GAMBLING IN THE KANSAS
CATTLE TOWNS: A PROMINENT AND
SOMETHAT HONORABLE PROFESSION

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WHEN FREDERICK JACKSON
TURNER wrote that he had admittedly
"refrained from dwelling on the lawless
characteristics of the frontier, because they are
sufficiently well known," he inadvertently an-
ticipated the prevailing assessment of much of
subsequent Western historiography.1 Turner's
reluctant acknowledgement of this subject was
contained in a single terse and encompassing
judgment: "The gambler and desperado . . .," he said, "are types of that line of
scum that the waves of advancing civilization
bore before them . . . ." 2 It is my conten-
tion that the activities and significance of one
such group possessing "lawless characteristics"—professional gamblers—is not "suffi-
ciently well known," and that rather than
being the flotsam of the frontier process was,
instead, surprisingly representative of it. For as
Ray Allen Billington partially defined it, the
frontier was a place "peopled by a variety of
individuals bent on applying individual skills
to the exploitation of unusually abundant nat-
ural resources." 3 In the cattle towns of Kansas,
as in much of the American West, gamblers
were able to fully exploit the most natural and
limitless resource of all—human frailty.

Gambling may not be the world's oldest
profession but it is probably its oldest obses-

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History
(New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1921), pp. 32-33. A notable excep-
tion to the general position would be Philip D. Jordan, Frontier
Law and Order: Ten Essays (Lincoln: University of Nebraska
The gambler in Kansas cattle towns enjoyed a local status which transcended the nature of his calling. He often was a man of property, perhaps a partner in the saloon where he plied his trade, and was considered a leader in local society. Like Luke Short, above, he could ooze charm, dress like a dandy, and was an asset to the community. His occupation might be hazardous, however, as is apparent in Frederic Remington's Misdeed, reproduced from Remington's Drawings (New York: R. H. Russell, 1897).
sion. Yet to engage in it on a professional basis, to become a part of it, is to accept an entire set of cultural values, to place oneself apart from, if not outside of, the general society. Gambling is more than "merely a method whereby wealth is redistributed from the possession of the many into the hands of the few," it is more than a means of making a living, it is a way of life. If seen from an economic perspective, it is fundamentally a business operation, and as such can hardly be deemed at odds with a society in which values are so commonly expressed, if not professed, in terms of monetary standards.

In the larger historical setting, the late 19th century, gambling was particularly appropriate to its societal context. As Vernon Louis Parrington argued, the social philosophy of post-bellum America could be "summed up in three words—preemption, exploitation, progress... Preemption meant exploitation and exploitation meant progress." These were basically "the days of an acquisitive individualism... an age vastly concerned with getting on." There is much that is subject to debate in Parrington's perhaps over-hastful view of the period, but his fundamental assessment, that "the Gilded Age threw itself into the business of money-getting," is difficult to quarrel with. After all, this was a time that saw John Morrissey become the first former prizefighter and professional gambler to be elected (and reelected) to the congress of the United States.

In such an era, the gamblers who worked the Kansas cattle towns were clearly as much a part of their age as were their more conventional contemporaries. Who they were and what they struggled for and aspired to were recognizable products of the churning forces of post-bellum America. Their notable contemporary Henry George wrote in Progress and Poverty, "Get money—honestly if you can, but at any rate get money! This is the lesson that society is daily and hourly dimming into the ears of its members." Far better than most, the gamblers understood. To them, money, to paraphrase the legendary Nick the Greek, had always been the means of keeping score.

"Gilded Age" gamblers were men who shared their society's goals, who had internalized a desire for its acknowledged symbols of success but for varying reasons had little hope of ever acquiring them. Men who compared and contrasted a life of wagering with the general alternative, concluded that the risk was less than the potential gain, and proceeded to act accordingly. For those who were susceptible, the wagering profession seemed to offer much of what more ordinary lives, both public and private, seemed to lack—change, independence, escape, a life of zestful self-indulgence which contrasted vividly with the numbing tedium that was all around them. For gamblers...
Gambling, based as it is upon a primal affinity for games of chance, has a timeless appeal, conjuring images of success without struggle or sacrifice repeatedly achieved against a backdrop of sustained, intense excitement. An activity grounded in fundamental human emotions, it is capable of assuming almost mystic proportions, transcending even the limits of want and greed. "Gambling," wrote Theodore Reik, "is a sort of question addressed to destiny." If so, regardless of the answers received, much of mankind has yet to tire of asking the question. For those who were especially subject to its allure, once it was envisioned as a personal and occupational panacea, gambling beckoned irresistibly.

However, by the late 19th century the sporting fraternity was well on its way to becoming corporate and controlled, to becoming the mass impersonalized activity that it is today, a conglomerate industry whose basic unit is no longer the professional gambler but that marvel of symbolic technology, the slot machine. Due in part to this process of modernization, numbers of careerists unable to become, in effect, franchised gamesters, set out for the West, to its relatively unencumbered boom camps and towns, including those of Kansas.

In Abilene, the first of the Kansas cattle towns, a resident and chronicler recalled the
The gambler’s main business was the pursuit of money, the ultimate status symbol. Saloons where the business was conducted varied greatly. Some were designed for subdued and congenial conversation, while others seemed dedicated to promoting such manly arts as drunkenness and fisticuffs. Representative institutions of the latter persuasion were common, those of the former were rare. Pictured here is the Varieties, a Dodge City dance hall.

impact and appropriateness of the gaming spirit to local life:

Men and women trusted in Luck, loved it, feared it, cursed it. They bet on it, not on Jehovah or the Devil. What made Luck popular on this lonely advancing ... border was its "chumminess." It lent itself and suited itself directly to the informal daily intercourse. ... A deck of cards on a table or plank displayed on the Plains the altar of this deity, and card games constituted its rites. ... Can the god hidden among the aces and deuces be other than Luck? ... How pat the ceremonial ... fitted into the widespread betting habits in the cult of Luck! ¹⁸

Like the locals, the gamblers who sojourned in the Kansas cattle towns possessed that qualification so characteristic of the pioneer, the "urge to reach beyond the monotony of life by deliberately embracing the unpredictable." ¹⁹ They were men who correctly saw in the risk-oriented frontier an unbounded field for their talents, professionals who would gamble on the fortunes of those gambling on the fortunes of the West. ²⁰ Having made their decision, they simply transferred their pursuance of that particularly American deity called Luck to the plains of Kansas where some of the more orthodox seekers of fortune's favors, called frontiersmen, awaited them.


