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**CARDS, CHIPS AND CHARACTERS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE OXFORD POKER PLAYERS**

by

Gwen Farnsworth

B.A., University of Montana, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts

University of Montana

1989

Approved by:



Chair, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

June 14, 1989  
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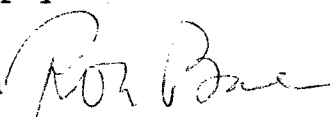
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Sociology

Cards, Chips and Characters: An Ethnography of the Social World of the Oxford Poker Players (175pp.)

Committee Chairperson: Dr. Robert W. Balch



This research is a case study of the social world of the Oxford Bar poker players in Missoula, Montana. An ethnographic description is presented of the daily life of the members whose central theme and common denominator is the game of poker.

Symbolic Interactionism is the theoretical framework from which this study evolved. Qualitative methods were used throughout the research process. Data was collected via participant observation aimed at developing and imparting empathetic understanding of the dynamics of the social behavior of poker players at the Oxford. Following the constructs of the Chicago School of Sociology, this ethnographic research was conducted in its natural face-to-face setting under the rubric of the sociology of everyday life.

The study concludes that the social world of the Oxford poker players is a highly cohesive albeit dynamic and ever changing phenomenon. Members gain status and membership in much the same fashion as those who join religious cults. The ritual of poker and its language reinforces the members' sense of group solidarity. The shared phenomenon of language, esoteric values pertaining to time, money and various strategies of play serve to bond members to their social world. This development of a strong social and emotional network encourages members to continue gambling even in the face of repeated financial loss. Without a replacement of that vital social network gamblers do not quit and thus preceding studies which isolated only the psychological or economic interests of gambling behavior have inevitably fallen short.

I believe this study sheds light on the complex facets of gambling behavior. Without the empathetic understanding gleaned from face-to-face ethnographic research it has been difficult to perceive why indeed gamblers don't quit. In the final analysis my study concludes that it is the combination of social, economic and emotional rewards that produce a social network. The social network is more powerful than any one individual and the need to belong and be a valuable member supercedes the need to be economically solvent.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is truly a social product. It reflects the everyday life of a particular group of people, but without the steady encouragement of yet another group, this slice-of-life would never have been cut.

This work is the culmination of literally years of effort. Completing the research was both extremely painful and exhilarating. Throughout its lengthy gestation I was the beneficiary of tremendous support from a variety of sources without whom I have not the slightest doubt I would never have finished. I wish to acknowledge and extend my deepest gratitude to those who made my thesis a reality.

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for extensions I would not have completed my task. Thank you Dorothy for being such a wonderful ambassador between students and the Graduate School.

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personality awakened me to the social world of the Oxford  
poker players.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT . . . . .	.ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS. . . . .	vi
CHAPTER I	
What's a Girl Like You Doin' in a Place Like This?. 1	1
CHAPTER II	
A Brief Look at the Literature of Gambling. . . . .	7
CHAPTER III	
Methods . . . . .	21
CHAPTER IV	
Setting the Scene: An Overview of the Oxford, Past and Present . . . . .	35
CHAPTER V	
A Typical Friday Night at the Oxford. . . . .	39
CHAPTER VI	
The Social World of the Oxford. . . . .	54
CHAPTER VII	
The Players' World . . . . .	70
CHAPTER VIII	
Playing the Game . . . . .	104
CHAPTER IX	
Language, Humor and Social Bonding. . . . .	124
CHAPTER X	
Conclusion: Some Reflections on Why Players Don't Quit . . . . .	146
GLOSSARY . . . . .	155
MAPS . . . . .	169
POSTER . . . . .	170
REFERENCES . . . . .	171
AN ALLEGORY IN HONOR OF THE POKER GOD. . . . .	176

## CHAPTER I

### WHAT'S A GIRL LIKE YOU DOIN' IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

What's a girl like you doin' in a place like this? This somewhat proverbial question was asked of me frequently when I was a newcomer to the Oxford bar, and I am still occasionally queried by a new arrival to the Oxford scene. My answer remains much the same today as it did eight years ago: "I love it here. It's a cross-section of life and I wouldn't miss this fun and variety for all the soap operas in suburbia."

