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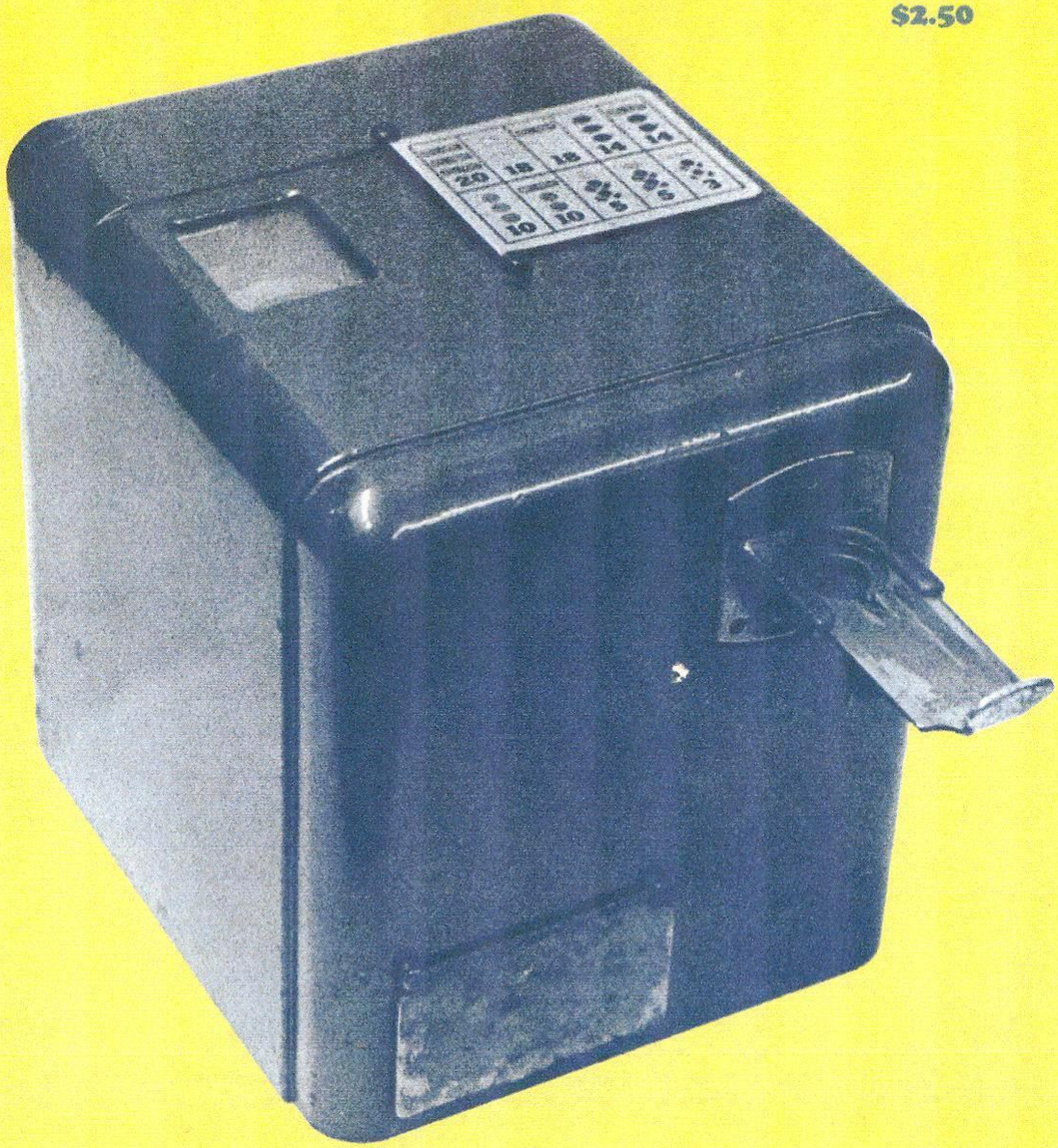
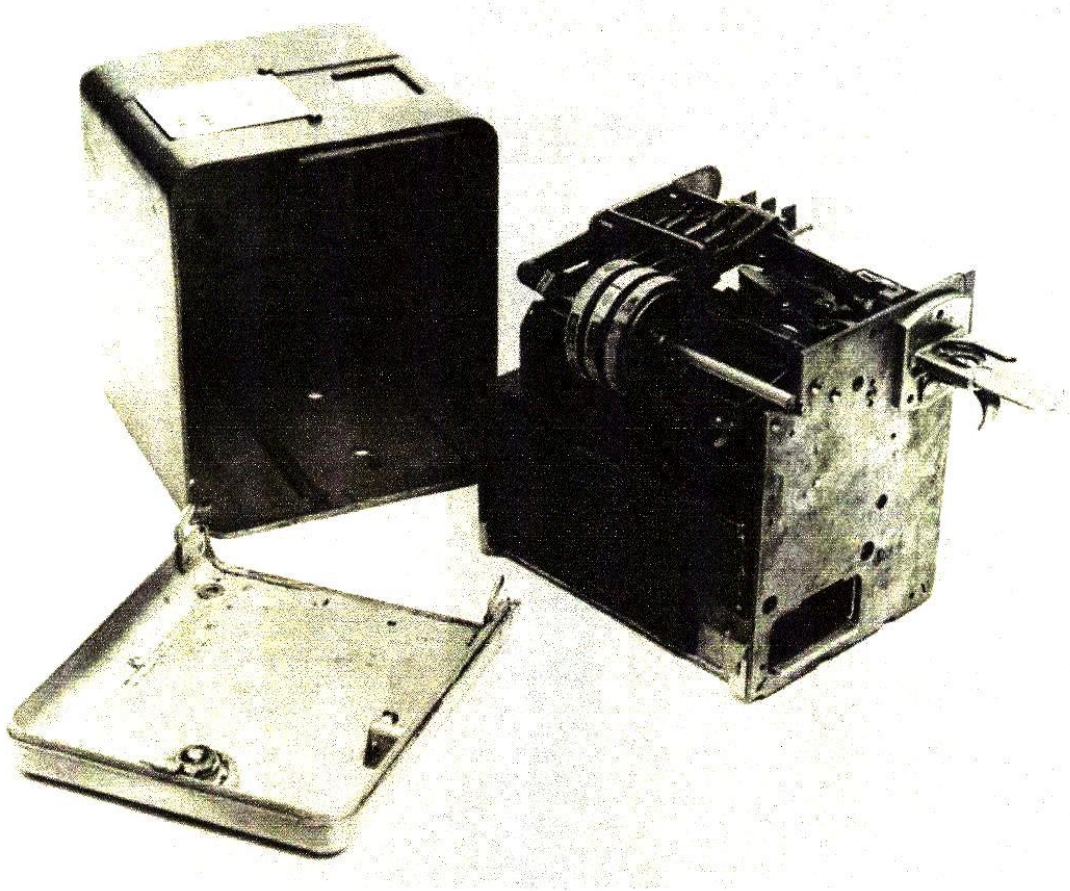




