

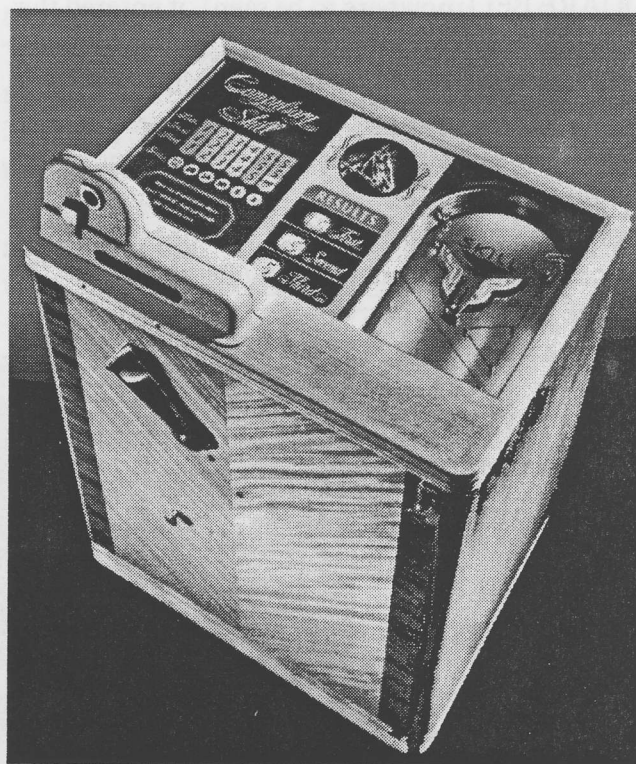
Mills

SQUARE

BELL

The legality of slot machine play was a bit iffy across the country in the middle 1930s. Some localities permitted it, others didn't (and the machines quite of then ran anyway, with payoffs to the right people) and some held a hard line that made machine gambling completely against the law. Other areas allowed some forms of machine gambling provided certain restrictions were met. The most intriguing exception was that of skill play.

It started in Maryland where the laws provided a loophole permitting slot machine operation if some form of skill device on the machines allowed the player to exercise control over the results of their play. The result was an amazing array of skill features added to traditional slot machines, more often than not taking the form of a miniature pinball game mounted on the side to trip the payout or, in the case of an elaborate revamp called SNAKES, created by a local Maryland operator named Harry Hoke, tossing a steel ball from a shooter into a snake's mouth on a modified Bell machine. Hoke took the idea to the Mills Novelty Company in Chicago, who engineered the machine to Hoke's plans, and produced them for his routes operating out of Hyattsville. Accepted for operation in Maryland in August 1938, the machine became a landmark example of getting around restrictive laws. It also alerted the Mills Novelty Company to



Source: Bueschel Collection

Making that skill shot on the SQUARE BELL was a snap. There was only one place for the ball to go.

the potential offered by skill play features, and indirectly led to the largest and most rewarding Bell machines made by the firm.

The seminal idea was to put a Bell in a box, include a skill feature, and sell them to distributors and operators who would capitalize on the opportunity to put them in locations that would normally abhor the placement of a conventional slot machine. They gave the project a simple name based on its concept: SQUARE BELL. Intended as a short run solution to a local problem (read "opportunity"), the format was so successful that once it ran out of its limited production schedule it quickly led to further development and a new payout slot machine configuration that became known as the console Bell.

The first SQUARE BELL made its appearance at the end of October 1938, two months before the 1939 coin machine show and in time to get the jump on the competition in the rapidly opening skill territories. Known as the "Compulsory Skill" model, with this description lettered in script on the flat top glass over the award schedule (suggesting it was the machine name, with its true name