²⁰. "Most [urban pioneers] were restless seekers after wealth ... who, driven onward by failure at home or the hope of greater profits in a new country, deliberately selected a promising frontier community as the site of their next experiment in fortune making." Billington, Westward Expansion, p. 7. The West naturally loomed before the enterprising as a magnificent land of plenty. Money and freedom it preferred, a combination that few of any persuasion, conventional or otherwise, find unappealing.
Popular and influential, the gambler often gravitated to the arena of local politics. Wyatt Earp (1848-1929) was assistant marshal at Dodge City 1876-1877 and 1878-1879. In 1878 he was a Ford county delegate to the state Republican convention in Topeka. Whether seeking private capital or public office, the gambler on the frontier was like other pioneers, reaching beyond the monotony of life by deliberately embracing the unpredictable. The only difference was that sometimes the dice were loaded.

To begin to understand the cattle towns we need only to glance over the first page of one of their newspapers, the Caldwell Post. On the masthead are the words: “In God we trust”—everybody else cash.” Caldwell or Dodge City or any other Kansas cattle town was that kind of place. As their historian, Robert R. Dykstra, noted, they were “frankly ambitious frontier settlements . . . [which] through the medium of the range cattle trade . . . sought the rare prize of city status.” But typically, like most opportunistic frontier settlements, their appearance belied their ambition and direction. The classic description of one of their upstart contemporaries, Silverton, an 1879 Colorado mining town—“This place impresses one as having gotten there before it was sent for”—was equally applicable to the cattle towns of Kansas. Such budding metropolises could afford to be temporarily unconcerned with their lack of visual appeal because they fully understood that sin, not aesthetics, provided their road to urban salvation. The basic process was simple: each spring, coming most commonly from the cities of the Middle Border, gamblers, frequently accompanied by harlots, commenced their annual pilgrimage to bring tarnished glamor and manipulated excitement to the nondescript centers of the Plains. By October the season would be


largely concluded: most of the cattle gone north, the cowboys south, and many of the professionals back east, with the rites of summer completed for another of what would be for those concerned, all too few years. These were the days "when Texas cattlemen were legitimate prey of all classes, from the highest to the lowest," and where numbers of "just plain, everyday, bow-legged human[s]" came to town absolutely committed to having a good time regardless of whether they enjoyed themselves or not. The boom towns of the frontier, Abilene or Dodge City or any of the rest, were like modern Las Vegas.

HEYWOOD BROUN once remarked that "The urge to gamble is so universal and

24. Ellsworth Register, October 3, 1872. Those who remained were subject to the off-season doldrums: "Just present his stock in trade is light. His back roll, which last summer he flashed from every occasion, now scarce ever sees the light of day. In the place of twenties and fifties he has ones and twos, and only occasionally does a "five card," meet his piercing eye. He makes no reckless bets, nor does he indulge in games whereof he does not understand..."


Electation to public office rarely affected a gambler's true propensities. Mike Meagher was elected mayor of Caldwell in April, 1860, and was arrested four months later for running a keno game. He was killed in December of the following year during a gun battle in his saloon. In the photograph, opposite, of Dodge City's Front street in the 1880's, the upper sign on the wall warns that the carrying of firearms is against the law. The gambler's personal and occupational penchant for carrying concealed weapons accounted for a number of convictions and was a source of local revenue. The derringer pictured with the poker hand is from the Historical Society's collections.


the professionals. An intrinsic aspect of the Southern gambling heritage was that gambling was one of the proper pursuits of a gentleman, particularly one of leisure. As the local propagators of leisure class behavior and social standards, the gamblers naturally acquired the attendant prestige. The local standing of gamblers was such that they played their trade securely behind open doors, being properly visible to the streets and to all passersby. Cattle town mores and interests being what they were, gambling was not an activity to be conducted in the dark secluded secrecy of enclosed back rooms. Wagering was not something to be ashamed of, rather it was something accepted and regarded as highly as any other successful local business endeavor. Under any circumstances, it would be a foolish and no doubt temporary town that would choose to conceal rather than showcase one of its more notable and popular attractions.

No doubt part of the local favor towards gambling can be attributed to the professionals themselves, most of whom seemed to have simply oozed personal charm at will. The elements involved might vary but the result was consistent. The gambler, given the proper appearance, demeanor, and style was perceived as a leader in society, one whose popularity knew no bounds. In an article entitled “A Nice Young Man,” gambler-gunfighter Luke Short was described as “a regular dandy, quite handsome, and [a local physician] says, a perfect ladies man. He dresses fashionably, is particular as to his appearance, and always takes pains to look as neat as possible.

At Dodge City he associates with the very best element, and leads in almost every social event that is gotten up.” It was, however, more than mere superficial captivation, no matter how adroitly accomplished, that made numerous gamblers so well liked; it was basic personality. Even those locals who found wagering distasteful at best “freely acknowledged their appreciation for many of its practitioners.” Perhaps the best illustration of the local stature accorded to professional gamblers occurred as part of the 1885 fourth of July festivities in Dodge City, popularly and likely historically as well, the cattle town. There locals paid 10 cents each for the privilege of selecting the most popular man in town. The overwhelming winner was none other than “Bat” — “I am a gambler by profession” — Masterson. From all accounts, no one was surprised.