THE VEST POCKET STORY

BY RICHARD BUESCHEL

Years ago back in the thirties, when you could get a two-pants suit with a vest for under forty dollars, alterations free, the vest had a pocket to hold a pocket watch. Some suits still have vests, and some vests still have pockets for a long-forgotten watch less than two inches in diameter. The expression "vest pocket" isn't used very often these days, but when wearing a vest was as much a part of wearing a suit as putting on the pants, "vest pocket" meant small. It also meant "hidden", or "handy" — "as handy as a pocket on a vest" some oldsters still say.

Small, hidden and handy handily describes the Mills VEST POCKET Bell, and that's just why they gave it the name. When it first came out back in 1938 it was a revolutionary slot machine, and the perfect answer for the slot problems of its time.

Slot machine development has always been a function of the times. Most producers of other types of machines, setting about to improving the breed, followed a straight line course of development, adding new technology and materials as they became available. That's why M.G.'s look like M.G.'s; Boeing jets look like bigger and smaller versions of the same idea; IBM equipment looks like it does, and Leica cameras have the "Leica-look". Once in a while laws will alter the train of mechanical development — we see new laws at work with roll bars on jeeps, cushioned bumpers and solid tops on cars, noise suppressors on jet aircraft and clear plexiglass screens around machine tools — but more often than not it's not the law that decrees machine function and appearance: it's usage.

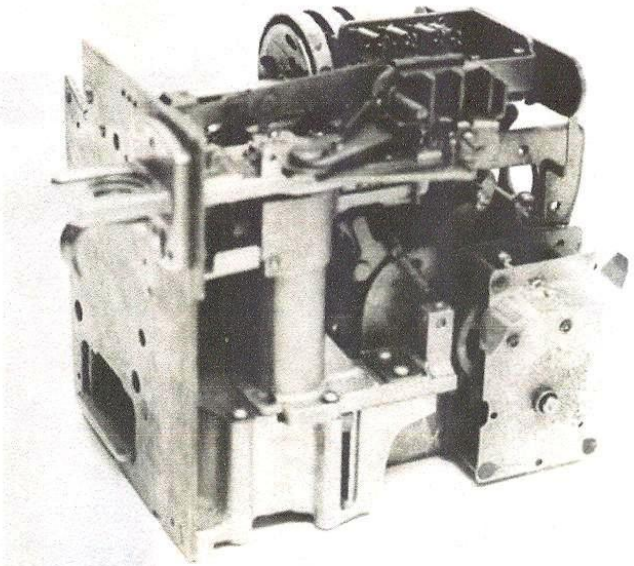
Except slot machines! From the very beginning two major forces have continually influenced the design and function of coin operated gambling machines; usage and the law. The usage part is easy to understand. If a slot machine is intriguing, fun to play, and pays out enough to keep people interested and involved, it's successful. If not, it's a dud. On that basis, and considering its past and present appeal, the automatic payout three-reeler Bell, "One-Armed Bandit" or whatever you call it, is the most successful slot machine format ever conceived. It's so good, in fact, that in

all probability the slot machines made in the thirties, forties and fifties might have looked alike and have been almost exactly like the machines our great grandfathers played over sixty years ago; except for the laws.

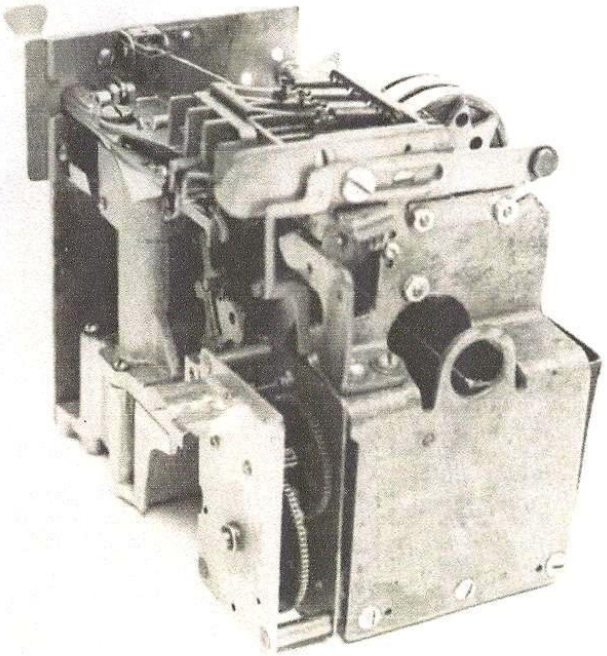
Here's what the laws did; they changed machines. The old OPERATORS BELLS, side venders and F.O.K.'s of the twenties; and the Mills SILENTS, Jennings' CHIEFS, MYSTERY F.O.K.'s and the other three-reelers of the thirties; were so widely successful and so widely placed people got up in arms over them. The machines were everywhere: cigar stands, drug stores, restaurants, school stores, hotel lobbies, train stations; just everywhere. And when prohibition ended they came out from behind closed doors and ended up on the bars of the taverns that sprouted up behind store fronts all over America. So people passed laws banning them, and law enforcement agencies — unlike so many of their forebearers of the twenties — by and large began to enforce them. The ban was on the Bell. Not everywhere, but the amount of "closed territory" began to climb, and slot sales dropped. The need was evident for a slot that could be run on the sly, yet still provide the play appeal of a big three-reeler. Laws made the specs. What was needed was a small, hidden and handy machine.

