Gambling with life, limb and beer money? You betcha!
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Ca-scene-o  Jennifer O'Brien cases the local offering of legal gambling.

Shafted  Karl Horeis unearths the mystery of one of Bellingham's more infamous legends.

Stuck in the Middle  The customer is always righteous. Danny Heistand explains why the counter is nothing to hide behind.

Going Overboard  Think cruise ships are all shuffle-board and Kathy Lee? Sarah Decker finds all the trouble Gopher and Isaac would never tell you about.

Game Over  Long before super-processor 64-bit realer-than-real brain-washing video games there was Atari. Jamie Lawson traces the sad decline of the mother-in-law of all electronic entertainment.

Grim Repo  It's only a missed payment or two, and besides, it's not as important as rent or tuition, right? Erica Christensen has no excuse when the Repo Man comes a callin'.

Night Show  Aaron Grey discovers that the real difference between men and boys is the size, speed, style, cornering ability and man hours invested in their toys.

Riding the Stakes  Brian Brandli has to see a man about a horse. He searches the stalls for the perfect method to find his way to the winner's circle.

Cash Calling  Jerry Weatherhogg tries his hand at the lighter side of organized gambling. Fun for the whole family!

Down in the Shrimp  Who you callin' a shrimp? Brian Kingsberry crosses the line to spend a day among those who bring us the seafood we so callously take for granted.

A hearty Klipsun thanks going out to readers throughout the animal kingdom who answered the readers' poll. We'd especially like to thank folks for the following responses:
- "Reporting isn't as accurate as you would expect or hope it to be."
- "Amateur graphics!"
- "Too many pics... The layout makes my eyes hurt."
- "Not of much value."

If you missed your chance to lend insightful input in a creative way, listen up: IT'S NOT TOO LATE! THE POLLS ARE STILL OUT THERE! YOUR ANSWERS MIGHT MAKE IT INTO THE NEXT ISSUE!
Danny Hiestand finds out why the middleman is always wrong.

As he looks through the double-paned window, his hair remains motionless and a glaringly bright shade of blood red. His lips, the same shade of red, form a smile that almost literally stretches from ear to ear.

His body doesn't twitch with curious mannerisms or nervous habit; he is a rock of solid calmness. His yellow-gloved left hand doesn't move from its position on his left knee, while his right gloved hand has found a home on the wooden boards of the bench he is sitting on. His perfectly straight plastic teeth fill in the gap of his smile as he watches the rehearsed chaos in front of him.

“I need a grilled chicken, please,” blares the walkie-talkie muffled of the distorted loudspeaker.

“I need a double quarter also.” He continues to watch the circus unfold in front of him as the uniformed attendants behind the counter continue to act in their theater of forced politeness and mass production.

Even the hum of electrical gadgets through the differing dialects of “beeps” and “chirps” doesn’t affect his observance. His perfectly straight plastic teeth fill in the gap of his smile as he watches the rehearsed chaos in front of him.

The Customer is Always Right?

“I really don’t understand why they get upset over trivial matters that really I can do nothing about,” said Lisa Ridgley, a Western student and part-time employee for the Best Western Heritage Inn in Bellingham.

“It depends—if it is something I have directly done or if it was my mistake and that I can fix, then I apologize,” she said. “But if it is some policy that was
created before I started working there, or it was something that someone else did, then it is kind of irritating and frustrating.”

Ridgley is in charge of checking customers into rooms and making reservations, as well as various other odd jobs. During her shift, she has very little time to relax.

The hotel’s front desk phone is constantly ringing off the hook, and the lobby is normally occupied with a continuous flow of people seeking shelter and service.

Ridgley, 21, has worked at her position for approximately the last year and a half. The number of customer-service horror stories she tells could probably fill a book. Ridgley told one story of her encounter with the ”Feather Pillow Woman.”

The woman called Ridgley’s hotel, and requested information regarding whether the hotel carried feather pillows for its guests. Ridgley asked her managers about the pillows, and they told her the hotel didn’t have them. Ridgley had to tell her this.

“She actually said that our pillows are ‘a tool of the devil,’ and that she couldn’t wait to get to the hotel just to fill out the questionnaire to yell at us about our pillows,” she said. Ridgley added that the woman complained about having to “lug” her feather pillow from home into the hotel, while questioning Ridgley as to why the hotel couldn’t accommodate her needs.

“She actually said that our pillows are ‘a tool of the devil.’”

“I just felt unjustly attacked for no reason. It’s not our intention to tick off the customer,” Ridgley said. “It’s just a pillow.”

But not all customers are that bad, said Western Taco Bell employee John Simmons.

“At this Taco Bell, it’s more like people are part of the conversation. There is a good thing that happens between the customer and the people that work here,” he said. Simmons, a 19-year-old Western student, said he really doesn’t have that many problems with the customers.

Jill Elliott, Simmons’ co-worker at the Bell, has had more problems working with customers than Simmons. But she also says the problems are kept to a minimum because the clientele that frequents their Taco Bell consists of college-aged customers, who they feel are more understanding.

Although there is the occasional flare-up.

“This one guy got all mad and stressed out because he wanted more cheese,” she said.

The Customer is Always Right.

Last year’s Tolo dance at Western will be full of memories for 19-year-old Whatcom Community College student Alan Allison.

Memories of a large group of people waiting around a table talking. Memories of that same large group of people sitting around that table. Still just talking.

Allison had no problems recalling the night. “And we are sitting there, talking and it’s all right. It’s a good night. But, the food never comes. It’s one hour, two hours,” he said.

“After two hours the food still hasn’t come. After the first hour, we complain and ask them, ’What’s up? Where is the food? We are getting hungry, the dance is going to be starting soon, blah, blah, blah ...’”

“And they are like, ’Sorry, it’s really busy,’ ” said Allison. “But that wasn’t good enough. They didn’t give us drinks, or chips and salsa. Nothing. They should at least give us something. You can only talk for so long. Everybody was on the edge.”

After about two hours, Allison said, the food finally arrived—but patience was long gone.

“We were all pretty pissed. Who cares if it’s busy?” he said.

Today the line for Western’s Taco Bell was fairly long, 25-year-old Western student Laurence Stewart said. But for Stewart, who frequents Taco Bell once per week, the long lines are okay.

“It’s a crowded environment, and you just gotta expect it. It’s like getting mad at crowded traffic. What do you do?” said Stewart.

“Usually I understand that it is not their fault, unless it is just plain stupidity. If you ask for something at the counter, and they give you another thing, that is pretty stupid,” said Stewart, who is seated at a university cafeteria table.

Sipping the half-consumed beverage on the table in front of her, Bellingham resident Lynda Keeler talks about her McDonald’s experiences not more than 15 feet away from the figure of Ronald McDonald.

Keeler has worked on the other side of the counter before, so she has a different perspective from many seeking service.

“They don’t deserve to be treated like that [bad] ... A lot of people have not been in a situation where they have had to deal with the customer, so they don’t know how to treat them.”

Keeler said customers just need to be more understanding of mistakes when they happen.

“Everybody has bad days.”
With little more than a few belongings and a case of the nerves, Scott Gallagher met up with his roommate Rob Johnson early one Sunday morning in June.

Johnson had just finished working a several-month cruise that left him weary and yearning for the hard land. Even with his girlfriend waiting impatiently at the entrance to the dock, Johnson grabbed Gallagher's hand and led him up the long unstable plank, into the 720-foot Statendam cruise ship.

Johnson led Gallagher through the maze of the ship, introducing him to some crew members. After an hour, Johnson gave him a quick pat on the back and bid him farewell as a Cheshire-cat grin grew on his face.

Thinking nothing of it, Gallagher went on exploring the deep realms of each level on the ship. Finding himself on the lowest level, he realized he was the only English-speaking person among a large group of Filipinos and Indonesians. Some broken bits of English led him up to the second floor and into his room.

Finally unpacking, Gallagher explored his tiny room. Peering through the porthole, he heard his new roommate open the door. Spinning around, he smiled as short, stocky Michael Braverman introduced himself.

In a few minutes they had to be on deck to greet the passengers who would soon board for a trip to Alaska. Braverman quickly threw Gallagher his short, starched white uniform and faded blue polo. They found their way up the elevator and onto the deck, waving and smiling as a horde of people began herding aboard the Statendam.
In life, most people tend to begin their journeys in uncharted waters. Gallagher was about to approach a time in his life that he would later describe as the best—and the loneliest.

