

Anyone who's spent some time around classic **fruit machines** or delved into the lore of gambling history has likely heard the story: "Old slot machines paid out chewing gum instead of coins." It sounds quirky and charming, but like many tales from the early days of gambling technology, it's a mix of truth, myth, and some clever legal maneuvering. In this post, we'll explore the origins of this *fruit machine myth*, [mobile slots portrait mode](#) dig into how coin-operated mechanisms evolved, examine the iconic symbols still seen today, and see how the transition to electromechanical slots changed payouts and player expectations.

The Origins of Slot Automation and Coin Mechanisms

The story of slot machines begins in the late 19th century with simple mechanical devices designed to automate the gambling process—no need for a dealer to hand out cards or calculate outcomes. These machines featured coin slots that triggered a random mechanical spin, with the possibility of coins popping out if matched symbols lined up. This early automation was groundbreaking but also fraught with legal hurdles.

Early Coin Mechanisms: Automating Chance

At their core, these slot machines mechanized the act of playing a game of chance. You inserted a coin, pulled a lever, and mechanical reels spun and stopped, displaying symbols. If the alignment matched a winning combination, the machine released coins from its hopper as a payout. This created a self-contained gambling system requiring no human bookkeeper or dealer at the table.

However, many jurisdictions banned or heavily regulated gambling machines. This forced manufacturers and operators to innovate approaches that could skirt or comply with local laws.

Readable Outcomes and the Three-Reel Template

The earliest slot machines often employed a three-reel setup. This became the canonical template for decades, and the familiarity of 3 reels spinning is something that survives even in modern digital slot games. The three-reel design uses a fixed set of symbols around each reel's circumference, aligning perfectly and giving the player instantaneous, readable outcomes.

Why three reels? It's a balance between complexity, cost, and excitement—more reels meant more complicated mechanics and expense, but fewer reels lessened the game's unpredictability and thrill. The three-reel configuration was just right to create a simple yet engaging experience.

Symbol Iconography: Fruit and BAR

The original reel symbols we associate with slot machines—cherries, lemons, plums, bells, and the "BAR" sign—did not arise randomly. Early slot makers sought distinctive, recognizable images that a player could easily interpret, even at a glance. Let's quickly decode these icons:

- **Fruit symbols:** Cherries, lemons, plums, and oranges initially served as a clever workaround for gambling regulations. Some machines paid out merchandise prizes—like chewing gum or candy—matching the fruit symbol's brand (e.g., a cherry-flavored gum for a cherry symbol).
- **The BAR symbol:** Reportedly deriving from the logo of the Bell-Fruit Gum Company, the BAR became a staple icon, eventually representing higher-value payouts, particularly cash. It was essentially a branding symbol that lent instant credence to the machine's prizes.

- **Bells:** One of the earliest symbols, the bell stood for higher-value payouts in slots named “Liberty Bell,” one of the very first machines.

This iconography is so ingrained that you see it on literally thousands of slot games worldwide today, despite the shift to digital and online formats.

Fruit Machine Myth: Were Old Slots Really Gum Vending Machines?

Here’s where fact and urban legend blur. It’s true some early slot-like machines didn’t directly pay out coins, but instead distributed products—most famously, pieces of chewing gum, candy, or other small merchandise prizes. This was a business response to legal restrictions on gambling payouts.



Instead of “paying out money,” manufacturers designed games that awarded players with gum or candies that could be consumed or even exchanged. This is why the fruit machine myth persists: the fruit symbols linked visually to the gum flavors these prizes often represented.

Why Chewing Gum?

Chewing gum was a popular, inexpensive, and easily stored prize. It wasn’t considered gambling winnings because, legally, players were winning merchandise, not cash. Thus, vending machines that looked like slot machines but actually dispensed gum or candy could legally operate in certain areas.



Important distinction: These machines weren't slot machines in a true gambling sense but rather prize vending devices with game-like elements. Their outcomes might be random or pseudo-random, but the government regulations treated them differently because the payout was merchandise, not money.

Common Misconceptions

- These gum machines never paid out money—players were exchanging coins for gum directly or winning gum as a prize, not receiving change or jackpot coins.
- The classic gambling slots that dispensed coins were a separate category and subject to on-site restrictions.
- The “fruit machine” naming derives more from the association with gum and candy prizes than from early gambling machines per se.

The Electromechanical Transition and Bigger Payouts

The 1960s and 1970s saw a major technological evolution: the transition from purely mechanical slot machines to electromechanical ones. This changed the game in more than one way:

1. **Reliability and Complexity:** Electromechanical slots introduced electrical solenoids, motors, and switches controlled by simple logic. This reduced mechanical wear and allowed for more sophisticated gameplay.
2. **Larger Payouts:** The new technology allowed bigger jackpots and coin hoppers with more capacity and reliability.
3. **True Coin Payouts Became Standard:** With new regulatory frameworks and state-authorized gambling systems, paying out coins (or tickets in modern machines) became the norm rather than merchandise prizes.

This shift helped cement the slot machine's place as a genuine gambling device, moving away from the frivolity of candy prizes toward serious cash gaming. As such, the gum vending slot era is practically a footnote, remembered now mostly as an interesting quirk in the history of slots, not a major chapter.

Summary: Separating Myth from Reality

Aspect Truth Myth or Misinterpretation Fruit icons on slot machines Originated partly due to gum prizes from associated fruit-flavored candies. Old slot machines "paid out" gum to bypass gambling laws. Machines that dispense chewing gum Vending devices with gambling-like play characteristics existed (gum vending slots). These were traditional gambling slot machines that just gave gum instead of coins. Three-reel setup Standard since early mechanical slots; persists in modern machines as a nod to tradition. None—pretty well documented and consistent. Electromechanical slots and payouts Brought in true money payouts, larger jackpots, and more exciting gameplay. The idea that electromechanical machines wiped out gum payouts instantly (transition was gradual).

Final Thoughts: Why We Love the Myth

Whether you call them fruit machines, one-armed bandits, or classic slots, these machines carry deep cultural resonance. The story about chewing gum payouts embodies a curious fuse of technology, law, and marketing creativity—a reflection of how the gambling industry adapted to survive and thrive. Even if “gum vending slots” weren’t truly slot machines as we think of them today, they helped shape some of today’s most iconic imagery and gameplay conventions.

Next time you see a cherry or BAR symbol light up on a modern video slot, you can smile knowing their roots intertwine with gum prizes, clever coin mechanisms, and the ever-present human desire for a bit of chance—and maybe a stick of fruit-flavored gum to chew while you play.