HAVING acquired a substantial base of popular support, numerous members of the sporting fraternity logically gravitated to the arena of local politics, the traditional medium for frontier businessmen to increase their economic efficaciousness. Besides those of the profession who entered the political contests for sheriff and marshal, there were even some who campaigned successfully for the


34. Ford County Globe, Dodge City, February 17, 1885. Men of personal quality who, for whatever reasons, chose a life of wagering were not, of course, limited to Kansas. The example of a Tombstone Arie, careerist called Napi Nick is illustrative. Napi Nick was a professional gambler of the old school, [who] looked more like a sedate judge. He was often called “Judge” by many. He was white-haired, wore Uncle Sam chin whiskers and was always dressed in a sedate black suit. One day two men came to town and asked to see Judge Nicholls of Napa City, California. Directly to Napi Nick, they recognized their man but were much taken back to learn that he was a gambler. Later on the two men learned that Nicholls’ residence at Napa City was one of the show places of the town and that the judge’s wife and two pretty daughters moved in the best social circles. They concluded by stating that although the judge was away most of the time, he was a liberal contributor to many charities, a leading benefactor of the town, and one of its most admired citizens.” — Odie B. Faulk: Tombstone: Myth and Reality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 123.

35. In the midst of the aftermath of the killing of Ellsworth’s popular sheriff, Chauncey Whitney, by drunken gambler-gunfighter Billy Thompson, a situation which was in part a result of difficulties between Thompson’s brother Ben and other local gamblers, the presumably antigambling editor of the Ellsworth Reporter wrote that “As a profession, too much can not be said against gambling, but there are in Ellsworth two or three men who have no other apparent occupation, whose word is as good as gold, and who aside from betting, act the part of gentlemen.” This was not a strictly local phenomenon, see, Lynn J. Perrigo, "Law and Order in Early Colorado Mining Camps," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Cedar Rapids, Jan., 1941, p. 54. In this article on Colorado mining towns of the 1860s, an issue “Doc” Thayer is mentioned as being one of the gambling proprietors who were remembered as “men of character and often of high respectability” and as “giving good advice.” Alaska, Thayer, was also a very close friend of a local minister. A typically mobile and opportunistic frontiersman, Thayer later operated major gambling halls in both Newton and Wichita.

36. To commemorate the occasion, Masterson was given, appropriately enough, a gold watch chain, with a gold-headed cane to follow. — Kansas City Journal, Dodge City, July 11, 1885; Ford County Globe, July 7, 1885.

The true occupational gambler was a consummate craftsman, and his skill could be absolutely bewildering to his opponent. Harry Gryden (1843-?), Dodge City judge, once described the accomplishments of the famed Dick Evans: "...there's something in his wink that neither man nor woman can withstand, and he won my last chip on a pat flush. Why...he can tell by the smoke from our chimney top if there is a chip in the office; and he comes for it; and he gets it."

higher local offices, including mayor. 38 A few of the more ambitious and intrepid gamesters managed to participate at the state level. Of the delegates from Ford county to the 1878 state Republican convention in Topeka were the prominent gambling cohorts and occasional lawmen, Charles E. Bassett and the as yet undeified Wyatt Earp. 39 That men who were professional students of human nature and behavior, who were dependent upon their ability to attract and retain the attention, trust, and patronage of both new and returning customers, were able to advance, or perhaps descend, into politics should not be a cause of wonderment. But the fact that they also became vestrymen and deacons might be surprising. Yet these religious brothers of the green cloth were remembered as being "true to their offices and were regular attendants at the services, as well as the best people in town." 40

Apart from the attitudes and achievements so far discussed, the gambler remained a businessman. 41 His economic orientation, values, and ambition were recognizably identical to those of the conventional local worthies. 42 Both

38. Election to public office rarely affected a gambler's true propensities. For example, sporting man Michael Meagher was first appointed and later elected city marshal at Wichita in 1871 and 1875 respectively. At the completion of his second term in office he moved to Caldwell where he was elected mayor in April, 1880. Four months later Mayor Meagher was arrested and fined five dollars for running a keno game. He was killed in December of the following year during a gun battle in his saloon. "Records of the City of Wichita," 1871-1881, misc. papers, ms. box 168, manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society; Caldwell Post, April 8, 1880, December 22, 1881; "Records of the City of Caldwell," 1879-1889, police docket, August 2, 1880, ms. box 144, manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society.

39. One of the two alternates for the two Ford county representatives to that year's congressional convention in Wichita was Masterson.—Ford County Globe, August 13, 1878.


42. "It seems clear that the dominant consensus at the cattle town was nearly always that of its business community."—Dykstra, The Cattle Towns, p. 356.
were committed to the pursuit of a common objective—the acquisition of capital. Although their methods differed, the integral components involved were hardly dissimilar, for the "very elements considered to be the major characteristics of gambling, namely competitiveness, chance and uncertainty are, at the same time, part and parcel of the market economy." Most important, in terms of local acceptance, was the fact that the gambler was largely an independent financial success. He represented money, so easily acquired that it seemed not to be earned, embodying that eternal human fantasy "of acquiring a lot of money all at once, and without effort." In the cattle towns or virtually anywhere else in the American West, that was the ultimate status symbol. The true occupational gambler was a consummate craftsman, an awe inspiring success, so good at what he did as to be absolutely bewildering to his opponents.

... there's something in his wink that neither man or woman can withstand, and he won my last chip on a pat flush. Why, he can tell by the smoke from our chimney top if there is a chip in the office; and he comes for it; and he gets it.