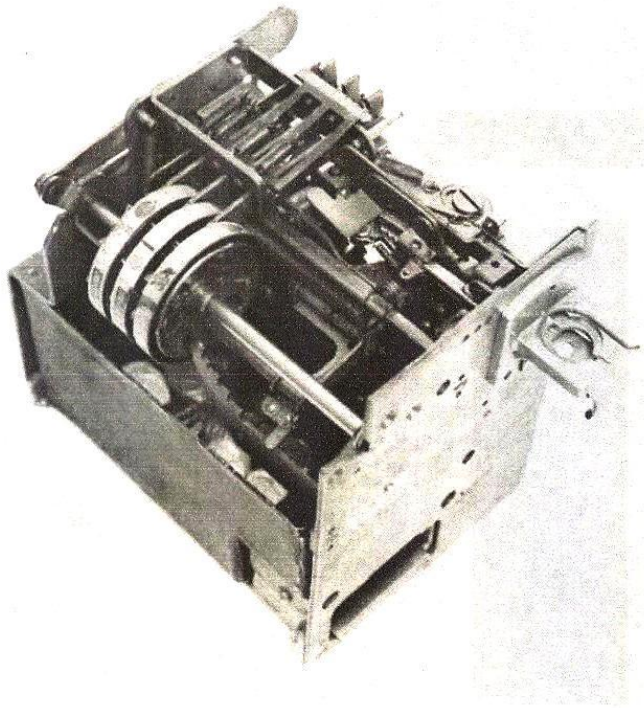
Miniature Bell machines weren't a new idea in the middle thirties. C&F had made one in Chicago in 1932, payout and all. Benton Harbor Novelty made one called the IMP, and Vendet had a two-reeler called MIDGET. But they all still looked like their bigger brothers; hardly hidden. The cleverest of all of them looked like it would never see the light of day. John Wahl, a mechanical genius that came up with the Wahl calculator around World War I, and invented the "Eversharp" pencil and later the pen in the twenties, had long tried to interest The Eversharp Company in a miniaturized slot machine. The company not only said no; they drummed him out of the firm. So Wahl started to look for a home for himself and his small Bell idea. He worked for a number of firms, and then Mills Novelty took him on as an engineer. Once the miniature Bell idea hit the Mills' drawing boards they made Wahl chief engineer, and the VEST POCKET was on its way.

Wahl was a mechanic, not an appearance designer. So Mills gave the assignment for the cabinet to their ace stylist Everett Eckland. Eckland's



The Mills VEST POCKET mechanism is all machine — when it's removed from the case, everything comes with it. Notice the short coin tube; it barely holds $2 in nickels. Payouts are made with a variable-depth "slide" which is controled by a single radial/depth sensing probe which penetrates all three reels. The VEST POCKET makes a dandy coffee table toy.





This view shows the main reel shaft, the reel stop levers and, if you look closely, the holes in the reels which determines payout. The cash box fits underneath the reels and will hold nearly $50 in nickels! The reels contain ten symbols each — a thousand possible combinations. Each reel contains its own disk and spins on a common shaft.