The Oxford Bar and Cafe is located at the north end of Higgins Avenue in Missoula, Montana. Higgins Avenue is one of the oldest streets in Missoula and is named for one of the city's founders. The Oxford has a history nearly as old as the city itself. It is best known as a somewhat seedy downtown establishment catering to a variety of colorful characters. The Oxford is a gathering spot for many of Missoula's evening celebrants who congregate after the bars close to "continue the party" while enjoying an infamous breakfast of "brains and eggs."

Poker became legal in Montana in the early 1970's. Prior to this time an underground game had flourished at the Oxford. With the advent of legalized poker the Oxford became a licensed gambling establishment and to date it has one of the longest running poker games in Montana. Both poker and Keno

have continued to be a central attraction of the Oxford. Regular players and drop-ins from throughout the western states convene daily to swap chips, stories, and gossip.

I first entered the Oxford in June of 1980. I was thirty-two years old and had just graduated from the University of Montana. My family journeyed from southern Idaho for my graduation ceremony. My mother, four sisters and I all enjoy playing poker for reasonably competitive stakes, and, as there were many of us wishing to play, we were seeking a gambling parlor large enough to accommodate us at separate tables. I had heard of the Oxford through conversations with poker players at another bar but had avoided going there because I generally gamble alone and the Oxford is located in what was reputed to be a dangerous section of town.

We entered the Oxford that evening feeling somewhat titillated by our adventurousness. I remember nervous giggling on my part and that of my sisters. The first thing I noticed was a tremendous cloud of cigarette smoke in a generally shabby room filled with bar and cafe patrons and only two poker tables. We were a little chagrined as we had been led to believe the Ox maintained five or six poker tables. Upon inquiry, we were shown to the "back room", which did indeed house three other tables.

Unlike most bars in Missoula which attract a specific type of clientele, the Oxford seemed to draw a variety of patrons whose dress, demeanor, and speech signaled ethnic and

socioeconomic diversity. A wide age-range from college students to very elderly men also caught my attention. I had been led to believe the Oxford was a very rough blue-collar bar and thus I was pleasantly surprised by the folksy camaraderie I observed.

The players knew each other by name. They joked with each other, exchanged gossip, and appeared to take an interest in each other's lives. Hanging on the wall was a collection of hand-painted portraits of many of the Oxford's regular players. These and other indicators suggested that the Ox was more than just a place to play cards: it was a community of friends and acquaintances.

The "floorman" introduced himself to us and inquired as to whether we were interested in playing in any of the games, either in the front or the back rooms. A floorman is equivalent to a casino pit boss. He runs the card games, adjudicates any disputes, brings replacement cards and chips to the tables and finds seats for new players as they arrive.

We decided to try our luck and separated to various tables. While two of my sisters chose the higher stakes games in the back room, I decided to try the Stud poker game located in "the front", as the main section of the Oxford is known. I sat down at the Stud table, read the rules listed on the wall behind the dealer, and with a ten dollar bill, began an odyssey that has awakened me to the "culture within a culture" existent at the Oxford.

Poker playing at the Oxford constitutes what sociologists call a social world<sup>1</sup>. A social world is a loose, fluctuating network of individuals bound together by social relationships, shared understandings and interests. Historically sociologists have focused on social forms at opposite ends of the organizational continuum--highly structured groups such as formal organizations and ephemeral collectives such as crowds. In between these extremes are social worlds which are more permanent than collective behavior but less structured than organized groups. Examples of social worlds include cheerleaders, athletes, social workers, restaurant workers, bingo players, poker players, and countless other loosely-knit collections of individuals whose common interests and understandings provide a taken-for-granted basis for social interaction. Participants in a social world identify with the activities that unite them, and their commonalities set them apart from others. A vital aspect of any social world is the status of being an "insider," i.e., one who is "in the know" or who "knows the ropes."