The extent of his activity, even more than his profitability, was a prime economic barometer, an acknowledged gauge of local commercial conditions. And on a more direct level, through a system of licensing and fines, gambling clearly made its contributive presence felt.

THE INAUGURAL implementation of periodic taxation on local professional gam-

45. The tortured but admiring speaker was Dodge City Judge Harry Gryden addressing County Attorney Michael Sutton on the accomplishments of the famed Dick Evans.—Dodge City Times, April 28, 1877.
46. Ellsworth Reporter, June 20, 1872. As the Dodge City Times of October 6, 1877, succinctly put it, "Gambling was better last week than it has been... for many a day. A good indication that money is plenty."
Gambling in the Kansas Cattle Towns

47. The legal heritage of this action can be traced to the city of New Orleans where, in 1823, a law allowing the city to license six gaming establishments at the rate of five thousand dollars apiece went into effect. Passed at the urging of local officials as a means of procuring needed municipal income, the law was only half utilized in its first year, but completely so thereafter until its eventual repeal. - Salley, The Story of Song, p. 111. "Records of the City of Abilene," minute book, 1876-1878, pp. 69, 71, 94, ms. box 31, manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society. For a convenient summary of the individual implementation of this policy, see, Dekstra, The Cattle Towns, pp. 125-127.

48. "Records of the City of Wichita," 1871-1881, misc. papers, ms. box 169. "Records of the City of Caldwell," 1879-1888, police docket, ms. box 144. "Records of the City of Ellsworth," 1871-1910, ordinance book, ms. box 172, manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society. Legal provisions were made in the appropriate legislation for much higher tariffs but they were seldom if ever invoked. See, for example, Dodge City Times, August 10, 1876; Caldwell Post, August 21, 1876; Caldwell Commercial, March 10, 1881; L. Curtis Wood, Dynamics of Faith: Wichita 1870-1897 (Wichita: Wichita State University, 1969), p. 11.

49. See, for example, "Records of the City of Wichita," 1871-1881, misc. papers, ms. box 169.

50. See, for example, Caldwell Commercial, September 28, 1882.

Joseph G. McCoy (1837-1915), right, was mayor of Abilene and father of the Texas cattle trade. In 1871 he was also the first to implement periodic taxation of local professional gamblers, a practice subsequently adopted by each ensuing Texas trade center. Individuals were fined at a rate varying between five and 10 dollars, plus costs, for their monthly violations. Proprietors contributed from $20 to as much as $75 for the privilege of conducting their businesses. The trains of cattle cars in the sketch, left, are waiting to leave Abilene for Kansas City. Cattle pens owned by McCoy are in the background, and at right of the cars is Abilene's famed Drover's Cottage, also owned by McCoy. Both sketches reproduced from McCoy's Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (Washington, D.C.: Rare Book Shop, 1932).
Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine
(1862-1954)

'THE OASIS.'
(South Side Railroad Track.)

Wm. Tilghman, Proprietor.

Open at all hours of day or night.

The best brands of liquors and cigars are kept at this house.
A much more substantial source of income, both individual and communal, was represented by the gambling hall-saloons and dance houses, those places "where the unwary . . . [were] taken in and done for after the most approved style," many of which were owned by gamblers. The demeanor and general atmosphere of these establishments varied greatly; some were designed to be places for subdued and congenial conversation while others seemed almost dedicated to promoting the many arts of drunkenness, violence, and fornication, filled with "cuspiders which never seemed quite large enough for the expectorator who lacked pride in his accomplishment." At their best they represented the nearest semblance of civilization on the frontier. At their worst they proved capable of giving vulgarity a bad name. But whether a model of select decorum or one of overwhelming uprightness, whether one's requirements in imbibing consisted of fine French cognac or whiskey of dubious legitimacy and pernicious quality, the saloon was always more than a store where men bought a chemical that helped them deal with the world around them. It may have been patronized by multitudes of men dedicated to the pursuit of perfection in the art of whiskey soaking, but it performed other functions as well. As the young physician Samuel J. Crumbine recalled of his first tour of Dodge City,

Our next visit was to the Long Branch, one of the larger and more orderly saloons on Front Street, the Fifth Avenue of Dodge City. Here I met merchants, ranchmen, traders and several of the "gentleman gamblers." Everything was comparatively quiet; in fact, the place suggested business. Later I learned that many large cattle deals were consummated there.

Major business was conducted in such establishments for a sound economic reason, the same as that which underlies the modern "three martini lunch." As was observed regarding the skills of a local proprietor, "it is hinted that the manner in which he concocts a toddy . . . increases the value of a Texas steer about $2.75." To return to Crumbine,

we went on to the local gambling palace where I was struck by the formality with which the players dressed. Most of them had on frock coats, the kind we called a Prince Albert.

As I watched these men playing poker, I was fascinated by their guarded movements. Their faces were blank. Nothing betrayed how they felt. Not a sign of tension was visible, though the "pots" were large. But as the play grew more exciting, one of the onlookers changed his position and stepped in close behind a gambler who was playing his hand close to his chest.

The town professional was a wandering craftsman who spent his nights engaged in pastime duels for momentary personal and economic supremacy and his days in sleep and leisure. A man of few words, he was a master of the looks that speak volumes. In his dress, in his manner, in his life itself, he was "Gilded Age" extravagance personified, frontier-style,

While a young physician Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine practiced medicine in Ford county and later described his experiences in the book, Frontier Doctor. He recalled Dodge City's Long Branch Saloon, interior view, opposite, as one of the larger and more orderly saloons on Front street. The atmosphere was quiet, he wrote, and many cattle deals were consummated there. At a local "gaming palace" he was impressed with the formal look of the gambler in a frock coat, and observed the concentration of participants in a poker game. The advertisement for the Oasis saloon appeared in the Dodge City Democrat, January 19, 1884. Its proprietor, "Big Bill" Tighman, noted marshal and sportsman, was treated by Dr. Crumbine for pneumonia, and the doctor remembered him when ill as being submissive and "humble as a child."
As the cattle trade moved west from Abilene, the first Kansas cattle town, citizens of the community viewed gambling and its attendant evils with less tolerance. Where the gambler had once been welcome as a commercial attraction and source of local revenue, he was no longer. The East had caught up with the West and he moved on. Year P. Wilson (1826-1899), editor of the Abilene Chronicle, was a leader of the town’s reformist element. On November 15, 1871, he reported that “the devil’s pimps” had “had their day.”

