

## The Game of Draw Poker

(John W. Keller - 1887)

Reprint

Introduction

(G.R. Williamson)

Draw poker was born and bred in the United States.

In many ways the game epitomizes the raw bone tenacity of the American spirit that drove the western movement from the Mississippi River in the 1800's. Life on the frontier was harsh, hazardous and full of risks the pioneers were literally gambling on their lives each day. To both survive in the untamed west and to win at draw poker a man had to be skillful at what he did and count on lady luck to smile on him. He had to closely watch his adversaries and at times bluff his way out of a situation. The results of his actions could prove very profitable or he could lose it all, sometimes even his life. Draw poker then was a natural choice for the men of the American west who were used to risking it all.

The game was the result of an evolutionary process that started when poker first took shape in America early in the nineteenth-century. Just when and where it was first played is subject to a continuing debate among historians, as is the game's origins. Several postulations attribute the game's lineage to a French game called "poque" or possibly to a German game known as "pochspiel." British historians state that the game was a direct descendent of the English card game of "brag." Still other researchers claim that poker evolved from a sixteenth-century Persian card game called "as nas" that was

played with a twenty-five-card deck containing five suits and had rules similar to five-card stud poker. Since exact documentation of poker's early history is impossible to determine its inception will probably remain a mystery.

Poker is thought to have started in America sometime in the early 1800's, possibly in the saloons of New Orleans. From there it spread up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers by way of the commercial steam boat traffic. Then as the wagon trains and railroads pushed the frontier west, poker continued to gain popularity with the early adventurers. An English actor, Joseph Crowell, recorded seeing poker being played on a riverboat in his diary of 1829 and later in his 1844 book, *Thirty Years Passed Among the Players in England and America*. A reformed gambler by the name of Jonathan H. Green wrote about early poker in his book, *Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling*, that was published in 1843. Both men described an early version of poker that was played with a twenty-card deck (A-K-Q-J-10). Each of four players were dealt five cards and bets were placed on these five original cards without discards or draws. When the betting was over the owner of the best hand won the pot - in the order of one pair, two pair, triplets, full house (one pair and a triple), and four of a kind. Due to the limits of a twenty-card deck there was only a single round of betting before the winning hand was declared and this made bluffing a much more difficult maneuver.

As the game evolved it moved to a thirty-two card deck and then eventually to the standard "French deck" of fifty-two cards. Sometime in the mid-1830's straights and flushes were introduced as winning hands. A few years later draw poker was born and started making the rounds of gambling halls in the west. The first mention of draw poker

appeared in the American edition of *Bohn's New Handbook of Games* in 1850. In that same year wild cards were introduced in poker play.

With these enhancements draw poker and another version called stud poker became the card games of choice among the soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. Originally called, "stud horse" poker, the game was played around the campfires between battles and was a close rival to draw poker in popularity. Both versions are conducive to bluffing but in stud poker you are not allowed to draw or discard cards. Rather, some of the cards are dealt face down and some face up to the player so that everyone at the table knows a few of the cards being held by each player. Betting occurs after each new face up card is dealt and after the last face down card is dealt. The first mention of stud poker appeared in the *American Hoyle of 1864*.

In draw poker all the cards are dealt face down to the players and after all of the cards have been dealt there is a round of betting. Then players may discard any number of cards and receive the same amount of cards from the dealer. When all the players have completed their hands there is another round of betting before the winner is declared. Later, in 1870, jackpot poker was introduced in an attempt to prevent players with poor hands from being drawn into a pot that was impossible to win. In this version players were required to have jacks or better to open betting. If a player did not possess the minimum to play they were required to fold and lose their ante.

The first recorded set of rules for playing draw poker came about when Robert C. Scheneck, a United States ambassador to Great Britain, introduced the game to the members of Queen Victoria's court at a party in 1872. Fascinated with the new game the royalty asked Scheneck to jot down the rules of the game so they could play the game

after he returned to America. He obliged and his handwritten rules of play were then printed by the queen's staff for future parties. Later, without his permission or that of the queen's court, his set of rules were published as a small booklet and sold to the masses. Entitled, *A Flowery Path to Wealth: The Game of Draw Poker as Taught to the English Aristocracy*, the pamphlet was a major hit with the British people who quite often referred to the game as "Scheneck's poker". Scheneck, who had served as general under President Lincoln, was embarrassed by the public release of his rules, that he had been assured would be used privately by the queen's court.

John W. Keller, an American, included Schenck's rules for draw poker in his own book, *The Game of Draw Poker*, published in 1887. In addition, he used a portion of a letter written by Schenck to a political friend, Thomas L. Young, to describe how the ambassador had unwittingly become party to the publication of the first set of rules for the game.

Keller's book provided a more detailed account of the rules and variations to the game as well as a section on progressive poker, which he described as being "The latest development of draw poker and doubtless owes its origin to the popularity of progressive euchre." Contrary to Keller's comments progressive poker never caught the attention of American gamblers and its play quickly faded from the gaming scene.

Throughout the book Keller referred to a noted mathematician, "Dr. Pole" who provided the probability and odds for draw poker hands. At the end of the book he summarizes Pole's calculations in a series of probability tables which have stood the test of time. According to Dr. Poe's figures there is an astounding 2,598,960 possible hands in draw poker.

Since Keller's book was published in 1887 there have been a large number of books written on the subject of draw poker but few have been as clear and concise on the rules and the strategy of the game. His sage advice to "Study your adversaries carefully; watch the game closely; be patient in adversity and calm in prosperity," seems right in keeping with the old gambler's adage of knowing "when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em."

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