

Gambling In The Early West

by Joe Goodson

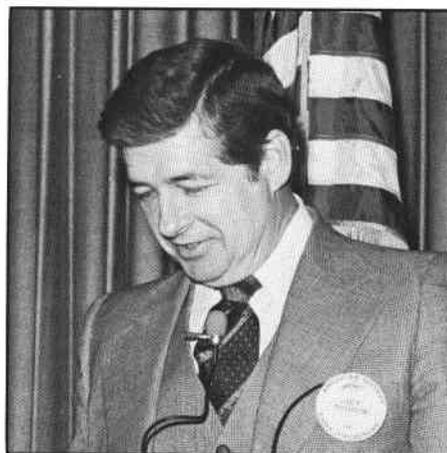
The early riverboat traveler faced constant danger. Gangs of bandits preyed on river travelers. For a gang to ambush and murder a boat's crew was an easy matter. Later, the ship and cargo would be sold and the proceeds spent in the dives and gambling houses. This was so prevalent that in 1788 the Governor of Louisiana ordered all boats to sail in flotillas for protection. In 1794 a packet company advertised the advantages of its boats as follows: "A large crew, skillful in the use of arms, a plentiful supply of muskets and ammunition, and equipment on each boat, and six one-pound cannon, and a loop-hole, rifle proof cabin for passengers." The greatest peril, however, was not the bandits, the flimsy craft nor the river itself, as changing and unpredictable as it was. No, the greatest peril was the gambler.

He was well dressed, with a clean shave, a ruffled shirt made of silk, and wore the latest fashions from the east. A "Journegon" watch, size 18, made of solid gold worn with a gold chain and fob adorned his brocaded vest. He was armed with cool nerve, a Derringer, a Bowie, and the ability to use them. The gambler was bold and daring. He knew the odds and was willing to take the risks. The gamblers creed was simple, "Get the Money!" And get the money he did, with the aid of marked cards, loaded dice, gaff dealing boxes and hold outs. The gambler got the money, by means fair or foul, much to the sorrow of many early travelers.

Damon Runyon was raised in a mining town in Southern Colorado. His father was a bartender, wise in the ways of the world. When, as a young man, Damon prepared to leave home, his father took him aside. "Son," said the old bartender, "of worldly things I have nothing to give you except some good advice. When you go out into this world, sooner or later a well dressed gentleman is going to approach you with a brand new deck of unopened cards. He'll bet you that he can make the jack of spades stand up and spit cider in your ear. Son, if you lay your money down, get ready for an earful of cider."

The professional gambler was out to get the money, but he couldn't get it without the sucker's help. Which brings up a good question: why do people gamble? Is it the money? Or is it something else, the atmosphere, the fast action, the excitement? How many of you are gamblers? How many of you never placed a bet, never flipped for a coke, played poker with the boys, bet on a baseball or football pool? Maybe you shot marbles for keeps when you were a kid? Have you ever owned any stock? We all gamble; the question is, why do we gamble?

We gamble for the money, the fast action, the atmosphere, and many other reasons, but primarily we gamble because the act of gambling is an escape mechanism. People lose themselves in the game. Chips no longer represent money, they are not redeemable at the window fifty feet away, they are simply a necessary part of the game. They do not represent value, but simply allow you to play. It is not winning or losing that is

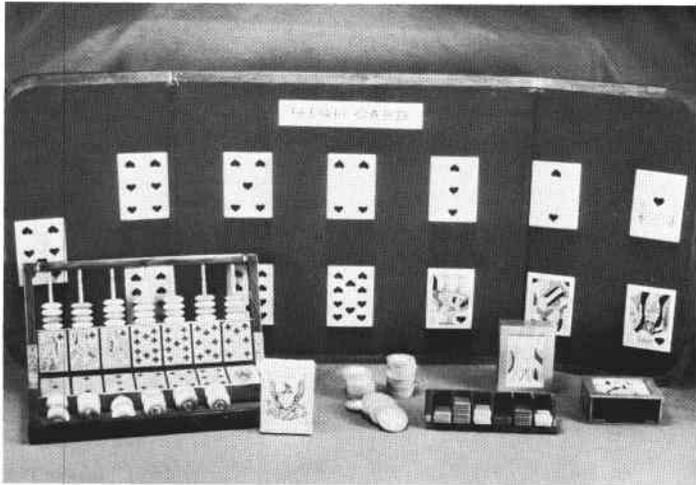


important to the gambler. Playing the game is the important thing.