Conspicuous consumption on the plains of Kansas. A man who saw gambling as an obvious form of personal initiative, he was always present-oriented, the future being too uncertain, too ambiguous for him to be otherwise. Understandably, ridding oneself of any surplus funds never presented any great problems for the gamer. As one of his contemporaries with a good deal of experience in such affairs put it, “Anybody,” said Jay Gould, “can make a fortune. It takes a genius to hold onto one.”

Money, then, was to be treated cavalierly, to be generously and mindlessly squandered. Yet despite the seeming obsession with things material, money in itself was relatively unimportant. Gamblers desired money because its mere possession denoted winners, society’s successes; not money for money’s sake but money for its symbolic value was the point. For the professional wagerer, being mercenary did not preclude being charitable, in fact, it facilitated it. Consequently, consolidation of

57. “He seldom lives frugally who lives by chance,” the worldly Samuel Johnson wrote. “Hope is always liberal; and they that trust her promises make little scruple of revelling today on the profits of the morrow.” —Campbell, “Who Wants To Be a Professional Gambler?” p. 275.


59. “As usual,” Dodge City pioneer Robert M. Wright wrote, “the gang was flush, and you never struck a more liberal crowd when they had money.” —Robert M. Wright, Dodge City, The Cowboy Capital and the Great Southwest in the Days of the Wild, Indian, the Buffalo, the Cowboy Dance Halls, Gambling Halls, and Bad Men (Wichita, 1913), p. 211.

“Probably the most pitiable sight that has been seen on our streets was a young man, lately discharged from the U. S. army, who is in the last stages of consumption and only kept alive by stimulants [sic] furnished by the saloon men of our city. He was trying to get home but had no money. This was told to W. B. Masterson last Tuesday evening, and he in company with two others proceeded to canvass what is called the ‘rough element’ of the town, for funds to send the man to his home in Flint, Michigan. Mr. Masterson raised in less than an hour $22.00 [sic], which was turned over to the man, who could not find words to express his gratitude. It was a touching sight, one that will not soon be forgotten. It is a well known fact that whenever there is a contribution to be raised this element is the first to go down in their
profits ranked considerably lower on the priorities than the ever-potential opportunities for greater winnings. Of course one does not need to be a compulsive gambler to realize that an obsession with endless victory will inevitably result in something quite different. But, as the renowned modern professional Nick the Greek has suggested, for the true gambler, "The next best thing to playing and winning is playing and losing." And if, "In our culture, money is a measure of the investment of a player in a game," then the reckless improvis-

jectories and the most liberal givers."—Dodge City Democrat, October 24, 1885.

Cattle town historian Robert R. Dykstra has disputed the common conjecture that frontier professionals "removed the cash from incorrigible amateur players on a scale that is legendary." by maintaining that the rather exalted status accorded to the cattle town gamblers "probably [tempted] many with only marginal skill to adopt the sporting life as an occupation." However, it seems logical to assume that while a number of modestly talented individuals, in keeping with the prevailing entrepreneurial milieu, attempted to gamble on a professional basis, their lack of skill would guarantee almost immediate failure. In the highly competitive arena of professional gaming, only the substantially accomplished survive, let alone flourish, and those who do not win cannot continue to play. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that those lacking in adequate aptitude and ability who nonetheless aspired to professional status would not remain in the occupation long enough to diminish its level of profitability. Indeed, the net result of their efforts undoubtedly added to, rather than subtracted from, the amount of capital gain enjoyed by the true professional.

The second part of Dykstra's argument—Furthermore, the gambler's income remained especially subject to variations in the local economic picture"—is more substantial. Doubtless professional bookers, along with all other businessmen, felt the impact of general economic ills. (See, footnote 24.) Unlike the largely immobile local commercial interests, gambling was imminently transferable, temporarily or otherwise, to a more favored location. Numbers of the profession did so each winter anyway, leaving after the end of the shipping in late October or early November, returning in the late spring sometime prior to the arrival of the first herds. The relative dearth of cowboys in the winter months was somewhat modified as trailing gradually gave way to ranching in the 1880's, tempting more of the sporting fraternity to extend their residency. But as the prospective clientele was still rather limited, an increased amount of playing time was likely spent in intra-professional games. Over the course of a winter, those profits which were not expended in the continued pursuit of a prodigal life-style were probably lost at the table of an equally self-indulgent cohort, with consumption of capital rather than its accumulation being the basic result for all.—Chalets, *Play the Devil*, p. 4; Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, p. 103.


By the late 19th century the sporting community was on its way to becoming the corporate controlled and impersonalized industry that it is today. The basic unit was no longer the professional gambler but that marvel of symbolic technology, the slot machine. The early examples of coin operated gambling devices, right, are from the Historical Society's collections. The wheel of fortune, above, had a vertical roulette wheel that would spin at the insertion of a nickel and paid off the winner in cigars. It was in use in a Topeka drug store about 1900. The slot machine, below, was another low stakes game that could be played for a nickel. This model was patented in 1894.
idence of the gamblers represents something more than mindless hedonism; it stands for collective over-compensation, a largely futile attempt to convince all of society including, perhaps especially themselves, that they were not small-time contestants.  