**Living Two Lives**

Getting paid $40 a day to play with kids wasn’t a bad deal. “Work on the ship was hard,” said Gallagher. “I started to have two lives. At nine in the morning I’d work a long day as the youth coordinator, entertaining and playing games with the kids until past midnight. Then at four or five in the morning I’d go up to the officers’ bar and drink with the other crew members.

“All there was to do to pass the time away while you weren’t working was to drink, and for 50 cents a beer, it’s not hard to make that your favorite pastime. The first week I couldn’t tell if I was seasick or hung over all the time.”

Mark Writer has worked for the same cruise line as Gallagher for two years, and admits that alcoholism runs rampant on the cruise ships.

“It’s a fine balance between being in public and trying not to be drunk,” he explained. “And as staff, you’re encouraged to drink with the passengers. There are people on the ship who have never drunk a drop in their life, never smoked a cigarette. They’re the pure people. Get them on for three months and they’re doing it.”

“One night my shipmate got so drunk that he went up into the show lounge and head butted one of the glass doors, shattering it to pieces. He was fired,” Gallagher said. “Although the staff is encouraged to drink, there are also rules that public drunkenness is not tolerated.”

Once in Alaska, Writer was designated to go on shore with the passengers. A tender (small boat) was used as a taxi. As they squeezed each passenger onto the tiny vessel, the nauseating smell of body odor began to fill the unventilated cabin. With a quick gurgling sound, Writer vomited in his mouth.

Trying desperately to be inconspicuous, because his job would be on the line, he swallowed it back down. “Are you all right, man?” a worker asked.

With a gasp of stale air, Writer blurted out, “Teah, just had to burp.”

**Below the Deck**

“Ninety-five percent of the 600 staff members are Indonesian and Filipino,” calculated Writer, “and they don’t get along.” He says that the majority of the crew has to spend most of its time below deck—supposedly there are too many
employees to all mingle above deck during their time off.

During one day of clean-up, Writer ran down to his cabin to get a change of clothes. Two officers were in his room moving his stuff about.

"What's going on?" Writer asked.

The officer slowly looked up at him with a twinkle in his eye and flatly said, "You're going to have to move to another room. We have to hide someone in here until we port."

Later that evening, as Writer walked into the lounge, he heard a rumor that they were stowing away a Filipino, who had been getting death threats from a rival gang after he was involved in the stabbling of an Indonesian, until they could get him off the ship.

"Stabbings and gangs and drugs don't happen very often, but it is something that the passengers never see because it all happens below the deck. And that's how it should be," Writer said.

Fun And Games

Games and practical jokes go along with the drinking. To get back at one person, 15 guys got together and defecated in a toilet until it overflowed into the room.

The toilets on board have a vacuum suction that can "suck your butt right off you if you don't get up quick enough," Gallagher said. And Gallagher tells his kids, "If you put some toilet paper in the toilet and roll the roll all the way down the hallway, out the door and down the stairs, it'll suck that whole thing up until it's done.

"Every week I have kids try it," he said.

Gallagher quickly found out that rules can be bent and broken if you know the right people and if you never get caught. One night en route Gallagher's cruise director climbed a 50-foot pole at the bow of the ship after getting drunk at a work party, right in front of the captain. "The director was pardoned, but warned. It could have been a real mess if he had fallen off the front of the ship," he said.

Rules like "Don't sleep with passengers," and "No passengers allowed in your cabins and you're not allowed in theirs," are made to be broken—that is, if you're not caught. "Often at one or two in the morning, if you roam the outer decks, you'll find crew members and passengers having sex," Gallagher confides.

Trying to master the trick of not getting caught, Gallagher and others scoped out spots during the day to visit later. One night he climbed a flight of stairs into the ship's dark, dingy smoke stack to make love with a female passenger.

"It's impossible to have a relationship with someone on land when you're out to sea," he admitted. "Everybody sleeps with everybody eventually; adultery seems to happen so often. It's rare that you'll ever see that person again, if they're a passenger. Sleeping with everyone seems to go hand-in-hand with alcoholism, but it's openly accepted on board, even homosexuality."

Writer had five different roommates on the ship, and four of them were gay.

"I had no problem with it. You have to be very open-minded to work in this ship. You meet a lot of homosexual and bisexual people, and it's accepted here. It's a comfortable environment for them.

"A lot of people come on the ship confused with their sexuality," Writer said, "and over the course of time they know they can be themselves and are accepted for it."

Gallagher's roommate denied his sexuality for a while, until he and two other men were seen together making out in the open air in front of a slew of people. "From then on it was hard for him to deny that one," Gallagher remarked.

Gallagher himself got more attention from some of the male entertainers during his first days on board. After a couple of days one of his buddies came up and told him he didn't look gay.

"What?" Gallagher said, wiping his mouth off after spitting his beer all over the place. Apparently Rob Johnson had told everyone on the ship that he knew the new guy (Gallagher) coming aboard and that he was gay. From then on Gallagher set things straight.

At the end of his two-month trip, even with the strange atmosphere on board, Gallagher realized that there are some great qualities about the job.

Looking back at all that took place, Gallagher expounded on the past weeks of his life. "Once the world looked big, and now it becomes a smaller place."
The legend of the Chinese-American mine disaster

Long before Bellingham ever existed, a small town called New Whatcom was nestled along Bellingham Bay. And when Bellingham city planners wrestled the land from New Whatcom, they got a little more than they bargained for...

Behold! The legend of the Chinese-American Mine Disaster:

On a foggy New Whatcom morning in November, 1866, a crew of Chinese-American coal scrappers gathered their equipment and prepared to enter the mine they had been working near the intersection of Laurel Street and Railroad Avenue.

Splashing through dirty puddles reflecting the gray foreboding sky, they disappeared one-by-one into the shaft, leaving the entrance and the light of day behind forever.

The shaft they worked in followed a coal vein precariously under the frigid waters of the Whale-oil lamps lit the entrance tunnel and large double masted schooners sailed over them in their dark, cramped workplace, a world place they had accepted when no white man would. Around mid-day the sky outside grew dark, and a sense of dread filled the streets of the city. The foreman of the mine crew, with an evil look in his eye, well aware of the loss of company dollars that paying the Chinese fairly caused in the failing Northwest economy. He was tired of paying these workers and decided to take matters into his own hands. Just when the Chinese crew would have been coming up for their mid-day lunch break, he quickly pumped a muddy torrent into the shaft, filling it to the entrance. The cries of the workers inside were muffled by the suffocating roar of polluted bay water.

The surviving family of these drowned miners, already unhappy with horrid living conditions and facing bitter racism, were so furious with this rain storm, unjust community that they placed a hex on the town, ensuring that it could never become a "prosperous city." And so it stands today. The hex has not been lifted, and the souls of the drowned miners lay still in their silent mass grave, death-cry expressions frozen in clay...

The myth of New Whatcom's Chinese-American Mine Disaster does seem to have a little base, or at least a long history, and is one of the most persistent myths in Whatcom County. Dorothy Koert, in her book Looking Back, quotes Cecil Morse as remembering the mine legend with wonder and curiosity. He and his boyhood chums were told that "if we dug into the mine, we could find the gold in the money belts of the Chinese who were drowned when the mine was flooded."

According to Ken Imus, local expert on early Bellingham and Fairhaven history, water was poured into the shaft at Laurel and Railroad on Nov. 26, 1866 by Bellingham Bay Coal Co., but only to put out a fire. Imus says the water was quickly pumped out, and no one was inside.

Don Gooding, a former reporter for the Bellingham Herald, investigated the mystery almost a half a century ago, coming up with the same negative results.

"Shucks, I get disgusted every time I hear that story," said Peter Denis, an 89 year-old miner interviewed by Gooding. Another snorted, "Ho! So they haven't given up on that one yet? It's pure bosh."

After reading the history of hostility toward Chinese in Bellingham though, one cannot help but be curious. There are accounts of anti-Chinese meetings, organized by the mayor, held in early Bellingham. These were followed by torch-lit parades and rallies at the opera house. The first forcible exodus of Chinese workers from the Whatcom areas was on Nov 1, 1885, and it's clear that the Chinese immigrants encountered grim bigotry here.

Though most researchers express doubt about the drowning deaths of any Chinese miners in November of 1866, one has to wonder how hard it would be to cover up such a situation, to just plain leave it out of the history books, or simply explain it as an effort to put out a fire in the mine.