The gambler's favorite pastime on the Mississippi was dealing Three-Card-Monte. Three-card-monte was the greatest fraud that ever masqueraded as a gambling game. George Devol and three other Mississippi rovers, Canada Bill Jones, Tom Brown and Holly Chappel teamed up to throw three-card-monte for four years during the 1850's and ended up dividing a million dollars at the end of their partnership. During those four years they ate the best food, drank the best wine, and between trips enjoyed the pleasures of the finest bordellos in New Orleans.

Three-card-monte is a simple con game played with only three cards, as the name implies. The gambler began his game by throwing three cards, two aces and the queen of spades, face down on a table, and boasting that no one could locate the queen after he shifted the face down cards from one location to another. He made sure that this shifting was slow and easy to follow, so sooner or later someone would step up and locate the queen. The gambler would pick up the cards and throw them again betting that no one would locate the queen this time. If the suckers were reluctant, a confederate would step up and turn the queen and collect the bet. This kept up until the suckers showed real interest and the first sucker to bet almost always got an honest throw and was able to locate the queen and win the bet.

At this point, the gambler, seemingly embarrassed and frustrated, would throw a large sum of money, perhaps \$1,000, down on the table and declare that this time he would have it all. One of the confederates would offer to cover \$100 of the \$1,000, but the gambler, showing signs of wounded pride, would have none of it or all of it. One confederate would distract the gambler long enough for another confederate to reach over and bend one corner of the queen, ostensibly unseen by the gambler. The sucker, of course, would see the marked corner



Faro set-up: layout, case keeper, dealing box, cards, chips and markers.

on the queen. The gambler would then pick up the cards, shift them once again and throw them face down on the table. By now the suckers could not wait to get their money down on such a sure thing.

When the cards were placed, the sucker confidently turned over the marked card with the bent corner, only to find it was an ace, not the queen. The gambler had removed the mark from the queen, marked an ace in identical fashion and the sucker was buried in his own greed. The professional gambler will tell you that you cannot cheat an honest man.

Three-card-monte was the most successful swindle of all time. It worked for over a hundred years, because the sucker thought he had a chance to cheat the gambler.

To the ordinary law-abiding citizen, the gambler represented reckless adventure and quick fortune, a flashy mockery of their drab, workaday lives. To many women, the gambler was irresistible.

But the riverboat gambler led a trying life. He slept by day and worked at night, playing cards for hours on end under oil lamps or gaslights in rooms filled with cigar smoke. His poker face often masked nerves that were tense with fatigue.



The Faro dealers' choice: "Hart's Squared Linen Eagle Nonpareil."

The gambler was his own worst enemy. George Devol made a fortune dealing three-card-monte and lost all of it to other gamblers who ran faro games. Faro, often affectionately called "Bucking the Tiger," was the most popular gambling game ever played in this country. Not even poker, which was the rage in this country from about 1880 until the depression, could compare with the popularity of faro.

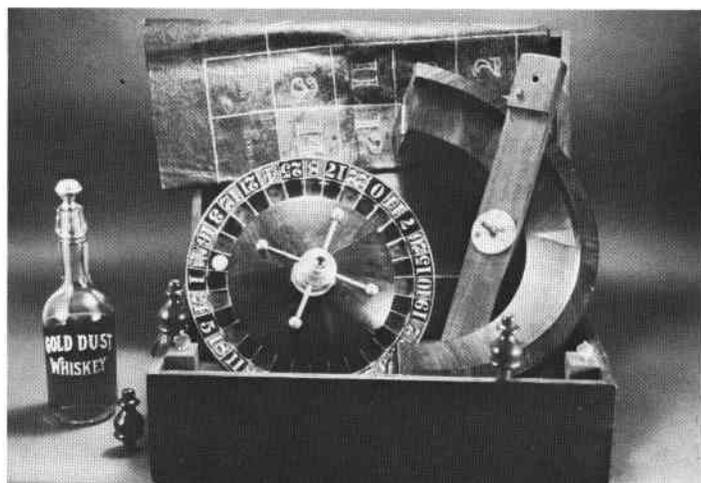
Faro, honestly played, was the most simple of all games. On a green blaze layout were one each of all demoninations of one suit of cards, ace through king. The sucker, or flat, could bet with or against the house. To bet against the house, he simply placed his chips on a particular card or in between two or more cards, and when that card came up, he either won or lost. To bet with the house, he placed an octagonal shaped marker, called a copper, on his chips, thus signaling that he was betting with the house.