There was also the matter of appropriate apparel. Stylish, fastidious, and simply reeking of personal vanity, it was, in many cases, difficult to distinguish from its wearer. The ultimate goal? To reduce the entire town to despair with one’s sartorial splendor. Parsonious in the pursuit of vanity they were not, but men then were not part of a modest age. On the other hand, their choice and style of apparel did demonstrate a commendable business appreciation for the values of advertising, self-merchandising, and the reinvestment of profits. Many even gave themselves up to the unusual, expensive, and thoroughly astounding practice of regular bathing. For the sporting fraternity, more elegance may have implied less virtue but it proclaimed greater status. Their peacockism was physical evidence of their desire to rise above Western egalitarianism, to be seen as clearly set apart. This, like so many of their characteristics, did not reflect an aberration from a frontier trait, but an exaggeration of it. As their contemporary Mark Twain observed, “Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society”; for the brethren of the felt cloth, apparel was simply another, albeit the most apparent, manifestation of their ambition.  

Near the end of the Texas trade era a cattle town journalist reported:

Under the present order of things the demi-monde are permitted to visit the saloons and gambling houses after midnight. Strange to say, very little, if any disturbances are witnessed. [A] noticeable feature is the appearance of the same individuals on every occasion. Sam B. and S. P. Flo, are generally together. The “Rincon Kid” and “Little Dot” make another team, while “Eat-em-up-Jake,” Geo. Masterson, “Konk” and the “Stuttering Kid” bring up the rear with “Hop Fiend Nel,” Nel Thompson, H. C. Sadie, “Emporia Belle,” with “Sear-faced Lillie,” “Burney the dude” and Miss “One Fin” as a strong reserve.

Whether one referred to it with the then common euphemism “blacksmithing” or used something considerably more direct makes no difference: most gamblers were whores-mongers. The joining of forces of the gentle men of leisure and the ladies of joy formed a situation that was time-honored but simple—“She made the living for the two of them, and he spent his time gambling away the money she made and looking for prospects from whom she could extract more,” was the way one Westerner described a particularly non-romantic example. This was naturally a lucrative situation for the man, but aside from financial as well as physical considerations, there was an additional attraction involved, that of status. The West may have been a veritable land of plenty but not in terms of females, so “the scarcity of women gave their presence an importance far beyond their numbers.” To be the chosen man of a woman whose business was being chosen by men, in a land where men prided themselves on being men, was indeed status.

Of course not all whore-gambler relationships involved pandering, but nearly all had an economic component. If the woman were simply and solely the gamester’s mistress, the exhibition of her attracting presence at his table was a marvelous means of engaging the atten-

61. Herman, Gamblers and Gambling, p. 6.  
63. Billington, America’s Frontier Heritage, p. 101. In the larger cultural sense this interpretation accords well with certain aspects of Thorstein Veblen’s The Theory of the Leisure Class. The extent of the parallels between Veblen’s theoretical analysis of the leisure class and the behavior and goals of gamblers can be illustrated by a sampling of his chapter titles, e.g., “Pecuniary Emulation,” “Conspicuous Leisure,” “The Pecuniary Stand of Living,” “Pecuniary Canons of Taste,” “Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture,” and “Conspicuous Consumption.” More specifically, a member of the leisure class typically “consumes freely and of the best. Since the consumption of such goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorable, and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.” If the constituents of the conventional leisure class find it essential for the maintaining of their social standing to publicly display their ability to spend, then the gamblers, who aspired to such social standing, would naturally have to do likewise—Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (New York: New American Library, 1954), p. 64.  
65. Kansas Cowboy, September 28, 1885.  
tion of prospective customers. As, if, additionally, the lady happened to be particularly décolleté she could, at the proper time with a properly improper movement, greatly facilitate if not completely camouflage her lover's less than conscionable techniques. Under such circumstances the customer would certainly lose, but likely not without at least an inner smile. He may have been thoroughly cheated but he probably walked away from the table feeling, if not thinking, that his loss was not without its moments. A minor consolation perhaps, but one he would likely remember the next time there was money in his pocket.

In June, 1872, an observant journalist noted,

"Game is abundant in Ellsworth, just now. Buffalo, draw-poker, antelope, old-sledge, vention, faro, qualls, billiards, rabbits, euchre, elk and keno, are the prevailing varieties.*

For those who participate, the gambling table is the great American equalizer, one of the most efficient forms of financial redistribution known. To watch its progressions is to watch economic democracy in action. The special means used to achieve this end—the games themselves—often vary with time and place, and their individual popularity or lack thereof indicate something more than the current favored or unfavored vehicle for financial reassignment. Thus the nature of the games played is in a very real sense suggestive of the nature of those who choose to play them. There remains one constant in all of this, however, perhaps the fundamental rule of gaming: "If you keep on gambling, you will lose." Unless, of course, you cheat. All forms of gambling involve the factor of "imperfect information," the "never not really knowing," to the point of complete assurance. This continually nebulous situation proves greatly enjoyable to some, unbearably frustrating to others, and largely compelling to most. It motivates some men to gamble; it leads others to dishonesty. Individual reasons for manipulative deceptions vary, but it is the inherent inability to determine the outcome that fosters the recourse to predetermining it. This is especially true for the professional. Not only is his livelihood tied to that which theoretically cannot be controlled, but his self-image as well. There are very few successful losers in life or cards; professional gamblers by definition, are committed to the mathematically impossible—consistent and ultimate winning. That many all but managed to do so for improbable long periods of time says something about the degree of their skills, the quality of their opponents, and the extent of their honesty. Certainly they preferred to win with their talent, no doubt they were glad to win by luck, but when neither factor was operative, and the conditions were favorable, the obvious recourse was to cheat. The distinction between gambling and thievery is maintained in the following discussion of games and cheating, although it is not at all certain that the participants were quite so particular.*

It is reasonable to begin with that charming enterprise of highly dubious propriety.

