

OLD WEST GAMBLING:

Was it 'on the square'?



All photos courtesy of G.R. Williamson

By G.R. Williamson

Wherever there were men and money in the American West, there was gambling – and much of it was crooked. Whether it was rigged, fixed, double-dealt, cold-decked, braced or otherwise manipulated, very little was left to luck and skill. Though there were some gamblers who were known as “on-the-square,” “honest” or “legitimate” gamblers, most used some form of “advantage” to win much more often than they lost. Some were not gamblers at all but mere con men skinning suckers as fast as they could find them.

Crooked gambling was rampant in the mining boomtowns, Kansas railheads, Mississippi riverboats and on railroads running throughout the West. Even if a gambler did not cheat, “as a rule” he had to know all the tricks used in his game to spot cheaters at work.

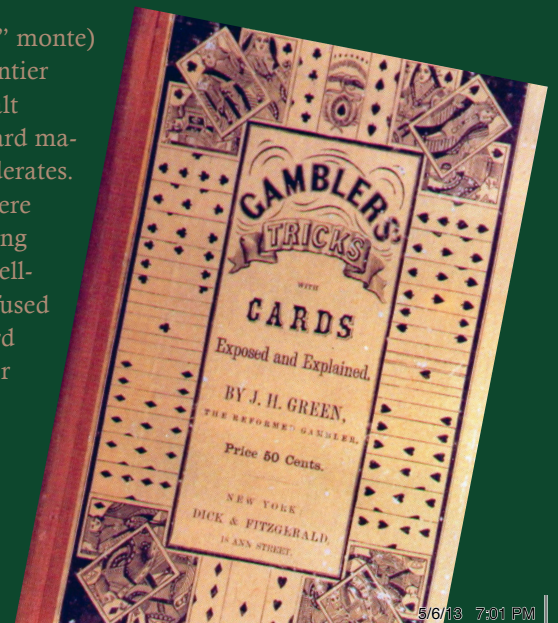
Faro, the most popular card game in the early West, started out being played with a hand shuffled deck that was dealt by hand. A good card “mechanic” had total control of the cards being turned in faro. It was just too easy. Later, to make the game honest, a faro-dealing box was invented to assure players that everything “was on the up and up.” Think again. A legitimate dealing box ran about \$20 while a “gaffed” dealing box could be purchased from a supply house for around \$200. It is easy to see why some of the gambling halls in the Kansas cattle towns paid their faro dealers \$1,000 a month to trim Texas drovers. Even the venerable Bat Masterson was in on the action until he was arrested in 1902 for running a rigged faro game where he and a small band of operatives bilked a Mormon elder out of \$17,000.

Monte (also called “Mexican” or “Spanish” monte) came in a close second in popularity with frontier gambling men. It was played with a hand-dealt Spanish deck of 40 cards and was rife with card manipulation in favor of the dealer or his confederates. This was a rapidly played game where bets were placed in a frenzied pace with the dealer paying winners and raking in the losing bets like a well-oiled machine. Today, this game is often confused with the sleight of hand con game, “three-card monte,” played on street corners, riverboats or train stations.

A reformed gambler, J.H. Green, wrote a tell-all book on gambling cheats in 1859.



Signs like this were posted in a number of saloons proclaiming their honesty – a dead giveaway to just the opposite.



Poker, twenty-one (later blackjack), red dog, acey deucey, seven-up and all the rest of the card games found in gambling saloons were fertile ground for the “sharps.” They were masters at the double deal, bottom dealing, dealing seconds, stacking a deck, or otherwise manipulating cards in their favor. They were skilled at marking cards, using “shiners” to reveal cards dealt, or relying upon mechanical devices to supply the needed card at the right time. It was typical for these “blackleg” gamblers to spend hours sitting at a table in their hotel rooms perfecting their card tricks in front of a mirror to stay proficient – quite often their very lives depended on it.

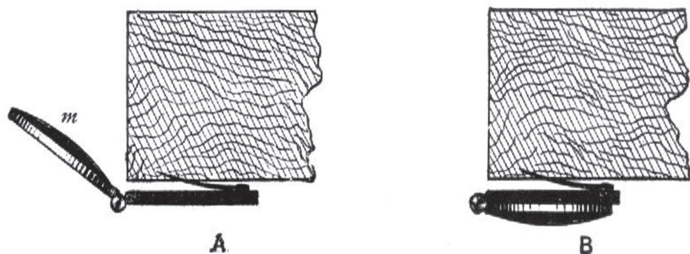


FIG. 20.

A simple table “shiner” that allowed the dealer to see the cards he dealt.

“Shiners” could be anything with a mirrored surface that would reflect images of cards being dealt by the dealer. The classic items used as shiners were cigar cases, money clips, ashtrays, or something as simple as a cup of black coffee. An often told poker story says that a rough and tumble mountain man was famous for saying, “I don’t cotton to card cheaters.” He would then pull out a big nickel-plated Bowie knife and set it on the table before him. After taking a long, hard look at each of the players at the table he would warn, “If I catch anybody cheating, I’ll put this knife to good use!” The mountaineer’s Bowie knife “shiner” worked well until one night when someone caught on to his trick and used it on him.

Crooked dice shooters could make dice “walk and talk” in popular games such as high-low, chuck-a-luck, craps, hazard and grand hazard. The term “tinhorn gambler” came from the shysters that used rigged dice shooting horns. “Tinhorn” actually refers to a device for rolling dice. A hazard chute was a horn or cone-shaped device used in dice games. Dice were dropped in one end of the chute, shook and then rolled out the other end. The chutes were originally made of high quality leather but petty operators, short on money, would use cheap chutes made of tin. In addition, supply houses sold all types of rigged dice, such as iced dice, variable load dice, tapping dice, and shaved dice.

