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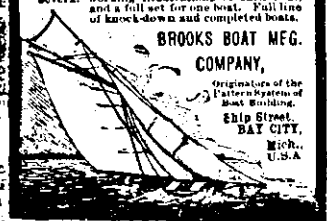
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FOOTBALLERS should drink O.T. PUNCH before every game.

"Silent" Smith's System

By FRED NYE

A POKER PLAYER WHO KEPT HIS MOUTH SHUT AND HIS EARS OPEN WITH MARKED SUCCESS.

There weren't many poker players in Cheyenne in 1875 more gifted than Wall Dickerson. He was a straight man in a straight game, but if he caught any other player indulging in Chinese he had a few tricks of his own which usually turned out a profit.

He was no hand for a "gun play" under any circumstances; just adapted himself to the situation, whatever it was—a marked-card game or an honest up-and-up trial of skill, courage and judgment—and he generally smiled.

But he wasn't really a merry man. He didn't smile like a fellow that felt good, but like one that had learned how in a smiling school.

Being the kind of poker player he was, with a reputation that reached all the way from Omaha to 'risco and back again, it was a mystery to everybody in Cheyenne the way he lost money that winter of 1875. There were generally five in the game—Wall and "Bud" Peterson and "Champ" Beebe and "New York Joe" and "Uncle Jake" Childs—and they played four or five evenings a week in the back room of "Jim" Bishop's saloon.

Peterson and Beebe had only been in Cheyenne a few months. The others were old settlers in the town. Peterson said he was a sheep man and Beebe claimed to be a cattle man, but of course nobody believed them. Cheyenne in those days was full of "capitalists" who were slighting for "sleepers" on the faro bank floors and borrowing quarters for drinks.

Every new gambler that came to town claimed to be a business man of some kind. Not that he was ashamed of being a gambler; but that he thought he'd stand a better show at that game if he posed as an amateur. This kind of foolishness might deceive the deacons of Montpelier, Vermont, but it didn't go far with the citizens of Cheyenne in 1875.

Well, that winter it was a case with Dickerson of playing for even after the first bet at every sitting, and never getting there. Once in a while he'd win a pot on his own deal, but never enough to put him to the good—net. And it wasn't luck that was against him. Nobody ever thought that. For one thing, Peterson and Beebe won all his money.

Luck plays a good many queer pranks, but she never sticks to the same parties like that—night after night. She flirts. Dickerson himself knew that it wasn't luck—that he was outplayed. But he wouldn't give up.

"There's twenty thousand dollars in the bank in my name," I heard him say once (that was in the fall before the big game began), "but it ain't mine; it belongs to any maverick that can hold better cards 'n I do in the show-down."

He was that kind of a sport. Just a custodian of other people's money, you might say.

At last one night, the end came. Dickerson had an ace full on kings. Peterson, who had drawn one card, raised him, and Dickerson raised Peterson, and so it went back and forth till there was about fifteen hundred dollars on the table and Dickerson called. Peterson laid down four little treys and took the money. Dickerson got up and lit a cigar.

"Gents," he said, "I'm all in. Good night."

Then he smiled—and went out. We didn't see him in Cheyenne again for some time. There wasn't much talk about him and nobody cried because he was gone. Gamblers don't have friends, even among themselves. The game eat their hearts out, as you might say.

Somebody declared that Dickerson had gone back to pounding brass (he was a telegraph operator before, he took to following the green), but no one ever

went to the trouble of finding out whether the rumour was correct or not.

Even the game at Bishop's seemed to get along without him pretty well. A railroad man with more cash than science dropped in and contributed several thousands to Peterson and Beebe. And there were others.

It must have been about four weeks after Wall left that we first noticed "Silent" Smith in town.

I never knew what his first name was. They called him "Silent" because he never spoke. He used to go around with a paper tab and a pencil and write out whatever he wanted to say.

At first he was kept rather busy writing "Deaf and dumb" on his tab, but the boys soon got to understand about him. They all liked him and sympathised with him. He was a careless, slovenly, dreamful man, and always had plenty of money to spend.

After all, you didn't need much conversation in Cheyenne in 1875. "Silent" Smith could hold up one finger at the bar, or three or four fingers if he had friends with him, and everything was understood perfectly. Or he could shove in enough chips to call or raise and there was no demand for explanations.

Sometimes in the game at Bishop's he did bring out his pad. Once he had raised Beebe a red stack and with the chips he pushed in one of his little square pieces of paper, on which he had written:

MONEY TALKS.

Like that. He was a joker in his quiet way.