It is difficult to form concrete ideas about the truth behind such a persistent legend, but the attitude of some old-timer county residents as quoted in a January 1996 Herald article on myths and mysteries lends refreshing insight. According to one old story teller, the most important thing is that you should "never louse up a good story with a bunch of facts!"

—Karl Horeis
Atari’s meteoric rise to the top of the gaming industry was followed by a prompt fall from grace. Jamie Lawson details Atari’s remarkable life and untimely demise.

The catacombs branch out from the medieval castles into rooms of red, yellow and blue. Past the castles are bridges and mazes that tend to trap the mighty warrior. Suspicious creatures lurk throughout the land, begging for a chance to wreak havoc.

Backtracking, the heart beats to an almost frantic pace as the next room is entered. The thought of a blood-thirsty dragon around the corner, ready to unleash its methodical fury, confuses the now blue-colored soldier. The fear is no match for the razor edge of the sword, however. Rooms upon rooms are scoured until finally the elusive key is discovered deep in the dungeons of the white castle. As the first thought of triumph sinks in, an angry bat dives down, latches onto the key with its venomous teeth, and disappears into the vast, mysterious land.

With grand determination the now red-colored warrior picks up the sword and searches for the evil bat. But in a split-second, not only does the green dragon appear, the fierce red dragon soon follows. As the squared fighter holds off the green dragon, the red dragon narrowly misses its prey as it chomps repeatedly with its frothy mouth of horror. The now yellow-colored warrior avoids near death and stabs the green dragon triumphantly, killing it with passionate skill.

The red dragon instantly gets pissed. The soldier fights off the red dragon with the yellow, bloodied sword but the constant barrage of attacks becomes overwhelming. The sword misses the red dragon and almost simultaneously the end has come—the once proud and honorable warrior sits dead inside the belly of the beast.

Oh, that scary red dragon in Adventure—one of Atari’s classic video games with an abstract style and state-of-the-art graphics...for 1980. To most, however, the lack of artistry couldn’t overcome the fun and ingenuity in games like Combat, River Raid, Air-Sea Battle and Moon Patrol.

“Atari is a feeling inside of me—it is different, of course, than the love of my wife, but very much as hard to put into words,” said Don Thomas, ex-Atari employee and aficionado.
The Day Atari Hit Kaboom!

July 30, 1996: A date no one knows about.
Atari and JTS Corp. (specializing in computer disk drives) agreed to merge, or as Thomas would put it, "Atari took each and every share of its company, wrapped them all in a tight bundle and presented them to JTS."

Uhhh, excuse me? Atari no longer exists? Atari is dead? One of the biggest influences on kids who grew up in the late '70s and early '80s was literally eaten alive by the nasty red dragon in Adventure?

Atari isn't exactly dead yet. Even though Atari isn't a part of the home video game industry, its arcade division is still alive (the arcade and home divisions split up in 1984).

Even if one slice of Atari has withstood the wrath of the red, green and yellow dragons, it's hard to believe one more move in the black castle could be fatal. Atari, father of home video games and sometimes mother to children, can join Commodore and other video game/computer companies that have succumbed to the changing market.

R.I.P. Atari

It's amazing how a once-powerful video game and computer giant can fall into the industry's web of failure. A few reasons can be attributed to Atari's collapse, but the ones that stand out are poor management, failure to keep promises and the video game crash of 1984.

Thomas, an Atari employee for many years, gave his rendition of Atari's demise in his "Did you hear anyone say goodbye" essay. He mentioned after the bitter years of the late 80s and early 90s, Atari envisioned a brighter future when Wal-Mart agreed to place Jaguar game systems (the first 64-bit game system—no, it wasn't Nintendo) in 400 of its stores across the country. Atari invested deeply into the product and the agreement with Wal-Mart.

However, Atari management's beliefs that advertising and promoting the Jaguar weren't needed (a practice Atari used in the past successfully) put the deal into a Spider Man free fall. All of Atari's money had gone to distribution and the product. By 1996, Wal-Mart began to return all remaining inventory of Jaguar products. No other retailers in the market would help, and Atari "virtually discontinued operations and traded any remaining cash to JTS in exchange for a graceful way to exit the industry's back door," Thomas said.

Not all of Atari's recent history was so unfortunate. In 1993 Atari introduced the Jaguar system just before Christmas. Atari couldn't afford to launch a nationwide campaign, so the system was sent to the New York and San Francisco markets first. Atari was actually successful, beating 32-bit systems like the Sega Saturn and the Sony PlayStation. But it took Atari almost a year before a wide range of games hit the shelves and consumers and retailers were fed up.

The Jaguar incident became a precursor of things to come and Atari would soon become crushed by a Jungle Hunt boulder.

Why would Atari be so damn stupid?

"While the Atari 2600 dominated the late 70s and early 80s, in 1982 the Colecovision, Vectrex and Atari's own 5200 SuperSystem debuted and immediately posed a stiff challenge to the technologically inferior Atari 2600," said Keita Iida, former editor of the Atari Zone fanzine and current staff-member at Atari Gaming Headquarters. "The playing field in the home video game industry became too crowded."

Some causes to Atari's demise were uncontrollable. In 1984 a video game crash occurred and people literally stopped buying video games overnight. Atari was to introduce the 7800 ProSystem, which had superior graphics and was compatible to the 2600 system. Since the video game market was weak, Atari retracted the 7800 and shifted its efforts to computers. This was a fatal mistake, because Nintendo came out the next year with its first system and became an instant success.

"Atari's premature pull out from home video games was their mistake," Iida said. "Even when that happened, they still had an opportunity to capture a large share of the computer market place, but they lost out to IBM and Apple as a result of bad ownership and poor decision making."

Before Atari's venture into the computer industry, the 2600 lived a long and healthy life.
"The Atari 2600 was the first home video game system to have a major success as a total of 26 million machines were sold between 1977 and 1991," said Lida. "Due to the 2600's gigantic success, numerous game publishers and companies had begun to enter the video game marketplace and saturate it with poor-quality titles.

"Many of these companies were more interested in the bottom line [money] instead of releasing quality titles," Lida said. "Atari was also at fault here, as they rushed to get big-name titles out the door in time for the holiday season."

Chuck Wagon, Kool Aid and even Quaker Oats had games for the Atari 2600.

"The problem was everyone and their uncle was producing games for the Atari 2600," said Mark Leair, 26-year-old editor of the now-defunct Central Atari Information Newsletter. "There was no regulation on what was released for the 2600 and there was a surplus of junky games out there that devalued all game cartridges on the market."

Another problem was the affordable price of personal computers. The Atari 800 computer was close to $1000 when it was introduced in 1979. Four years later it was under $400.

In 1983 the Commodore 64 was released at a price tag of $299. Atari became an alternative to the "business" computers people used at work as consumers jumped ship so they could better integrate home and office activities, Thomas said.

However, poor management left Atari with an inadequate understanding of the changing marketplace, and the company couldn't adapt.

"Atari didn't survive past 1984 because of it," said Leonard Herman, author of "Phoenix: The Rise and Fall of Home Videogame." A 1984 ANALOG article stated that Atari computers weren't even used in the Atari offices, because the management didn't know how to use them," Herman said.

Let's Give Atari its Due

If it wasn't for Atari, who knows what the video game industry would do today? Atari can be credited for a ton of intuitive ideas and breakthroughs. Atari had the first video game, Pong, invented in 1972 by Nolan Bushnell, Atari's co-founder. Pong was the original hit-a-ball-back-and-forth game. The Pong name came about for two reasons: (1) the sound that was programmed into the game every time the ball bounced off a wall, and (2) the name PING-PONG was already copyrighted.

Atari also had the first color portable game system, the Atari Lynx, that "blew away the black-and-white Gameboy," said Leair. Still more Gameboys were sold.

Bushnell later founded Chuck E. Cheese Pizza. Atari spawned Apple Computers (which was born in a garage by ex-Atari employees) and Activision.

"Atari greatly influenced the early years of computing and video games," Thomas said.

And there's more: Atari was the first company to offer arcade games (Breakout, Tank, Surround). Atari was the first to license an arcade game for the home (Space Invaders). Atari invented bank-switching technology (Asteroids). And Atari invented the first programmable hand-held machine (The Cosmo—never released).

The Cult

Thousands upon thousands of people still collect Atari products. Just type Atari under the net search on Netscape and 41,897 related web sites are found. Atari may be nonexistent, but it is still alive among the die-hard followers who continue to communicate through newsgroups, mailing lists, newsletters, fanzines and pawn shops that collect and sell old games and systems.