In addition to loaded dice, companies such as H.C. Evans and the K.C. Card Company offered an abundance of other crooked paraphernalia – to be shipped

K.C. Card Company supplied marked cards, loaded dice, and other cheating items to “sharps” throughout the West.



anywhere in the United States. They had a large selection of marked cards, (also known as “readers”), virtually identical to the cards sold by all the popular card companies of the day. If the sharps wanted to mark their own cards, they offered tints, card daubers, pin-prickers and card shavers. Foremost among their offerings were the “card hold-outs” that enabled a player to remove a card from his hand and then return it at the opportune time. Ranging from the “bug” (a very simple pin device that held a card under the table) to the more complex “arm-pressure holdouts” that were worn under the sleeves of shirts, card holdouts were big sellers at both supply companies. A seasoned professional could spot all of these devices being used and knew when to fold his cards and walk away from the table. All, with one exception – the “Kepplinger Holdout.”

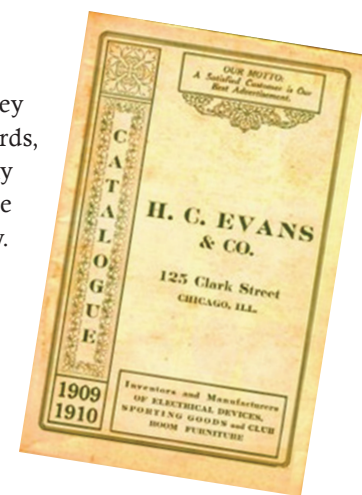
P.J. “Lucky Dutchman” Kepplinger, who was a persistent winner at high-stakes poker games in San Francisco, defied detection. The other players complained that, “It was plumb unnatural how he won at poker.” All the pros knew he was cheating but couldn’t tell how he was doing it. Late one



The “miraculous” knee-operated Kepplinger Holdout.



An old print showing the detection of the Kepplinger Holdout.



H.C. Evans Company in Chicago would ship crooked gambling equipment anywhere in the U.S.

night they grabbed him and made him take off his clothes. To their surprise he had on one of the most ingenious knee-operated contraptions for pulling a card from his hand and then returning it when needed. Instead of tar and feathering him, they insisted that he have one of the gadgets made for each player in the room. Fraternal justice you might say.

Wheel games such as roulette, big six, and wheel of fortune could be rigged to pay or not pay at the will of the operators. Roulette played honestly has a house edge of 5.26 percent but most tables in the frontier times held an edge higher than 20 percent. A reformed gambler named John Philip Quinn published a book in 1912 that described the various methods used in gambling hall cheating. When using the American roulette wheel, which has 38 possible betting slots, Quinn pointed out that a 27-for-1 payout alters the edge dramatically for the house. He then states, "However, despite this fact, the gambler is not satisfied, and has succeeded in devising schemes, whereby he may win every bet made against him if he sees fit." After giving a detailed description of the various ways a roulette table could be rigged he concluded by stating, "It is easily perceived that players can have no possible chance when playing against such roulettes as these, and there are a large number of them in use all over the country."



A Keno caller at work, from an old print.

The game of keno took up more floor space than other games and as a result the game quite often dominated the whole operation – squeezing out all other forms of gambling and giving rise to the term “keno den” or “keno hall.”



George Devol and Canada Bill work a three-card monte game on a riverboat.

Early versions of the game looked for a match of five numbers on balls drawn from a jar with a long neck that allowed only one ball at a time. Over time this became known as the “keno goose.” It was common practice for a “keno den” to hire shills to serve as players and funnel some of the pots their way. This was a very simple process

– the “roller” palmed the balls as he removed them from the “goose” and substituted other balls that matched the numbers on cards held by the confederates.

George Devol, a gambling legend of the American West, wrote that after he lost all he had in a faro game in St. Paul, Minnesota, he asked the dealer for a loan of \$300 to set up a keno game. The dealer agreed and the saloon let Devol set



George Devol, the legendary riverboat gambler and con man.

up his keno apparatus on one of the billiard tables. “They commenced playing at \$1 per card at twelve o’clock,” Devol wrote in his autobiography, “and at six in the morning they were playing at \$10 per card. I was taking out ten percent. They all got stuck. That night my receipts amounted to \$1,300. The result was that they put the carpenters at work to fit up a nice room for me, and in eight months my

part of the game was \$33,000.”

While table games required setups and dealers, the coin operated mechanical gambling machines did not. Most of these were poker machines that allowed a player to win a cigar or free drinks when they lined up a winning combination. Since the winners were paid in some sort of merchandise, the name “trade stimulator” was attached to these types of machines. Later machines offering a payout in cash came onto the scene and a whole new method of gambling evolved into what is known as slot machines or “one armed bandits.” Of course, as with the rest of the gambling operations, the devices were rife with rigging, gaffing or small percentage payouts. The Royal Jumbo paid off in cigars and if a player hit a royal flush they received a token good for 100 cigars. Though the machines were rigged to only payout a few cigars, it was common for bartenders to tell customers, “You should have been in here last week. A stranger walked in and damned if he didn’t hit a royal flush in no time.”

Strangely enough, crooked gamblers were just as vulnerable as others when they played outside of their specialty. “Canada Bill” Jones, who was a master three-card-monte scam man, was a sucker for playing faro. He routinely lost but that never stopped him from playing the game.



Once, when he was playing in a small, backwater town, a friend whispered in his ear that he was playing against a rigged game. He is reported to have nodded his head in agreement and then with a heavy sigh said, “I know, but it is the only game in town.”

“Canada Bill” Jones was a master at working the three-card-monte scams on riverboats and trains, yet he was a sucker for the game of faro.