

Kiowa Casino opens doors

Devol, Oklahoma – In true Las Vegas fashion – complete with celebrity impersonators, showgirls and Playboy Playmates – the sparkling Kiowa Casino threw open its doors Wednesday to a rush of people in pursuit of filling their pockets with cash.

As quickly as the doors to the new gaming facility opened, a massive crowd of gamblers pushed and shoved their way in, filling virtually every slot machine and most card tables on the 63,000-square-foot gaming floor within minutes.

Hundreds more were stacked up at the entry – and a 3-mile-long line of vehicles slowly navigated the two-lane state highway in hopes of finding a parking place. One early arrival said the highway was packed two hours before the opening.

Wanda George of Wichita Falls, who said she was with a group of women called the Red Hat Chicks, was one of the first in line as workers braced for the onslaught.

„We all love to gamble,“ George said as she leaned against the door. „I go about once a week ... the others go more often than I do. Mostly, I play the slots. I like to play the Vegas-style slots.“

Cathy Gowan of Lawton was one of the first to push money into a slot .

„I’m so excited,“ Gowan said, nervously eyeing the slot.

Billie Cauble of Wichita Falls was another to quickly land at a machine not far from the door.

„I hit 45 quarters,“ she said as onlookers approached.

„Fine. Fine,“ the exited Cauble said of the new casino. „I definitely like the Vegas-style machines.“

As gamblers continued to make their way in, others took a break to watch the Flying Elvi, a team of 10 parachutists from Las Vegas, signal the grand opening with a precision jump from a few thousand feet above the overcast Oklahoma sky.

One man who was leaning up against an automobile to watch the Elvis look-alikes said he was leaving after the ceremonial landing. He had enough of the „zoo“ atmosphere, he said.

As the Flying Elvi approached, casino Manager Tom Carr paced the sidewalk and parking lot.

„This is what I live for,“ he said, moving swiftly back toward the casino.

Tana Edwards of Ryan said she made the trip to see the grand opening festivities.

„I’m here for the grand opening,“ she said. „We like to gamble ... and to see it all. I don’t want to miss a thing. The casinos have livened up the small towns around here.“

Admittedly not much of a gambler, Glen Sutton said he and his wife drove in from Lake Nocona to be part of the celebration.

„I came to just see this place opening up ... just curiosity, I guess. I don’t play much. My wife is the player,“ he said.

Anticipation also was written across the faces of casino employees before the crowd was unleashed. One was Wichitan Joanne Nelson, a server in the Morningstar Steakhouse.

„I’m all excited. I’m glad it’s finally happening. I’ve been waiting nine months for this day,“ Nelson said.

One eager gambler was Deborah Lynch of Bowie, who was waiting to start play at a blackjack table.

„I’m just learning,“ she admitted. „I get excited. I even get excited if the dealer wins.“

The casino, a multimillion project, boasts more than 900 slot machines. It has about two dozen tables of blackjack, Spanish 21 and three-card poker and has a 10-table poker room, showcasing No Limit Texas Hold ,Em and other poker games.

In addition to Morningstar, the casino has two other restaurants: the Morningstar Buffet and the Winner's Circle Sports Bar, each with its own menu.

The casino, located east of Devol at the intersection of Highway 36 and State Road 1980, employs about 570 people from North Texas and southern Oklahoma. According to Carr, the casino expects to see more than a million visitors each year – about five thousand Wednesday.

The casino will hold a fireworks „extravaganza“ Sunday at dark.