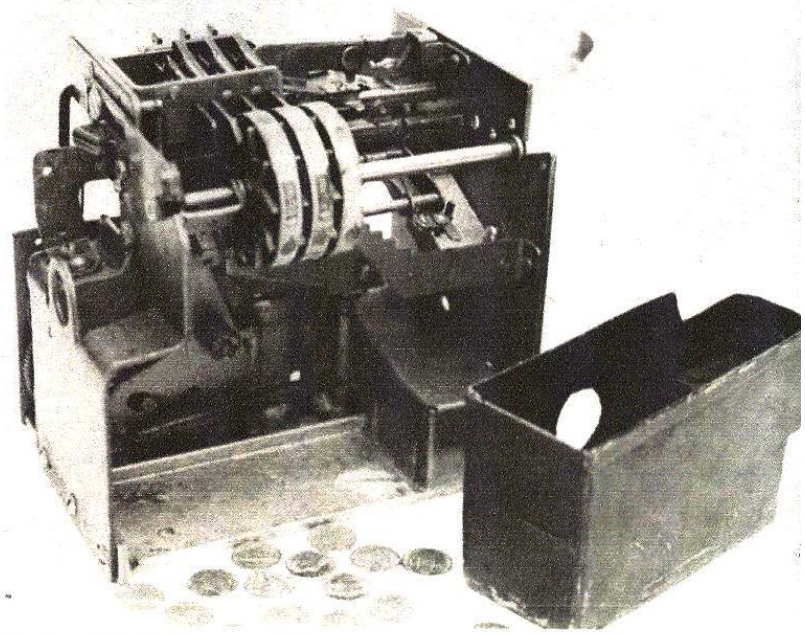
suggestion surprised everybody. It was so simple and neat that they almost rejected it. In appearance it was practically a cube, and not much more. But the more they thought about it the better it looked. So VEST POCKET — everybody was soon calling it the "VP" — was launched.

The Mills VEST POCKET is the ultimate miniaturization of the automatic payout Bell machine. It has never been improved upon. In fact, it's *still being made*; by Sega Industries in Japan, as the MINI-SEGA. And the machine still has a market, both new as well as antique.

More slot machine collections are started with the Mills VEST POCKET than with any other machine. Logically so. There are many around, and it is the only automatic payout you can buy that sells for around $300 depending on the model. Not only that, the machine is small and compact. You can stick one almost anywhere — it's a great office toy — and it's out of the way. It was this very smallness and the hidden qualities of the VEST POCKET that immediately made it popular when it was introduced. On a bar or a counter it looked like a contemporary radio, and a flap could be flipped over the reel windows so that its real use could be covered up in an instant.

The original "VP" is painted a metallic "Hammerloid" blue with gold ends. It first came out only in nickel play, but penny play was added in 1940. By 1941 the cabinet colors were changed to green as well as gold with blue ends, and by WWII the machine had been made in a dozen variations with metered jackpots — paid by the house, not the machine — locking flaps, fruit or cigarette reels, and for elegant locations (If any VEST POCKET location could be called elegant), all-chrome cabinets. The entire line was so successful that it came right back after WWII to start out again, ending production in Chicago only when slot machines were banned, but going on in production in Nevada, and ultimately, Japan.

The CHROME VEST POCKET is the ultimate collectible in the VEST POCKET line. It's a much heavier machine as chrome, surprisingly, is a very heavy metal. VEST POCKET serials apparently started with 100. An early blue-and-gold has a 7241 serial. Sales moved them up fast, with a late pre-war gold-and-blue having a 22211 serial. A typical CHROME VEST POCKET serial is 29617. Post-war serials went over 50,000.



The cash box (this one isn't original) takes up about one third of the bulk of the machine. Most parts on the VEST POCKET are products of the punch press. The few castings are die cast.