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Author Discusses Book on Casinos

by Geeta Schrayter

During the 1970s, Robert H. Steele was a congressman representing eastern Connecticut. When he came to Hebron Wednesday night, however, it was not as a former politician but as an author, excited to discuss his new book *The Curse* to an audience at the Douglas Library.

Steele's prior political experience, however, didn't go unmentioned. He said it was his time in Congress that allowed him to become "intimately familiar" with the towns, history and people of the region. Combine that with two decades living on the edge of the Mashantucket Pequot Reservation and some meticulous research and the result is an individual with enough information to pen a book about gambling in Connecticut.

And Steele did exactly that. *The Curse*, which was released last September, takes place during two time periods. It begins 350 years ago with the massacre of the Pequot Indians, then jumps to present day as a Connecticut family tries to prevent an Indian tribe from building a casino that threatens their town.

In the synopsis on the back of the book, it's explained "the lure of easy money drives everyone from the tribe's chief to a shadowy Miami billionaire, venal politicians, and Providence mobsters, while a small, quintessential New England town must choose between preserving its character or accepting an extraordinary proposal that will change it forever."

Library Directory Mary Ellen Beck said the book had her "almost convinced" there was a third casino in Connecticut.

"The blending of fiction and non-fiction is masterful," she said. While Steele appreciated the compliment, he stressed that the book contains historical details and firsthand knowledge of the gambling expansion that took place in the state during the 1990s, but *The Curse* is in fact, a fiction novel.

Even so, during Wednesday's discussion it was the facts he'd researched, and the actual events – which Steele said he had a "front row seat" to – which led him to writing his novel, that he focused on.

Steele talked about the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 which was meant to help Indian tribes raise revenue. That act, he said, "opened the door to Indian casinos in the United States and spurred non-Indian commercial casinos."

Before then, casinos were only allowed in New Jersey and Nevada, but since that time there has been a "dramatic expansion" in both casinos and gambling.

In Connecticut, Steele said the two casinos came to be only after they were "basically imposed by the state and congress." Prior to the formation of Mohegan Sun Casino and Foxwoods Resort Casino, gambling was prohibited in the state except for "Las Vegas nights," which were casino-style fundraisers held by charities.

The Indian tribes said the exemption for Las Vegas nights meant they could offer gambling, and the state and federal government agreed. In response, then-Gov. Lowell Weicker tried to repeal the exemption, but the House of Representatives and the Senate were split on the issue, and the exemption remained intact. Then, the Mashantuckets opened Foxwoods in 1992, and the Mohegans opened Mohegan Sun four years later.

"It's truly one of the most amazing stories in the history of Connecticut," he added. "These were two tribes who were mortal enemies 300 years ago, gradually fading away as tribes, and then miraculously reemerging hundreds of years later to build two of the world's largest casinos."

With the advent of Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun, Steele explained there came some attractive attributes. They provided 20,000 casino jobs and at their peak in 2006, sent $430 million to the state.

But there are also downsides. Steele said there are supposed to be periodic studies on the effects of the casinos, but to date there has only been one.

That 2009 study showed the casinos caused a spike in pathological gamblers, skewed the economy in the area of the casinos to low-paying service jobs, and caused a 400 percent increase in the number of arrests for embezzlement since Foxwoods' 1992 opening – including the tax collector in Steele's hometown of Ledyard, who he said embezzled $302,000 in tax receipts to play the slots.

It was also found in a 1999 report by Congress that there were some six million problem gamblers in the country, and gambling addiction doubles within 50 miles of a casino.

Steele said opponents will point to these issues, saying the casinos are dependent on problem gamblers, and the addiction leads to bankruptcy, broken families, crime and even death.

But the gambling industry is easily "one of the most powerful," Steele stated, and added that casinos provide economic growth, jobs, state revenue and entertainment. The casinos also back many of the studies that are conducted, meaning it becomes difficult to weed out unbiased information.

At Wednesday's discussion, Steele's knowledge of the area was apparent. And it's that knowledge, combined with a bit of fiction, which has allowed him to create his tale "of greed, politics and town and tribal conflict" that's received 4.6 stars out of five on Amazon.

Author Robert H. Steele was present at the Douglas Library Wednesday night to discuss his book *The Curse*, about gambling in Connecticut.

One of Wednesday's audience members said she'd read the book on her Kindle and when it came time to provide a rating on the Amazon.com website, she gave it five stars – but felt that wasn't sufficient.

"I said it's too bad there's not more [stars], that's not enough," she said. "It was absolutely amazing."

In addition to Amazon, Steele's book is available via Barnes & Noble and through the Levellers Press website. More information on Steele and *The Curse* can be found on rhsteele.com.

Hebron Youth Baseball News

The Hebron Youth Baseball Association has announced registration for the 2013 season is now underway. Any player who registers before Feb. 22 will qualify for an "Early Registration Discount." Registration can be done either online at hebronyouthbaseball.org or in person Saturday, Feb. 9, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m., in the Gilead Hill School multi-purpose room.

Any player who is playing in a HYBA league for the first time must provide a copy of their birth certificate to be kept on file with the association. (People are asked to make sure they provide a copy, and not an original birth certificate.)

Volunteers are also sought for HYBA, be they coaches, umpires, fundraisers or participating in any other role. For more information on registering or volunteering, visit the aforementioned website.