"There is definitely an underground following that will keep the Atari name alive," said Reinhard Priblish, an Atari 2600 cartridge collector who has his own speed/death metal band aptly named "Missile Command."

"Just like the Model T, the Atari 2600 is a true classic," said Priblish, who also creates web sites for Virtual Market Enterprises. "Although better and faster machines may come along, nothing will ever match the ingenuity, originality and impact Atari had."

A few years ago a friend of Priblish's showed him an Atari 2600, and he remembered all the games he played to play in junior high school.

"Now I'm hopelessly obsessed with collecting every Atari 2600 game ever made!" said Priblish, the owner of more than 420 different games.

"There are hard-core, dedicated fans who have fond memories of when they were younger and bought their own Atari 2600 for the first time," Leair said. "I have fond memories of days when games were released on the 2600. People lined up to get their hands on Pac-Man. These were exciting times when games didn't need the sophisticated graphics and sound to be fun."

Leair continued his Atari rampage. "Why do people still play Pitfall, Defender, Missile Command, Space Invaders, Joust, Pole Position, Dig Dug, Tempest, etc?" he asked. "These were classics. Where is the originality in video games anymore? All I see is hack-and-slash fighting games!"

Where is Atari Today?

"Atari is dead ... plain and simple," Leair said.

"Commercially, it is virtually nonexistent," Thomas said.

"The only person that is left now is a few people who are aware of what was going on," he said. "I understand the remaining inventory was pretty much liquidated and JETS has and continues to be a hard-drive manufacturer."

Atari may have been the last U.S. video game company, but to many it is first in every other category.
Stephen Ball doesn’t need your soul, he already possesses the power to take away your car. Erica Christensen hears his dark tales.

Photos by Ryan Hooser

It was 3 a.m. and local Bellingham repo man Stephen Ball was on his way to Oak Harbor to repossess a 1992 green Ford Escort.

“I had a key for the car, which you don’t always have,” Ball said. “The car was in the driveway, which is bad.”

“The car may not start or the car could start and not have a muffler,” Ball said.

All the lights were off in the house so he walked up to the car, unlocked the door and put the key in the ignition.

The next thing he knew, the owner of the car slid into the passenger door and put a gun to his side. He had just returned home from drinking at the bars.

“They have no idea where you’re coming from, and you have no idea where they’re coming from,” Ball said. “I said, ‘If you’re going to shoot me go ahead and get it over with because somebody else is going to still come and get the car.’”

Luckily for Ball’s sake, the man didn’t shoot, and he got the car.
Ball carries a gun but has “never pulled one on anybody.” “I can’t force you with a gun. I’m on your property,” Ball said. “Legally, you can tell me to get the hell off your property.”

Anytime there is a conflict or a fight, it is called a breach of peace. If it is no longer a peaceful matter, Ball has broken the law.

Ball did not search out his profession; he got into the repossession racket by mistake.

Ball owned an automotive repair shop and had a contract with Bellingham National Bank to work on cars that had been repossessed to sell to the general public. One day a man from the bank called and said he had a repo man in Anacortes and if Ball would go down there with him and drive the car back, he would buy him lunch.

“I thought it was a great deal. I get a free lunch,” Ball said. “I went down there and drove the car back and next thing I know he’s flying me all over the place to pick up cars that had been repoed.”

He was running around picking up cars that had already been “repoed” for the bank in places such as California and Wyoming when he found out the money was not in bringing back the cars that had already been repoed. It was in repoing the cars.

“So then I knew nothing about repos and, like a lot of people you use the word repo, and a lot of them don’t even know what it means,” Ball said.

He found out that you don’t just go out and repo cars without the right credentials. You have to have certain requirements to work for major lenders like General Motors, The Chrysler Corporation, Whatcom State Bank or Chase Manhattan Bank.

The biggest requirement is liability insurance because of the high risk job. It is extremely expensive. Most major lenders will require at least a million dollars worth of liability insurance.

You don’t have to have a license or be bonded to repo cars. Anybody can go out and repo cars.

“The problem is you’re not going to get what we call the good accounts until you have the insurance,” Ball said. “So you’ve got guys running around repoing cars for 50 bucks and stuff like that. I wouldn’t dream of doing that.”

Ball bought into a repo franchise business called American Lenders, which has $5 million worth of liability insurance.

“Kind of like McDonalds, you know, franchises,” Ball said. “They sell hamburgers, we steal cars. You know, same kind of scenario.”

Ball said as long as lenders finance things, stuff is going to be repoed. He does not repo only cars. Among other strange things, like almost having to repo a horse, Ball has repoed a yacht on Lake Union.

He was not sure where the yacht he was repoing for the Bank of Nova Scotia in Canada was, but he thought it was somewhere between Canada and Mexico. Ball had a feeling the boat was in Seattle, so he paid someone $200 to find it.
Sure enough, it was on Lake Union.

"I met my informer at the end of a dock at a brokerage firm. It was a secured area and there was no way to get to the boat unless I wanted to swim for it," Ball said.

Fortunately for Ball, he talked some people who lived in neighboring houseboats to let him through the gate. The lights were on so he wasn't sure if anyone was on the 72-foot boat. Legally he can't take it by force if someone is on the boat.

Nobody was on it so Ball and his informer "secured the boat." They camped out on it from midnight until 10 a.m. waiting for their licensed captain to arrive.

In the morning they pulled the boat away from the dock, gassed it up and placed "Boat under siege" signs all over it.

"It was kind of a joke," Ball said about the signs. "We looked official."

Ball said when he first got into the business he felt bad about repoing things.

"It's hard to go out and take something from somebody," Ball said.

But now he says it doesn't bother him at all because he realizes people are given every option in the world to work it out with the bank.

"I have no feelings whatsoever now," Ball said. "I've even repoed a minister's car out of a church lot."

Jaleen Bacon, a loan servicing manager at Whatcom State Bank, hires Ball to repossession cars.

"We usually wait until they're 60 days past due and legally we have to give them a 10 day notice after that to repossession the car," Bacon said.

The owner of the car is sent a letter saying they have 10 days to make the payments. On the eleventh day, if the bank has not received the payment, Bacon calls Ball to repossession the car.

After that the owner has 10 days to retrieve the car from the repo man, make their payments and pay for all costs that have incurred since repossession.

Bacon said most of the time the bank sells the cars to dealers, but if you are interested in getting a good deal on a car, you can call the banks and credit unions.

"A lot of times you can get a good deal," Bacon said. "You can get a steal."

Bacon says she does feel bad about her job sometimes, but said most of the time the people who own the cars do not contact the bank for one reason or another.

"You do feel bad sometimes, especially around Christmas time," Bacon said.

Ball said the percentage of repos is controlled by the economy.

"When you've got a very positive economy, everybody's working, the repo business is kind of down. When people are out of jobs, the economy is bad, the repo business is, let's use the word, up," Ball said. "It kind of fluctuates with the economy, but there's always stuff to repo."

Right now Ball warns he is looking for a few cars on Western's campus. All he will say is that one is a '96 blue Dodge and he has paid informers to find it.

"He has the car stashed," Ball said, "but I'm going to get the car."
Night Show

Four Bellingham Big-wheelers light up motorists' eyes with their own twist on transportation. Aaron Grey follows them into traffic.

Clockwise from top
Heath Oberlander—The Frankenride
Jeremy Ellison—Killer Bee
Devin Berg—The Christmas Tree
Adam Zebnder—Meat Wagon
I gazed forward at the stretch of homes, parked cars, steep grade and windy turns of Ridgemont Road, which was to be my first run. Fear and excitement pulsed through my body at ever-increasing intervals as I prepared myself for the sure death that was awaiting me. It wasn't fear of the unknown, but known fear that had engulfed me. For I had heard horror stories of near-death collisions with non-moving objects, bouts of uncontrollable skidding into nature's fury and near misses with moving vehicles over the past three months. It was only natural that I had developed this healthy fear-response to the unorthodox sport of big-wheel racing, created by the four crazed pleasure-seekers before me.

I sized up Adam's big-wheel hybrid, which he so generously lent me for this, my first run. I call them hybrids as a result of the many modifications Jeremy Ellison, Heath Oberlander, Adam Zehnder, and Devin Berg have come up with since they raced their first big-wheel four years ago. These weren't your normal run-of-the-mill $34.95 Toys-R-Us specials. These machines were equipped with rear rubber tires, a dirt bike wheels and suspension forks in the front, head and tail lights, fiberglass frames, horns, and an optional seat for comfort. Adam's ride became the obvious choice for a rookie, as it was the only one equipped with the greatest safety feature of all—brakes. After hearing that these things reached speeds up to 45 mph, I insisted on brakes.

