agents of the DCI has contributed greatly to maintaining the integrity of Iowa's gaming industry since its inception. Within other legalized gaming jurisdictions throughout the United States, the State of Iowa's Division of Criminal Investigation Special Enforcement Operations Bureau has an outstanding, well-regarded reputation for competence, professionalism, and integrity.

Even after all the changes that have occurred to the gaming business here in Iowa, DCI's Special Enforcement Operations Bureau has endured and adapted and the "Big Wheel Keeps on Turning." Tina would be proud.