

Gulf Coast a graveyard for thousands of slot machines

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GULFPORT, Miss. — C.J. "Mac" McClendon spent years installing slot machines on the Gulf Coast. These days, he is exhuming them.

When Hurricane Katrina leveled the Gulfport and Biloxi area, it silenced about 18,000 slot machines at Mississippi's floating casinos. Some of the one-armed bandits were washed into the sea. Looters ran off with others. And the vast majority — about 75 percent — were destroyed.

"I can't think of anything that is even close to this," said Mike Ulmer, North American casino services manager for International Game Technology, the world's largest maker of slot machines.

IGT and other big slot makers are picking through the twisted casino barges, trying to salvage machines and reclaim the ones they leased to the gambling companies. They have not found much to save at the 13 casinos that dotted the Mississippi coast.

"Imagine throwing your computer into the ocean, drying it out and seeing how it works," McClendon said.

Monday, McClendon and

two IGT technicians descended on the Copa Casino in Gulfport to remove the 17 IGT-owned machines from the approximately 1,250 ruined one-armed bandits there.

The casino barge was lifted from its moorings and tossed onto the asphalt, where ocean waves continued to pound it, drenching the machines in salt water.

Inside the Copa, battered and broken slot machines littered the casino floor, forming row after row of metallic corpses. All the favorites were there: The Wheel of Fortune, Lobster Mania, Enchanted Unicorn and Cleopatra. A pair of Regis Philbins were still standing in one corner.

"It's hard to write off Regis," said McClendon, casino services manager in IGT's Gulfport office.

But Regis, it turned out, had suffered the same fate as the other machines. The salt water destroyed their electronic innards and caused them to rust.

Looters climbed aboard the Copa but did not get away with any real money, since employees removed most of the coins and bills from the machines before the hurricane hit, said Rick Quinn, the Copa's chief



Rogelio Solis / The Associated Press

Destroyed or damaged slot machines are shown at the Copa Casino on Monday in Gulfport, Miss. When Hurricane Katrina leveled the Gulfport and Biloxi area, it silenced about 18,000 slot machines at Mississippi's floating casinos. Some of the one-armed bandits were washed into the sea. Looters ran off with others. And the vast majority — about 75 percent — were destroyed.

executive. But some five-cent machines still had nickels in them. And in one area of the casino, a dozen or so buckets were filled with thousands of nickels.

"Quite frankly, the priority was getting the paper money out," Quinn said.

Dan Lee, chairman and chief executive of Pinnacle Entertainment Inc., said thieves sneaked into his casino and tried breaking into the machines and security carts that hold money.

He said they almost got lucky — coming close to discovering

roughly \$400,000 that was inside a locked cash cart and left in the casino during the storm. Pinnacle recovered the money, Lee said. Armed guards now protect the casino.

State gambling regulators are supposed to keep track of every slot machine, but Katrina has

made that task unrealistic. It is unclear how many were swallowed up by the sea.

"Basically, it's impossible to account for each and every one of those lost," said Larry Gregory, executive director of the Mississippi Gaming Commission.

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