From a small metal box little more than the length and width and twice the depth of a regular deck of cards, the dealer dealt one card at a time, two cards to a turn. The first card in a turn won for the house, the second card for the players. If both cards were of the same denomination, say two jacks, this turn was declared a split, and one half of all bets placed by the betters on the jack belonged to the house. In an honest game, this was the only percentage the house had, and faro, played honestly, was as close to a fifty-fifty proposition as the sucker ever had. Does it come as any surprise then to learn that faro was almost never played honestly? Brace games were the order of the day and the sharps dealt seconds and stacked the deck at will.

There were those who believed they could beat the odds, as did two sun-parched travelers who rode into a one horse town in New Mexico, dismounted, and headed for the nearest saloon for a cold beer. Soon one was engaged at the faro table while the other watched. The observer whispered to his friend, "This game is crooked, the dealer is using a gaff dealing box." "Yes, I know," replied his friend, "but it's the only game in town."

Other popular forms of gambling were keno, roulette, monte, rondo, chuck-a-luck, red and black and twenty one.

While the gamblers plied their trade in the beautiful salons of the riverboats, below deck the sounds of clinking dice and



Traveling roulette set-up, which earned plenty of gold dust for its owner.

even come "leven" announced the arrival of another American game, Craps.

Poker developed in the swank upper decks amid mint-juleps, rimshawed ivory poker chips, white silk suits, and gold stick pens. Craps was born in the hot and steamy lower decks among the black deck hands. The two forms of gambling indigenous to America were both given birth on the Mississippi riverboats.

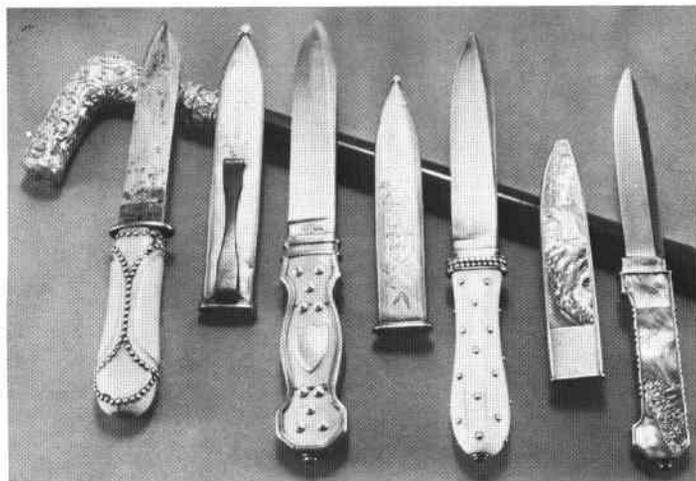
As the western expansion took a great leap from the Mississippi to the hills of Northern California in response to tales of Sutter Creek gold, a race developed between the prospector, the prostitute and the gambler. It's difficult to know who got there first, but suffice it to say that the gambler gave the prostitute a run for her money. Speaking of California, here is a little poem I ran across:

The miner came in "forty nine"
The whore in "fifty one"
They jungled up together
And made the native son.

San Francisco prospered during the gold rush, and no business prospered more than the gambling halls. San Francisco casinos introduced the first female dealers. Pretty girls dealing at the tables: what a come-on to the lonely miners, what a distraction for the gullable legions. In a day and age without movies, television or spectator sports, and in a vast land that held too many dangers and not enough women, gambling became an obsession. In places like Dodge City, Billings, Tombstone, Leadville, and Angel's Camp, gambling was an all night, every night diversion. Ben Thompson, Marshall of Austin, Texas, and an admitted killer of thirty two men, spent more time dealing faro than he did as Marshall. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday and Bat Masterson all dealt faro as a steady means of income while serving as law enforcement officers. John Wesley Hardin held up two gambling games in different saloons in El Paso within six months of being killed by John Selman. Hardin was playing dice when Selman shot him from the back. Wild Bill Hickok was shot in the back of the head while playing poker in Deadwood. Hickok was holding a pair of aces and a pair of eights, known ever since to poker players as "a dead man's hand."



The American push dagger was a favorite of the gambler.



California cutlery—the choice of the sporting crowd.