When the last of the four big-wheels, referred to as "The Frankenride," was retrieved from the back of its carrier (Adam's truck), Jeremy began the pre-race preparation. It was during this preparation that I began to get a feel for who these guys truly were.

Jeremy's passion was for performance. Coming from a guy who exhibits a deep liking for Porsches, a car known for its legendary performance, it fit him well. He spent most of his time checking the rear wheels, fixing any wobbling motion that would greatly hinder his speed, and repeatedly repositioning his body in his seat trying to find the perfect aerodynamic position for the ride down.
Slow curves changed into hair-pin turns as we snaked our way down the paved streets.

What Jeremy's ride, colored a bright yellow and offset with black trim, lacked in aesthetics was more than compensated for by Devin's big-wheel, "The Christmas Tree." Heath came up with this label due to the many lights that Devin has added to his machine. From his factory-looking, glossy-black, perfectly sanded fiberglass frame, to his black racing jacket with Mopar racing stickers, Devin spared no expense on his creation. He even had "Blue Dots," an illegal commodity only available to show cars, on his rear tail lights, giving them a soft purple glow. The only piece Devin lacked was a sheepskin steering wheel cover, something I'm sure he'd purchase if I divulged this information to him.

Adam's ride can be summed up best with the phrase "Meat Wagon." Adam's big-wheel serves him as a novelty. It is not an outlet for performance and glamour, but one for sheer fun, with a hint of "now for something completely different." Different in his case takes the form of a hitch on the rear of his big-wheel, to which a custom made tow dolly is attached. But this was no tow dolly; it was the "Meat Wagon." A one-seat pleasure ride of instability. Anyone who craves danger and lack of control would surely find this ride fulfilling. And, if this isn't enough for you, how about the danger of many oddly placed, forgot about, and left over screws protruding in all directions from the undercarriage of this big-wheel to add a little more excitement?

Finally, there was Heath and his aptly named "Frankenride." This big-wheel got its name due to the high ground clearance that gave anyone daring enough to ride this creation severe instability when cornering. Out of the four, this big-wheel was truest to its roots. It still had the original plastic big-wheel frame, one thing Heath proudly boasted of. Heath's creation was much like himself—nothing outlandish, nothing too crazy. To Heath, big-wheeling meant just going out and having a great time.

The pre-race preparation continued as Jeremy grabbed a roll of duct tape from inside the truck. Around and around he went, wrapping his shoe until all the white had disappeared, giving way to the silvery duct tape.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, to which Jeremy replied, "Applying brakes." Devin explained how duct tape is used to protect your shoes from melting under the massive friction caused from using your only source of brakes: your shoes. "It's sort of like Flintstoning it," Adam said. My only reply was to add this new safety device to my shoes as well, for I didn't have much confidence in the front brake on Adam's big-wheel.
The precautions piled up, with everyone putting on extra shirts, gloves, and helmets for protection. Once the protective clothing was on, the testing of the big-wheels came next. This involved everything from spinning the back tires to check for instability, to inspecting for any cracks that could turn a fun ride into a trip to the hospital. As I looked at their faces I noticed a seriousness that hadn't appeared there before. It was obvious they took great care in what they did and the last thing they wanted was for anyone to get hurt. They are a tight group that has been together for many years. Just as quickly as this mood had fixed upon their faces, it was washed away with laughter as Heath eased back into his big-wheel.

"It's the Frankenride!" they all screamed, except for Heath, who seemed startled by the outcry. Heath made some sort of snappy comeback, but with all eyes fixed on the horizon it was time to get the show on the road.

"Start the sirens!" Heath yelled, and the whole group, in perfect sync, yelled like sirens until the last breath of air was depleted. After their ritual departure was finished, Adam hopped into his truck, and we all slowly inched forward, beginning the run.

The start resembled that of an Indianapolis 500, with everyone weaving back and forth, testing their steering and handling, all while jockeying for a better position when the rapid descent took over. The sky had given way to night by this time, and we felt a cool breeze on our faces as our plunge down the run got underway. Adam sped off quickly in his truck in hopes of perfectly triggering the light at the bottom of Ridgemont Road to continue the run. The mission was to make the neighborhood descent, travel through the stoplight at the bottom of the hill, cross over the bridge overlooking the freeway, and then make a left turn through the next light, followed by a sharp right turn into the Haggen parking lot. They had completed this mission many times before, as I could read the familiarity with this run in the way they handled themselves through the early portion of the descent. My mission was a little different. Staying alive and keeping up with the group were all I could think about as my survival instincts played the major role in my early descent.

Houses slowly began to pass by, the flags on our big-wheels arching back progressively as we picked up speed down the steep decline. Curves changed into hair-pin turns as we snaked our way down the paved streets. Stationary cars seemed to come to life, joining the race as we weaved and dodged them in a game of playful chicken. Devin took the early lead with a dashing determination to enter and exit every curb. Jeremy followed close behind, leaning back in his seat trying to gain more speed. Heath kept within striking distance, eager to take advantage of any opportunity given to him by Devin or Jeremy. I stayed close behind, still trying to figure out the ways and means of Adam's big-wheel.

As our speed picked up, so did the adrenaline rush that followed. A childish sense overcame us all in a flood of emotion as we entered turn after turn. Beginning the final descent of Ridgemont Road, I could see the stoplight rapidly approaching. By this time we had reached our maximum speed of the run, which we later figured to be around 55 mph.

The light was still red, but everyone continued on with little hesitation, confident in Adam's ability to trip the light in our favor. With about 10 seconds of braking or bailing time to spare, the light dawned a beautiful shade of green. Devin and Jeremy were the first to pass under the light, accompanied by honking horns of excited motorists who had been stopped by red lights in opposite directions.

One by one we passed through the light and over the bridge, but what followed was the most disturbing leg of the race. The second light would not be triggered. We would have to rely on speed, good luck, and the hope that the two lights were in perfect sync. Jeremy and Devin passed through with ease. As Heath and I approached, the light was itching to turn yellow. The only option was to stop in the left turn lane, easy prey for a Bellingham police officer to pounce upon, or take a gamble and hope I had the speed to make it through the light.

Yellow! The damn thing turned yellow. I then crouched down, trying to draft as much speed as I could muster. It seemed like an eternity coming up to the light. As I went through the intersection I realized I had made it. A little too close for comfort, but safe and sound. Next came the necessary sharp right turn into Haggen's parking lot, where I breathed a pleasant sigh of relief. Once in the parking lot, we were all greeted with awe and amazement from onlookers. We had given them a small show, something a little out of the ordinary that they didn't see everyday.

We quickly loaded the evidence into the truck and trotted into Haggen's for a victory drink, for this was something special. Not only had they ushered a rookie into their group of elite big-wheels, they had also completed one more run without any injuries or police interference.
Fortunes have been made and lost betting on the horses. Brian Brandli takes a chance on luck and stops by Emerald Downs to unearth the secrets of the winning ticket.

The horse's head moved up and down, his rear veered out to the side and his tail whipped as the groom struggled to lead him into the paddock. After jockey Frank Gonsalves mounted Air Bag, I knew they had a shot. Gonsalves, also known as Gonzo, is the leading rider at Emerald Downs. If any jockey was capable of finding the winner's circle, it was Gonzo.

I muscled my way through the crowd to get close to the rail. Air Bag trotted onto the track next to me, his coat sparkling like a new pair of dentures. Just then, he halted and gave me a bold stare. His eyes were like mirrors—I could see myself in them. Gonsalves slapped the horse's hind end with his hand, and they started to gallop toward the gate on that rainy afternoon.

With pen markings and coffee stains decorating my racing form, I peeled it open to see what exactly I was dealing with. Air Bag was a speedster. He had run 5 1/2 furlongs in his last race, winning in dramatic fashion.

But with only six horses in the race, a muddy track and an explosive gut feeling, I placed a bet on Sockeye Sam for $5 to win in the ninth race. While Gonzo is a masterful jockey, he still has no control over the weather.

Winning a ton of cash is the ideal dream for many people going to the racetrack for the first time. However, a wealth of variables await careful analysis when choosing the winners.