He put up a fair game of poker, but he was no match for the Peterson-Beebe combination. However, he was a conservative player, and after he'd dropped twenty or thirty dollars at a sitting he knew enough to quit. Besides he didn't play so often as some.

It was a habit of his to sit near the table after he'd quit the game for the night. He'd rest his elbow on his chair arm and his head on his hand and close his eyes, and anybody would have thought he was asleep. Perhaps he was.

Another thing that we always noticed about him was a curious habit of tapping, tapping, that he had. Sometimes it was with his fingers, sometimes with his pencil. It annoyed the other speculators in the poker game at first, and one of them grabbed Smith's paper pad one night and wrote on it, "Stop that tapping."

Smith looked at the message with a sort of sad expression and then he wrote underneath:

"I can't. I'm nervous." After that they didn't bother him about it any more. As I have said, he was good to lose about thirty dollars every time he played and the boys felt that they could afford to be patient with him.

Along about the middle of March Wall Dickerson drifted back to Cheyenne. For some time he kept away from the game—said he'd quit the cards. But one night when he was looking on and Beebe stumped him to buy a stack and sit in, for the sake of old times, he took off his coat and rapped into a chair.

"Before investing," said Wall, as nearly as I can remember his words, "I'd like to make a few preliminary remarks."

"Fire away," said Beebe. "I don't say," said Wall, "that (his ain't a square game, and I don't say it is. I don't say anything about it, one way or the other. What I do say is that, if ebng a gentleman's game, we should make the agreement that if any party is caught at any particular variety of crooked play he shall cut that out from the time of the aforesaid discovery and go on as if nothing had happened."

"I don't want to see any guns and I don't want to hear any hot talk. I'm willing to live up to this contract my

self, and if you gents will do the same my money's yours."

Beebe and Peterson looked as though they'd like to start a dispute over this proposition, but they didn't quite dare to.

"Suits me," said Beebe finally. Dickerson asked for a new deck and the game began. It went on quietly for fifteen minutes or so and then Dickerson called a halt. It was Beebe's deal and he was shuffling the cards.

"Just a minute!" said Dickerson, quiet but firm. "That card-marker hitched to an India-rubber band which the gent is using, and which is up his right sleeve at the present moment, is contrary to the new rules and regulations of the game."

Beebe started to rise from his chair, but Dickerson looked him straight in the eye and he quailed and settled back. "No hard feelings," said Dickerson, pleasantly. "This is a gentleman's game and I hope the gents will all conduct themselves as such."

Beebe looked mad and silly both together for a minute and at last, seeing there was no other way out, he unfastened the contrivance from his sleeve and laid it on the table.

"We'll put it in the next jack-pot," said Dickerson, smiling, "and I hope I win it. I reckon it lays over any I've got in stock."

After that there was no interruption till Dickerson caught Peterson holding out the ace of clubs. Peterson behaved better than Beebe had under like circumstances.

"I didn't calculate to use it," Peterson said; "allowed I'd make a bluff to see if Dickerson's system was still working."

"Well," said Dickerson, "you found out."

Several times during that evening and the evenings that followed Dickerson discovered the cattle man and the sheep man attempting the use of tricks and devices which are not permitted in a straight game, but the matter was always settled in a polite and friendly way and finally there was no more trouble whatever. Beebe and Peterson had learned their lesson and settled down to straight business.

As for "Silent" Smith, as the game went on night after night he got more and more dreamful. The boys often had to nudge him to ante or come in. The only thing he didn't seem too sleepy to do was to tap. He kept that up with the regularity of a machine.

I suppose you have guessed that all this time Dickerson was getting the best of the game. He certainly was, and he not only quit 'way to the good the first night, but every night after that until those two partners in crime and science, Beebe, the cattle man, and Peterson, the sheep man, faded out of Cheyenne, leaving their entire stock of crooked paraphernalia and all their good money in his possession.

Ordinarily this kind of see-saw would not have caused much talk in Cheyenne in 1875, but there were points about the game which made it a mystery to all of us outsiders and which after Beebe and Peterson had gone we discussed for many weeks without coming to any satisfactory conclusion.

First, there was the way in which Dickerson had discovered the tricks that Beebe and Peterson were playing on him; nobody could explain that. Next was the fact that in all the play Dickerson was never once beaten in a show-down.

I never witnessed such poker as he played in my life. If he had seen every card his opponent held he couldn't have showed better judgment. Why, one night when I was sitting behind him I saw him lay down a flush—ace, king, queen, ten and seven of hearts—to Beebe without betting a chip on it.

Beebe showed his hand after Dickerson had passed out (although he didn't have to show it) and what do you think he had? The ace, king, queen, ten and eight of diamonds. He had Dickerson beaten by just one spot! And Dickerson