

The Strange Saga Gambling Part



It was 1926 when the first gambling boat, the *Johanna Smith*, moored off the coast of Long Beach, CA. Although it was the first, at one time as many as seven of the vessels simultaneously worked off the California coast, from Santa Barbara to Seal Beach. Besides the *Johanna Smith*, there were the *Monfalcone*, *Monte Carlo*, *City of Panama*, *Texas*, *Showboat*, *S.S. La Playa*, *Lux*, *Tango*, and the *S.S. Rex*. As a Ships collector, I recognize at least the last two from covers in my own collection.

As many as 50,000 eager citizens were entertained each week on the vessels, and they were provided with water-taxi service and practically free dinner on board. The ships were a cottage industry for the area, employing some 1,500 locals. The bar on the *Lux* was 100 feet long, and it was estimated that as much as \$400,000 was wagered on a busy night on the *Rex*.

Most of these ships were not actually “ships” at all, but converted fishing barges permanently anchored just beyond the 3-mile limit. The ships and owners ranged from the seedy to the spectacular, but the one owner considered the “Commodore” of the gambling fleet was Tony Cornero, who operated the *Lux* and the *S.S. Tango*. The *Lux*, the largest in the gambling fleet, accommodated 2,000 passengers and 500 employees, and some of these ships were from 200 to 500 ft. long and cost up to \$200,000 to outfit.



Whether a gaudy, floating dive or a lavishly remodeled tour ship, all the ships featured a variety of gambling entertainment—craps, cards, roulette. Cornero’s *Rex* had 300 slot machines and a 500-seat bingo parlor. Water taxis brought patrons out to the ships from those well-known dens of iniquity—Los Angeles, Long Beach, Santa Monica, and Seal Beach [hee hee].

Cornero was a character of the times in more ways than one. He’d had some brushes with the Law before our story starts. In fact, he was a rumrunner on the lamb from the Feds when he first got into the off-shore gambling racket (police had caught him in San Pedro Bay with 1,000 cases of first-class whiskey hidden on his speed-boat). He escaped from the train taking him to prison and spent two years dodging authorities before he eventually surrendered...he spent almost two years in McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, WA. (The Long Beach city prosecutor at the time, Charles Stratton, remarked that Cornero “was gentlemanly” and preferred to think of himself as “a whiskey importer”) (unfortunately, this was all during Prohibition!). Stratton, oddly enough, had started out as a defense lawyer defending the very gamblers that he later prosecuted.

In any event, “importing” whiskey ashore was no longer profitable by the time Cornero emerged from prison, but the sea was still in his blood (!), and the big

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money potential of gambling ships appealed to his 'sensitivities.' He wasted little time before launching the *S.S. Tango*, a joint venture with Clarence and Ed Blazer.

Colorful skirmishes periodically captured the attention of the press in both this country and in Europe—which had the dual effect of attracting more customers and spawning several gangster movies. Indeed, Tony Cornero, citizens of Santa Monica, and law enforcement officers ranging from Attorney General Earl Warren to local police officers had a running legal battle for years on the legality of gambling beyond the 3 mile limit. Police commandeered small flotillas of pleasure craft to raid the ships. In the meantime, competition between the ships, themselves, was fierce, and the operators engaged in murderous feuds. “Mysterious” fires claimed at least two of the vessels. Bribery rumors abounded.

Stratton managed to to halt the *Tango*'s water taxis on the legal theory that it was not permissible to transport people to a place of gambling, but taxi skippers were bailed out as fast as they hit jail, and none of the legal assaults stood up in appeals courts. Cornero, meanwhile, had tired of his partnership with the Blazers. Part of long-standing waterfront lore tells who Cornero shot craps with the Blazer brothers for the ship. Winner take all. Cornero lost.

However, he had plans, and in 1938, he paid a courtesy call on a somewhat amazed group of FBI agents in Los Angeles. Cornero told them every detail of the new ship he had planned, not bothered in the least because he felt that the shipboard gambling was entirely legal in federal waters. So, he asked, would the FBI be so kind as to run fingerprint checks on all his employees. He said he would fire anyone with a criminal record (!!).

Bruce Henstell, chief librarian for the California Historical Society in 1980, had spent the previous two years researching the California gambling ships, and felt that eventually “He [*Cornero*] cleaned up the gambling ships. His boat (the *Rex*, which opened in 1938), was safe and pleasant. Cornero went after the middle class.”...”This is why he is so important, and this is why he bore the brunt of official hostility,” Henstell said. “The *Rex* was not full of smoke and loud jazz music and you didn't need to worry about getting knocked up side the head.”

The *Rex* dropped anchor in Santa Monica Bay, opening to a throng of patrons clamoring on the pier. A remodeled fishing barge once known as the *Star of Scotland*, the new *Rex* “lured thousands with the Goddess of Luck,” as the *Los Angeles Times* put it.

[...Part II in our next issue]