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68. Ashby, Sucker's Progress, pp. 333-354. Since women and gambling had such a fatiguing way, one might well expect that there were numbers of female gamblers, yet there is just one concrete mention of a feminine gambler in all of the cattle towns—"a new damsel to get the cow boy's [sic] money—and we are afraid it catches a good many others—a woman dealing hard in one of the saloons." The commercial potential was there to be realized but apparently very few attempted to do so. One popularizer has suggested that feminine vanity was the cause for this dearth, that frontier women of unconventional bent preferred attention to their charms rather than their chips. Another has argued that women lacked the crucial ability to control their emotions. A more sensible explanation would be lack of opportunity. Daily training and experience were essential to a mastery of the craft. They were typically acquired through the tutelage of a master, the only alternative being actual gaming which was expensive schooling indeed. Likely most professionals were unwilling to take on female apprentices—no doubt partly because of sexism but also because of the first principle of economic self-preservation. Bane is the student who is more than a match for his teacher, all other things being equal. But if the student were a woman other things were not equal. By virtue of her sex she could easily be less valued and still more successful. Obviously, she was not to be encouraged. A gambler did not collaborate with a woman with the intention of incurring an economic disadvantage. —Caldwell Commercial, August 31, 1882; Dunne Alkmna, Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1927), p. 291; C. Martin, Whiskey and Wild Women, An Amusing Account of the Saloons and Bandits of the Old West (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1974), p. 222; Souvenir, Billy King's Tombstone, p. 57.


72. See, for example, Caldwell Post, November 6, 1879; Ford County Globe, January 6, 1880; Dykstra, The Cattle Towns, pp. 264-265. For example, there was a member of the firm touch gentry known as "Slippery Fingered" Jake, a man who "loathed playing with the small fry such as cowboys and small cattlemen, and preferred to engage the large cattle barons, where the sky was the limit." On one occasion, this singular individual was involved in a card game at Dodge City's justly celebrated Lady Gay dance hall. Apparently the normally adept Jake was having a less than adept day, for in his pastiche manipulation he managed to acquire, along with the desired hand, an undesired extra card, which he somehow managed to dispose of in an ordered sandwich, although, apparently, in a completely effective fashion. Thereafter "Slippery Fingered" Jake was known to the sporting fraternity as "Eat-Em-Up" Jake, perhaps with personal pride, certainly with augmented status. —Dodge City Journal, October 29, 1948.
known as three card monte, a game aptly described as “so simple and so time-honored that it is no less than wonderful that it can still find victims.”

Basically it is nothing more than a variation of the ancient “three shells and a pea, the hand is quicker than the eye” ruse played with cards, and traditionally its participants have been able to safely assume that they are being cheated. Still, there were some practitioners who were true gamblers, who concentrated on skill rather than theft, betting that they could indeed move their hands faster than others’ eyes could follow. For those with skill and patience, the typical ruse that was monte was a thoroughly unnecessary recourse. So played, the game was a favorite, lacking neither patrons, including other professionals, nor ample wagering.

When a cattle town resident referred to banks—“There has been a heavy run on the banks of this city for several days, and some of them have been compelled to suspend for the time being”—he was talking about faro, not other, more conventional financial institutions. Faro was a game which assumed a local significance far beyond what its economic success indicated because it fit the needs of the people and the times. A game instantly accessible to even the totally unfamiliar, faro was a true game of luck, not skill. Anyone could play it simply by picking any card on a layout and placing his wager on it. It was manifestly a game of action, played with intuition and feelings, requiring minimal concentration, a game of dynamics, not thought. To play faro was not to engage in a slow and intense contest of wills in which the final outcome might occur hours later; to play faro was to impulsively and mindlessly abandon one’s money to the blind dictates of chance, repeatedly experiencing the day of reckoning at the rate of twice a minute.

Having selected his card or cards, the player was, until the next selection, a spectator not a participant. That faro was the supreme money game was a function of its fundamental nature, equally appropriate to a myriad of small bets, a single huge one, or combinations thereof. Lacking any appreciable advantage for the banking player, it was also not a game which encouraged integrity, that appealed to men who were burdened by conscience or a fine sense of the general welfare. Those who could not cheerfully acknowledge and abide larceny were not in their element at the faro table.

Those who worshiped chance, who understood that “the money motive increases as chance predominates over skill,” did not seem to mind.

Unlike faro, which was favored by professional and amateur, resident and transient alike, the game of poker, the great American temptation, attracted a much more limited although no less enthusiastic following. Again, the basis of the situation is to be found in the nature of the game and those who did and did not take it to heart. Foremost among the latter were the cowboys. Poker has always been those things which a game like faro is not—a game of concentration, patience, and objectivity. For the typically indulgent cowboy the appeal of a game which demands both patience and concentration is likely to lose whatever attraction it may have originally possessed for him as the night grows longer and the drinks get bigger.

It has been argued that “Shrewdness, cunning, deception, conscious strategies, suspi-


74. Dickinson County Chronicle, Abilene, April 10, 1873; Ellsworth Reporter, July 3, 1873; Ford County Globe, June 10, 1884; Topeka Daily Commonsweath, September 17, 1871; George Jelks, Ellsworth, Kansas, 1867-1947 (Salina: Consolidated, 1947), p. 13; Abilene Chronicle, July 20, 1871. Despite its largely appropriate reputation as a vehicle supreme for fraud and theft, months, in an ever-changing series of disguises and forms, has yet to suffer from any notable lack of victims. For a recent example of its unending success see the Los Angeles Times, February 6, 1980, pt. 5, pp. 1, 3, 67.

75. Dodge City Times, August 18, 1877.

76. “Cheating... became as much a part of faro in America as a pack of cards.”—Asbury, Sucker’s Progress, p. 13.