Finding handicappers with inside knowledge can usually lend good advice on which horses to play. This was the scenario when I spent a day at Emerald Downs in Auburn.

risky business
Early that morning I slopped down a heart-attack-on-a-plate for breakfast, bought my racing form and program at the Quarter Chute Cafe, and then watched the morning workouts on the muddy track. Three horses galloped by me, their thunder sounding like "Braveheart" pumped up on surround sound. Mud from the track sprayed out from all angles as the horses rode by.

One rider resembled a black-eyed fly from afar. Mud covered his strange-shaped goggles, and two whips stood straight up from the back pockets of his Wranglers. It's always a good idea to watch these workouts in order to get a feel for how the horses are adjusting to the track.

Just as fast as the rain was pelting my face, I snatched my first tipster. His hat was low on his head, his shirt unbuttoned and his pants spotted with mud. Sean Chambers cares for five horses at this track where he trains for his dad. Chambers has been training for two years now, but has worked with horses his entire life. His horse's rider, Sean Evans, had a boyish grin with dimples the size of New York City pot holes. Evans works as the jockey and warm-up rider for Chambers.

"She run good today," Chambers said.
"Yeah, I didn't even need to ask her at all because she loves this damn mud," Evans replied.

On muddy days, the track can have a tremendous effect on the outcome of the races. The pace of the race is considerably slower than the pace on a fast, dry track. When the pace is slower, this gives horses more time to make their move down the stretch.

"Some horses love the mud and others don't," Chambers stated.

The type of surface, muddy or fast, is only one pertinent piece of information found in the racing form. When studying a racing form, it's important to see if a horse has consistently run off of the pace or at the lead. It's more likely that a closer, those who tend to take the lead, will prevail on a muddy track. Speed horses have a hard time sustaining their lead on a muddy track because it requires a lot of energy, whereas on a fast track, speedsters hold onto their leads much better. A fast pace can tire out the closers in the beginning of the race, leaving them with nothing to give down the stretch run.

Knowing what physical signs to look for is also a factor in picking a winner. For instance, all horses have different hoof sizes.

Typically when evaluating hoof sizes, the Goldilocks tale stands true. Horses with smaller hoof sizes have a harder time getting traction on the track. Those with larger hoof sizes can grip the track almost too much. The ideal hoof size is not too big, nor too small.

First I wrote down the name of a horse, Misty Knight, and noted his hoof size before the morning workout. His hoof was so big, it would've squashed my head like a juicy watermelon. I observed him during warm-up to see if he was grabbing the track effectively. A muddy track turned out to be an advantage for Misty Knight because he didn't stumble once.

Other physical factors can indicate a horse's health as well.

"If a horse has a shiny coat and a keen look in its eyes, then it's live. In other words it's ready to run that day," Chambers said.
"On the other hand, if a horse has a cloudy look in its eyes, or if its coat is splotty, then these are good signs that the horse may be sick."

Getting an idea of which trainers prepare their horses the best is also important. A high winning percentage usually reflects the preparation and tactics of that particular trainer.

"You see some guys pulling and shanking on a horse, basically treating it like shit. Most likely their horses will not give them a hundred percent," Chambers said. "All of my horses react to how I treat them in the shed row."

Around 11 a.m., most of the stalls had been cleaned and the air was permeated with the aroma of hay saturated with horse urine, which started to give me a brief contact high. In order to clear my head, I invited myself into a trainer's office, where I caught up with last year's leading rider at Emerald Downs, Vann Belvior.

Belvior said the important factors that play into winning a race are a good horse and a clean trip with no traffic. Positioning during the race is where luck matters the most, since getting thrown off a path when
"A good jockey shows patience, but at the coming around the turns is particularly easy. It's especially important for a jockey to pick his gaps carefully throughout the race.

"A good jockey shows patience, but at the same time knows when to be aggressive," Belvior commented.

Jockeys also factor into the winning equation. Those with higher winning percentages tend to be better bets. However, each rider has his own style, so it's a good idea to watch them in order to pick a winning combination of jockey and horse.

The fifth race was just about to run. I continued to wander aimlessly around the stable area, like a stray cat looking for food. Unexpectedly, I stumbled into a barn where a groom was diligently working.

"Hey brother," I said, using the slang to which most people at the racetrack respond, "got any hot tips for me?"

"Sure, here's one: don't bet," replied the man.

With persistence, I coerced him into sharing some of his hot tips. Tom Jenkins works as a groom for a variety of trainers and makes his home in one of the dormitory rooms in the barn. He carried a concentrated look on his face; smiling was a rare occurrence. He had the serious look of a man who has handicapped races for nearly 20 years.

"I stay away from races that have a lot of horses running because a lot of things can happen," Jenkins said. "In races like that, luck is an enormous factor because it's easy for any horse to get closed in, regardless of its ability."

Jenkins added, "I always look at the soundness of the horse after each race. If the horse comes back with its knees ice cold rather than expelling lots of heat in the form of steam, then the race didn't take a lot out of him. If the horse is eating well, this is an indicator that the horse is not stressed from the race it just ran."

How a horse has done in the past is also very important in determining how that horse will do in the future. The racing form is a handy guide for researching past performances. However, little attention needs to be given to races ran..."
two or three years ago, because it's unlikely those races will be a predictor of what will happen today.

It was now almost post-time for the ninth race, so I made my way to the grandstand. While walking from the stable area I noticed an abundance of betting tickets on the ground, a couple of which were worth more than $1,000. I imagined how long I could make $1,000 last. I could pay all my bills, and still have money left over.

I approached the entrance to the grandstand, walked under the EMERALD DOWNS sign pasted in big golden letters and took the escalator to the second floor of the gigantic five-story complex. Again, losing tickets carpeted the ground.

While watching the first couple of races, the gentleman in front of me noticed me breathing over his shoulder, trying to get a look at his picks. I felt like I was caught smuggling answers while taking a math test. The clean-cut, well-mannered Pete Holland, was now going to be forced to engage in a conversation with me—whether he liked it or not.

Holland has handicapped races for 25 years. According to him, luck is the key element for the casual race goer. Holland only likes to bet one horse in each race. With exotic wagers, such as exactas (betting on the first two finishers of a race) and trifectas (betting on the winners of three consecutive races), more than one horse can affect the outcome of the race. If you bet only one horse to win, then that horse is the only horse that can hurt or help you.

As I left the betting window before the ninth race, I noticed a beautiful rainbow. This was a sign to me, promising a pot of gold awaiting me after the race.

"The horses are racing," the track announcer said.

Just two seconds into the race, my horse lost its rider. The lead pony boy had to chase the horse down and bring him to the paddock. I wanted to start crying.

I did not leave with any winning $1,000 tickets, so I darted out the gates of the main entrance in a frantic search for a leprechaun who would furnish me with the tips necessary to find the end of the rainbow. The truth of the matter is that with so much luck going into picking winners, all of the careful analysis is just busy work to keep the mind focused on a dream.
Some people drive fast, others love to bet, but Jerry Weatherhogg daubs at some good, clean fun.

"I-21."
The call, amplified by several file cabinet-size speakers hanging from the ceiling, cuts the silence like a dish shattering on the floor. Throughout the parlor, a sea of heads are pointed down, eyes frantically scanning their boards for the elusive number.

"N-38."
Every number brings the goal closer to reality. This game's winning pattern: the flyswatter with a fly. Up above, the number is lighted on the eight black scoreboards keeping track of the action.

"O-70."
Beads of perspiration start building on the foreheads of tense players. To the left is an obvious veteran: 18 boards, a knapsack filled with a half-dozen daubers (thick, felt-tip markers with a flat, circular tip) and a red mesh cap that says "Bingo Papa" in that "Different Strokes" font.

"N-32."
A quiet murmur of anticipation fills the spacious hall. Joe, the number caller, has a staccato rhythm that feels much shorter than his 13-second cadence between calls. He has a Carolinian accent that makes him sound as if he's announcing the starting lineup of a baseball game. In fact, his voice is a deadpan replica of Chip Carey, the play-by-play announcer for the Atlanta Braves.

"N-44."
The initial silence is now replaced by a quiet roar. People sneak sideways glances at their neighbors' boards, measuring how they stack up to the competition. Across the table, a Vietnamese family is rooting for a member who is "on." She is now just one number away from the bingo and the $75 prize.

"B-5."
"Bingo!" yells a silver-haired man in a far corner of the room. The crowd moans in unison, as if spontaneously punched in the stomach. A floor worker rushes to the winner and announces the board number. An electronic replica of the board is displayed on the 11 television screens surrounding the room, fulfilling the prerequisite of a flyswatter diagonally across the frame and a single corner spot representing the fly.

