

Indians won better lives at bingo

By PETER MALLER
Sentinel staff writer

Hannahville, Mich. — In 1978, the Potawatomi Indian Community started holding bingo games on Sundays to raise money for softball uniforms.

Nobody imagined then that gambling would someday become the tribe's salvation.

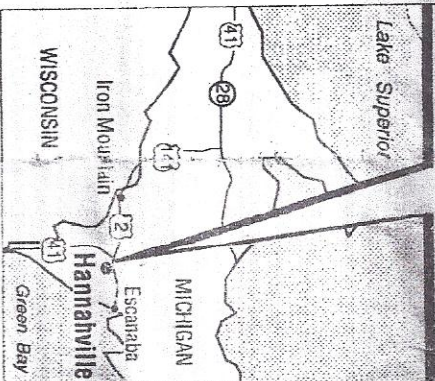
When blackjack and poker were added four years after bingo, some tribal members wondered if they had jumped in over their heads.

They were so nervous getting ready for their opening night they invited friends to the gaming parlor to help practice dealing cards.

Even the most optimistic members of the tribe didn't expect many cash customers to show up right away.

"We were amazed," said Ken Meshigaud, the tribal chairman,

Potawatomi casino



Sentinel graphic

who worked then as a casino cashier. "I can still remember looking outside the building and the cars were looped around the parking lot three times."

The gamblers — and the gam-

bling money — have been coming in ever since.

In fact, the gaming industry has revolutionized the way many of the tribe's 533 members live.

The weekly payroll at Hannahville, west of Bark River Township, Mich., has gone from \$1,200 to \$80,000.

A total of 382 people now have jobs connected to gambling. Unemployment, once 65% within the tribal work force, is down to 27%.

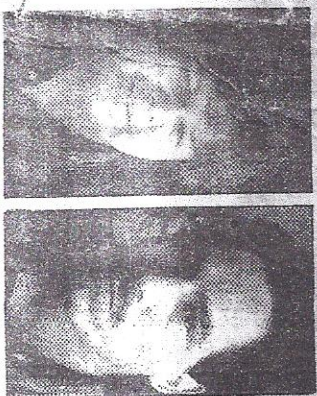
Because the gambling rakes in \$12 million annually and draws tens of thousands of tourists to the Escanaba area, tribal members also have become power brokers.

"What I'm doing for the community is unreal," said Leroy Wandahsega, chairman of the Tribal Gaming Board and also head of the tribe's Housing Authority. "The attitude of the people has changed. Even the way they look has changed. For the first time, they're keeping their heads up. Gambling has done a lot for their self-esteem."

Not only did it provide jobs, but it brought badly needed funds to improve housing, education and social programs.

Using gambling profits, the tribe built new homes, which then were rented to residents at bargain rates subsidized by gaming profits.

Gambling profits also have been used to assist tribal children. Each year, funds are set aside to send some of the best students on tours of Washington, D.C.



Meshigaud: Was amazed at turnout
Wandahsega: Sees more self-esteem

Gambling money has paid for a teen center, too.

"According to the data we have, we're too small and we'd like to expand the casino," Meshigaud said. "But we're waiting to sign a compact with the governor."

Until Michigan and the Indians enter into a legal agreement that spells out the details of what types of gambling will be allowed, the Indians are being very cautious.

The tribe is expected to negotiate hard to be able to offer craps tables and poker games, which now are found at the casinos run by all seven tribes in Upper Michigan.

Those games are not available at Indian-run casinos in Wisconsin.

"I think we can use those games to draw players from Wisconsin," Wandahsega said. "Once we complete the compact, we'll probably use free buses to bring players up here from Green Bay."



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