78. The influence of poker has never been limited, see, McDonald, Strategy in Poker, Business and War, p. 37.

79. An additional factor would be the young man’s separation from home, a situation believed to be detrimental to one’s interest and participation in agonistic-type games such as poker. In comparison, the greater the distance from home the more appealing games of chance rather than skill—faro, for example—became. Herman, Gamblers and Gambling, pp. 86-87. Poker as played in the cattle towns, whether high, low, with or without jackpots, was primarily draw poker, the singular variation known as stud not appearing until late in the period. Herbert Asbury, among others, hypothesized that stud poker was a Western creation, that its name was the result of a slang term being “at stake the first time a game was played with exposed cards.” The latter if not the former part of this contention is supported by the following recorded occurrence which was apparently unknown to Asbury: “Two gamblers were fined $40 each in the [Dodge City] Police Court on Monday for disorderly conduct and cheating. The game is a new one in these parts, having been introduced a few weeks ago. It is called ‘stud’-horse poker.”—Asbury, Sucker’s Progress, pp. 27-28, 32-33; Dodge City Times, May 4, 1882.
cious appraisals of worth and character, and bold aggressions, all the repressed values of a competitive society are let loose and placed first in the order of proprieties” when men play poker.\textsuperscript{80} Doubtless the cattle town professionals had little difficulty summoning such traits to the fore, along with other personal attributes like self-control and courage which were of equal prominence. While faro was a game to make money with, poker was the game with which to make one’s mark. A contest for intensely competitive individuals not unfamiliar with quick recourse to violence, poker proved to be the healthiest and most obvious and accurate way to test and rate each other as players and as men. “Unlimited poker,” wrote the modern theorist John McDonald, “is not a game but a duel executed with money instead of pistols.”\textsuperscript{81} It was more so for the professionals, armed and skilled men who lived the game rather than merely played it. Slow and intense poker, demanding the all and the best of those who would play it well, was the game for careerists, so well suited to their lives that had it not existed, one suspects that they would have tried to invent it.

\textbf{WHEN THE} first wave of reform finally hit the first cattle town, Abilene, the local editor, Vear P. Wilson, wrote that the gamblers were “licentious and stealing characters who . . . crawled into this place in violation of the laws of the State and the ordinances of the Town.”\textsuperscript{82} What he neglected to mention was that they had also been welcome. But the transformation of the social and economic nature of the towns, from urban and commercial to rural and agrarian, ended the viability of locally conditioned gaming. What for the majority of the cattle town populace had been a social habit was now, for the new majority, a social cancer. Much of the longstanding tolerance of gaming had been based upon the widespread opinion that it was at the very worst a victimless crime. Now it was perceived as quite the contrary, with society itself being deemed the repeated victim. The consensus was clear: Abilene or Ellsworth or any of the others would join the ranks of those “towns with less name but better repute.”\textsuperscript{83} “The devil’s pimps . . . .,” as Vear Wilson smugly concluded, had “had their day.”\textsuperscript{84} So had the cattle towns.

The very onset of this transformation signified one very personal thing to the gamblers: what they had perceived as the mean little circumscribed minds that they had known so well at home, the ones that had perceived them not as men of personal enterprise but as some sort of green felt vultures, the ones that they had tried so hard to escape and forget, had caught up with them again. When those of this disapproving, reformist bent arrived it meant but one inescapable fact to the gamblers: the West, as they knew it, had become the East, as they had known it. Still, their faith in the future was easily sustained. Their goals, like those of other frontiersmen, may not have been particularly realistic, but then, the West was not a place that attracted the easily satisfied. To be a pioneer was to engage in risk-taking, an activity with which the gamblers had more than a passing familiarity.

Thus the gamblers began again to play out the frontier process of rebirth, repeatedly going westward to “grow up with the country,” in a country already grown up. It was a situation with many players and only a few winners, but then, throughout the history of the frontier it has always taken a few winners to keep the rest of the players continually in the game. As a modern researcher has suggested,

“The gambler is full of optimism and never learns from defeat.” Despite losses and reversals, the mathematics of chance and all logic, he “conveys the impression of a man who has signed a contract with Fate stipulating that persistence must be rewarded.”\textsuperscript{85}

When gambling was forced behind closed doors and became symbolically sordid, most who were professionals departed, if they had

\textsuperscript{80} McDonald, Strategy in Poker, Business and War, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, p. 25. “Competition among players is the central and most basic property of poker. Only one player captures the pot in each deal; all other players are losers. Poker is also one of those very few games that have no meaning without gambling. The betting intervals are essential. The fact that all players are rivals has suggested to many observers that poker is a miniature expression of basic competitive values of the wider culture. As Marshall McLuhan put it, poker calls for shrewdness, aggression, trickery, and unfaltering appraisals of character.”
\textsuperscript{82} Abline Chronicle, July 27, 1871.
\textsuperscript{83} Dodge City Times, February 7, 1884.
\textsuperscript{84} Ablene Chronicle, November 16, 1871.
\textsuperscript{85} Lindner, “The Psychodynamics of Gambling,” p. 95.
stated regarding horse racing (but equally applicable to all forms of gambling), “Let’s face it, the race tracks sell dreams. It’s amazing what a guy’ll pay for a dream.” 88 In the end, those who did not finally desist proved to be more gullible than even their clients. To compete was still perchance to win, and to win was to be one of the elect. That the realities of probability stood in conflict did not matter, for facts have never been all that important to those Americans who have believed in their own frontier sense of mission.

Chronicle, as cited in David Lavender, “This Wondrous Town, This Instant City,” American West, Palo Alto, Cal., v. 4, no. 3 (August, 1967), p. 14.

88. Waller, The Gamblers, p. 91.