"That's a good bingo," Joe says as unremarkably as a single to left field. "Next game, the
letter C. And let's make it interesting. A backwards C will get a table split of $100."

This news is well-received by the crowd. Rather than clapping, the noise of hundreds of the plastic daubers tapping the wood of the tables fills the room. And so begins the next challenge.

A night at the bingo hall

This scenario is enacted almost 40 times a night at the Whatcom Crisis Services' Bingo 262, one of eight bingo parlors in Whatcom and Skagit Counties. Every weekend for the past 14 years, hundreds of people have swarmed to this bingo heaven which is a stone's throw east of the northbound lanes of Interstate 5 in Ferndale, to partake in the game of patience.

Rows upon rows of cars, many with British Columbian license plates, line the giant parking lot. The building itself looks like a converted airport hangar, a bingo mecca surrounded by a sea of asphalt.

Inside, nearly 300 people occupy the seemingly endless expanse of tables this Friday night. Almost half the clientele are gray-haired retirees, spending their pensions on some relaxing fun. The rest of the crowd is a mix of baby-boomer couples, college-aged floor workers and a handful of kids.

The room is split by a wall-to-wall glass partition, which separates the smoking and non-smoking sections and is a strong reason why the players come back. The glass does a good job of keeping the smoke out, but does an even better job of insulating the sound. Therefore, a winner in the non-smoking section really has to yell "Bingo!" to be heard by the caller. The aroma of French fries and hot dogs lofts from the cafeteria, replacing the nicotine scent.

Half of the evening's 40 games are played on the regular boards, which cost $5 to $10 for six, depending on the session: afternoon, evening or moonlight. Instead of the standard, boring single line, patterns like a large kite, layer cake, hardway lines (made without using the free space) and bow tie are used to determine the winner of the $75 to $200 pot for each game.

The rest of the games are played on "throwaway" boards, which cost a dollar for three and are used for only four games. These special games have extra special jackpots for quick bingos. For example, the popular orange board awards a player who completes a blackout in fewer than 52 numbers a prize of $3,000.

Fund-raising machine

Bingo is big business. When Congress investigated the gambling industry in 1976, bingo was so big that it could only estimate that $1.7 billion was spent on the cards annually. Last year in Washington State, where only nonprofit agencies can receive bingo licenses, players spent $190.7 million. In Whatcom County alone, $15.8 million was spent at 15 licensed bingo halls, raising $1.1 million for the agencies.

Locally, several nonprofit agencies draw support from bingo. The Boys and Girls Club, the Blaine Eagles, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and the Ferndale Band Boosters all earn revenue from managing bingo halls. Harrah's and Swinomish casinos also have bingo among their betting repertoire.

The Whatcom Services Center receives almost half of its $800,000 budget from Bingo 262 profits, executive director Kathleen Marshal said. The Center uses the money to fund its crisis line (734-7271), support groups for domestic violence, sexual assault and adolescents, and for education programs.

More fun than cow tipping?

"A lot of people say it's not gambling, but it's the possibility of winning a large amount," said Bill Brennan, a bingo caller for 13 years. "[But] I think what really brings them back is personality, the people out there and the atmosphere."

The callers try to make the evening an enjoyable experience by increasing the bingo pots, establishing "table splits," which award the table with the winning bingo an extra share of cash, and other high-jinx.

Brennan's favorite joke involves a plastic eyeball and a gullible crowd. After pulling a number from the bin, "instead of putting the ball in the monitor, I put the eyeball up there," he said with a mischievous smirk. "They look at the ball and just crack up because they don't know what's coming. And I'll say, 'Hey, I'm just looking at your card to see who's close.' And they think my real eye's up there."

His prop collection includes a miniature toy frog. "It makes it fun during the session," Brennan said.

Another fun aspect of the evening is noting the caller's error with a
A holler of "dollar!" The crowd can be quite testy sometimes, jumping on the caller for such subtleties as going too fast, too slow or, heaven forbid, calling the wrong number. The caller usually will reward the 'dollar' calls with more cash in the pot.

"I used to get so red in the face...The first time you do that [get dollared], you feel like a schmuck," Western junior and bingo caller Lana Robertson said. "But after that, it's better. Now I get a rush when I give away the bonus dollars."

Sometimes, people will yell "dollar" for mistakes beyond the caller's reach. Midway through Friday night's session, "Ferndale's famous Corral #5," as one floor worker coined the scent, swept into the parlor. One irritated player yelled, "Dollar for the smell." "You can have it, it's free," another player responded. An unlucky player added, "It's even making the numbers bad."

A different breed of bingo player

Brennan said his clientele vary widely. "You get them from 80 years old all the way down to 6 or 8, depending on where you go. And the different nationalities you meet, all over the world, playing bingo. You get them from all sorts of societies: rich, poor and indifferent."

Floor worker and Western senior Stacey Carroll said most Western students come for the moonlight sessions, which start at 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights. Senior Kristina Hull was one of the few college students who made the moonlight trip north Saturday night.

"I don't come here to win," Hull said. "Chance of winning, maybe. Something to do, mostly. I just come to have fun."

This same sentiment was expressed by many bingo players. Gisla Zuhlke, a long-time bingo import from Canada, has been playing at the Bingo 262 parlor since day one. She said she spends about $60 to $70 every Saturday night here.

"I don't smoke. I don't drink. This is my pleasure. I've earned it," Zuhlke said. "Most of the old-age people get pensions. If they don't have any hobbies, they spend it here."

Bingo 262 attracts a loyal following of players from Alger to Abbotsford, British Columbia. "There are some people that come here like clockwork—you show up to open the door, they're here," Brennan noted. "they're like part of the family, and that's what's so special about this place."

"We have at least maybe 200 people that have been coming here for almost 13 to 15 years, never miss a day. They don't care if they win or lose. It's just coming with here and seeing faces, being with people."
Serious, intense expressions disguise the faces of the players. Every once in a while a smile or look of relief flashes, but the expression immediately returns to deep concentration. The room constantly explodes in intricate arrays of glittering lights, and mirrored signs revolve like halos above the different games available.

Fans wave back and forth from the ceiling, brushing cool air across the hot flesh of the players. The feel of the betting table provides the puckering field for the gamblers to temporarily rest their clay poker chips.

Waitresses walk by with steaming appetizers, waving them in the faces of hungry onlookers. The breath of fellow gamblers thickens as drinks replace empty glasses and smoke wafts up to curl under people's nostrils from resting, waiting cigarettes.

"Jump on in," says a burly sandpaper-faced man as he takes a drag off his smoke. "That's the only way to play. You gotta get yourself seated at a table and have a go at it."

Students aren't usually ready to jump on in when it comes to playing the local casinos because it usually means betting rent, tuition or beer money. But with some restraint, you needn't lay life's essentials on the line to play.

"The best way to get started is to play a few hands of blackjack with your buddies," senior Shawn Keller explains. "Then, once you get the hang of it, venture to some of the casinos and stick to the low-dollar tables."

He jerks his head back in a quick half-nod, waving his hand to indicate to the dealer that he'd like to stay with the cards he's got.

"You need to go in with your winning pocket and your losing pocket. You put $20 in your losing pocket because you're going to play until you lose it. Anything you win you put in your winning pocket and you leave it there, you don't bet it."

Junior Gary Goodale, a dealer at Harrah's offers some tips for people who want to try their hand at gambling: leave the credit cards and the AIM cards in the car.

"That way, if you spend the money you went in with, you have to walk outside to get more money, and you have a chance to think about what you're doing." Gary says.

The Lummi Casino is the only casino that has $2 tables for Blackjack, one of the most popular games at the casinos. Roulette can also be played for $5 on up, depending on where the chips are played. Harrah's also offers an old favorite, Casino War, which starts at $5 a hand.

Casino groupies leave their seats as they win and lose money; the clusters around the game tables thin out, the bar closes down and cigarettes are ground into smoldering ash trays. Walking out of the windowless, clockless time warp, people re-encounter the world they left at the door.

—Jennifer O'Brien
Amid frightening men and sickening shrimp, Brian Kingsberry begrudgingly readies himself for some labor.

On my way down the street, a window catches my eye.