Nothing, not the Winchester, the Colt, or the Bowie, are more representative of the Western United States during the mid to late 1800's than the deck of cards, the faro dealing box, or the poker chip. Gambling was a major part of the West, and its influence is still felt today.

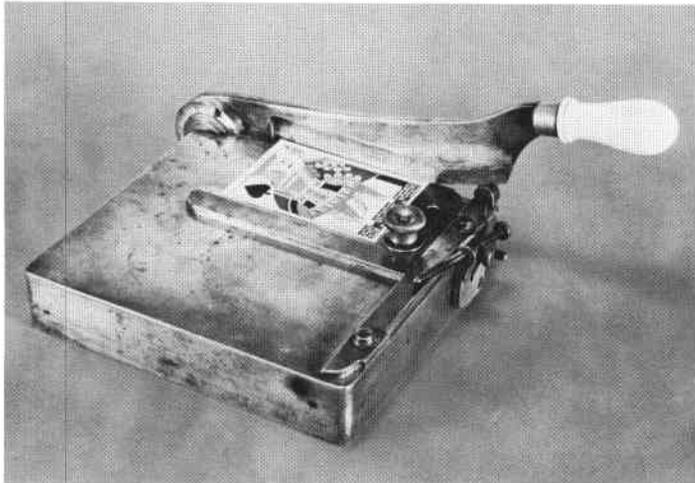
Everyday we use terms which originated from gambling. "Passing the buck," is a term derived from the game of poker as played in the late 1800's. A marker, sometimes made of ivory or pearl, or perhaps of buckhorn, was placed to the left of the dealer, denoting where the deal has originated. If an argument occurred over the honesty of the deal, the "buck" proved conclusively who had dealt the hand. "Pass the buck" and "the buck stops here" were familiar terms to poker players of the last century.

Squared cards, those with square corners, reduced the chances of a crooked deal, thus the term "square deal."

Poker players today in the Southwest use the term "case card" for the last of that denomination card left to be dealt from the deck. The "case ace" or the "case king" then would be a pleasant surprise in a game of five card stud where the other three aces or kings were already showing, face up on the table.



Belly guns, which came in handy at the gaming tables.



A Will and Finck card trimmer—used to retrim worn faro cards, and to make wedges and other advantage playing cards.

Little do these modern day poker players realize that the term “case card” came from the use of the case keeper or cue keeper in the game of faro. This double sided, abacus like device showed the faro player, at a glance, how many cards of each denomination were left in the dealing box.

The terms “look out” and “stool pigeon” both came from gambling. The “lookouts” watched for the police, while the “stool pigeons” steered the suckers into the gambling halls to be plucked by the sharps.

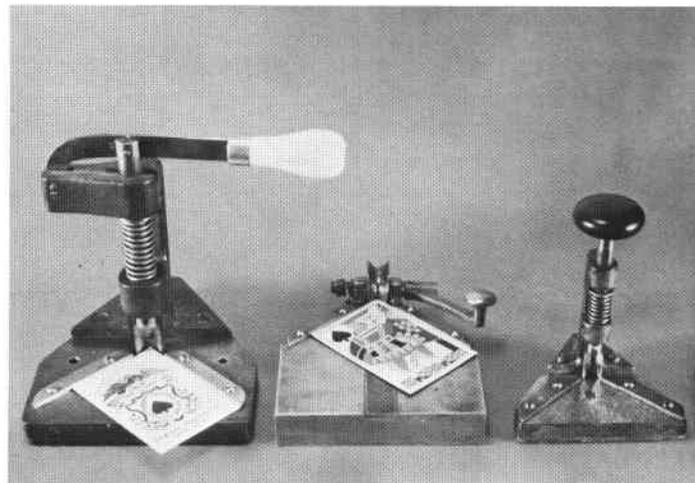
“Tabs” were printed sheets on which players noted cards as they were dealt in the game of faro. Thus, we have the term “keeping tabs.” “Calling the turn” originally meant to correctly guess the order in which the last three cards in a faro dealing box would appear.

Over the long haul, things didn’t go so well for the gambler. As civilization slowly caught up with the mining camps and frontier crossroads, the gambler steadily lost favor and eventually moved on.

“Get the money” was the creed of the gambler, and get the money he did. But keeping the money was something else, and almost all gamblers died lonely and broke.



The well armed gambler had his revolver, his bowie, and the ability to use them.



Several examples of corner rounders, used to restore rounded corners on playing cards that had been trimmed.

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A Keno Goose.