As I look closer, I see that it's the Labor Ready Company. I have noticed this place before, but never paid it much attention. It always kind of scared me. In the morning, shady characters mill about on the corner smoking cigarettes. To me, they always looked like the type of guys who work today, get drunk tonight. As much as this image haunts me, my need for cash persuades me to stop in and take a closer look. The only people in the room are the secretary and a man doing paperwork in the back office. All the workers have already been sent out on jobs.

I walk up to the counter and a nervous feeling comes over me. Suddenly, I feel a bit apprehensive about working here, but I forge on.

"How do I go about getting some work here?" I blurt bluntly to the girl at the desk.

A faint accent makes me think she's Southern, but I can't be sure. Her voice is pleasant, yet she seems bored with giving the same information she's probably related a thousand times.

"What type of work do you have?" I ask.

"We've got all kinds of stuff: digging ditches, working in a bakery, landscaping. When were you planning on working?"

"Probably tomorrow," I say, as noncommittal as possible.

"If you come in early, we'll be able to find you something," she reassures me with a friendly smile. "We open at 5:30 a.m."

Driving home, I think about getting up at 5 a.m. It's quite a burden, but I decide to give it a try. That night I go to
I bed early. I plan not to shave or shower in the morning in a feeble attempt to fit in with the other workers.

5:06—A DJ's shrill voice pounds my lazy eardrums with all the tenderness of a heavy-weight punch. Awakening this early reminds me of my childhood paper route, when it was so much easier getting up before the sun.

5:35—People are already at Labor Ready, waiting outside, talking and smoking cigarettes. Inside, there's a guy taking care of paperwork and talking with the other workers. I can tell he's British by his obvious accent. He's tall and slender with a clean-cut look. After watching him solve several problems, I notice he seems to have established a rapport with many of the workers. He treats them with respect and gets the same in return.

5:45—After several people come in and sign their names to a list, I decide to sign in, leave my application on the counter and take a seat at one of the tables. On a back bench near the window, new workers are all waiting silently. They stare straight ahead; their eyes are glazed over, as they helplessly clutch coffee cups, like it's the last legal vice. I sit alone near the counter.

6:00—A bald guy comes over and sits across from me. At first I'm frightened, but his smile is friendly and he doesn't scare me like the others. He steadily slurps coffee out of a styrofoam cup. He pauses a second and begins talking to me.

Before today, he'd been working at a construction site where the workers are paid under the table. He's pissed off about missing his ride because he was busy "boning the old lady."

He goes on to inform me he's divorced and needs to pay child support for his three kids. I feel sorry for him, but don't know what to say. I remain silent.

6:30—At the counter, I show my identification and take a safety test in which all the answers are already circled.

Needless to say, I pass and am ready for work.

6:45—I'm offered a job shucking shrimp. I am handed a pair of rubber boots that seem to have some sort of fungus growing on the soles. I'm not too excited about my new job, but I make the most of the situation by imagining a Forrest Gumpesque excursion.

6:50—"Is that you that smells like alcohol?" the British guy asks someone next to me.

"Duh, I don't know," he responds, smelling himself like a foolish child.

"I'm not going to send anyone out smelling like that, now who is it?" he said, angrily raising his voice a notch.

I've noticed this same smell emanating from several guys. The Brit leaves his chair, comes out into the lobby and begins sniffing for alcohol. After sniffling my bald friend and a couple grungy bearded guys, his mission to find the smell ends when he sniffs the guy next to me. He works here regularly and has already been set up for a job.

"You've got 20 minutes to change your clothes before your ride gets here; so you better be hustling," the British guy sternly orders him.

7:00—A white sedan from the shrimp company arrives and five others and I squeeze into it. We are being given a ride because the company doesn't want its strikers hassling us.

The crew consists of me, a white woman in her forties, two...
The constant barrage

non-english speaking Mexican Americans and David, an older African American.

7:15—Work begins. We’re peeling shells and nasty black parts off of tiny cocktail shrimp while they scatter over a conveyor belt. It sucks.

My hands feel frozen. I’m half-asleep and start to feel nauseous.

9:00—Finally, our first break comes. I take a seat at a round table and contemplate taking a nap. David makes tea and conversation about cooking with the ladies. The two Mexican guys sit together loudly talking about something funny. I don’t speak Spanish.

9:15—The break ends and Bob, the boss, or as I like to call him, the shrimpin’ captain, informs me that I’ve been promoted to packaging the shrimp. I’m happy, I guess.

9:20—I’m taken aside and shown the fine art of packaging shrimp. It’s basically filling a bag with five pounds of shrimp. I’m told that it’s important that I do a good job because I’m the last line of quality control (whatever that means). At least now I’m at the end of the conveyor belt and the nausea has subsided.

10:30—I come to the realization that I’ve forgotten to pack a lunch. All that there is to eat are shrimp, and plenty of them.

10:45—The constant barrage of shrimp begins to look like maggots coming at me a thousand at a time. The nausea returns. There’s no way I’m eating any of these shrimp.

11:00—Lunch time. A strange Mexican guy sits down at the table across from me and tears open his brown lunch bag spreading its contents out on the table. In his best broken English, he offers me some of the food on the table.

“Want some?” he asks pointing to an array of sandwiches, Pop Tarts and banana bread scattered on the table.

I walk over, grab a sandwich and head back to my table. On the sandwich is a black cream that I’m a bit uneasy about trying, but do anyway. It’s surprisingly good.

11:30—Back to work. The conveyor belt has sped up considerably, and suddenly, packaging doesn’t seem so easy. Instead of five pounds on the dot, it has become five or so pounds.

1:00—Another break. The new pace has drained me, and my body is feeling the effects of getting up at five in the morning. David begins to rant and rave about shucking shrimp and the other workers join. I’m too tired to complain.

2:00—As work continues, I begin to remember how long an eight hour day really is, and can’t wait until my shrimpin’ experience is over.

3:30—We break again and David and Barb inform Bob, the shrimpin’ captain, that they’re through working for the day. David tells him he has prior commitments and must get going. Barb has quit because she has a much bigger problem to deal with. She needs to find a place to stay tonight. I join David and Barb because I also have prior commitments
of shrimp begins to look like maggots coming at me a thousand at a time.

(I've waited until the last day to pay my tuition and must get to the registrar's office before it closes) plus I'm dead tired and sick of shrimp. While waiting in the lunch room for our ride through the crowd of angry strikers, David informs us that he's new in town and lives in a room on his pastor's house boat. He suggests the YWCA as a solution to Barb's housing predicament and blabs on and on about his desire to become computer literate.

You can tell that he's an intellectual. I ask him about a book he's been reading throughout the day on Hindu philosophies. He babbles something about spiritual healing through using your mind. My mind shuts down. I can't keep up with him. He has way too much enthusiasm. When I tell him I go to Western, he begins talking of his experiences hanging out on UCLA's campus and once again I contemplate taking a nap.

4:00—Our ride still isn't there and David is starting to get impatient. So am I.

4:15—David calls labor ready asking about our ride. The secretary informs him that Bob, the shrimpin' captain, is in charge of our ride. There's only one pay stub and Bob isn't done working yet. At $5 per hour overtime pay, it makes perfect sense for him to keep us working.

4:45—Barb mysteriously disappears, presumably to take care of her housing problem or maybe she's sick of listening to David.

5:00—The workers finish and our ride is ready to go. Bob shorts us a half hour on the pay stub and David argues with him about it. By now, I don't really care about a half hour's pay and just want to go home.

5:15—"Why are there different hours on here?" the Brit asks. "Who are David and Brian?"

"I'm Brian," I say stepping up to the counter. David does the same.

"Why do you guys have different hours than everyone else?" he asks in the same tone as with the alcohol situation earlier this morning

"I was told I'd only have to work eight hours," David explains calmly.

"Eight hours? You walked out on the job; you bloody gyped him!" he scolds us.

"As far as I'm concerned you're fired! Don't bother coming back!," he yells at us before stampeding back to his office muttering something about eight hours under his breath.

"Brian Kingsberry," the secretary shyly says, embarrassed by the whole ordeal.

"That's me," I respond, grabbing the check and heading for my car.

5:36—Twelve hours later, I arrive back home, thoroughly exhausted and reeking of shrimp. I crash back into a familiar spot on the couch and take a look at my check. Thirty dollars and fifty three cents. Barely enough to cover my late tuition penalty.

"Why do you smell like fish?" my roommate asks.

"It's a long story," I respond, closing my eyes, finally able to take that nap I'd been wanting all day. As I drift away to deeper realms of consciousness my shrimpin' experience is quickly forgotten.