Easily the most convincing indicator that the Oxford poker milieu constituted a separate, self-contained world was the fact that, although I was well versed in the language and rules of poker, I frequently had to guess as to what these

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<sup>1</sup>For studies of social worlds see Irwin 1977; Abrahams 1962; Prus 1980; Scott 1968; Spradley 1979; Whyte 1949.

players were talking about when they bantered and quipped at the table. I was both fascinated and annoyed by their esoteric interaction. Though I was treated courteously at the poker table, I was clearly an outsider.

The true meaning of "a girl like me in a place like this" can only be appreciated by understanding the separate, social world of the Oxford. In the months that followed my introduction to the Oxford, I came to understand the world of the scene as a regular poker player. Later, as a graduate student in Sociology, I was able to step back from what had become "my world" as a player and analyze the scene from a sociological perspective. This paper presents the results of that analysis.

What follows is an ethnography of the social world of poker players at the Oxford. I will describe the social organization of poker in the Ox, focusing not just on the game itself, but on the community of players and the significance that poker has in their lives. In keeping with the tradition of ethnographic research, my purpose is primarily descriptive. However, in the course of documenting the social world of poker players, I came to realize that my data had both theoretical and practical implications. My understanding of the poker world has led me to some conclusions about an important question in the study of gambling: Why don't players quit? The answer, I believe, lies in the social rewards that players derive from the game.

In the following pages I will briefly review the literature on poker playing and explain how my own study was conducted. Then I will describe in detail the social world of the Oxford with particular attention to the social organization of poker playing. Finally, I will return to the question of why players don't quit by explaining the significance that the social world of poker playing holds for its participants.



## CHAPTER II

### A BRIEF LOOK AT THE LITERATURE ON GAMBLING

Americans typically romanticize gamblers in literature and history. Writers such as Mark Twain with his river boat gamblers stories and the very popular television series Maverick, based on the lives of two fictional brothers whose chief pursuits were playing poker and performing heroics for fair damsels in distress, have captured the hearts and imaginations of Americans in both the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Winning a jackpot, the lottery's "big spin," or hitting it big on a long shot are all part of the American dream. In fact the United States has always been a gambling society. The thirteen original colonies were largely financed by lotteries, as were Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth and Columbia Universities. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson strongly advocated the use of lotteries to raise funds.

Although gambling is widespread in the United States, only a small minority of those who gamble become so involved that they have trouble quitting. According to psychologist James Coleman, an estimated

50 percent of the American population gambles at one time or another on anything from Saturday-night poker games to the outcome of sporting events such as the World Series or the Super Bowl.... But while most people can take it or leave it, an estimated 6 to 10 million Americans get 'hooked' on gambling (Coleman et al. 1980, Pp.361-2).

It is that minority--the so-called compulsive gamblers--who have received the greatest attention in the social science literature on gambling.

Most research on gambling in the United States has been conducted by psychologists who have regarded gambling as a symptom of underlying pathology. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III (Pp. 324-5) defines pathological gambling as a disorder of impulse control. The essential features of impulse control disorders include the following:

- 1) Failure to resist an impulse, drive or temptation to perform some act that is harmful to the individual or others. There may or may not be conscious resistance to the impulse. The act may or may not be premeditated or planned.
- 2) An increasing sense of tension before committing the act.
- 3) An experience of either pleasure, gratification or release, at the time of committing the act. The act is ego-syntonic in that it is consonant with the immediate conscious wish of the individual. Immediately following the act there may or may not be genuine regret, self-reproach, or guilt.

Several studies have attempted to discover personality correlates of pathological gambling. Traits associated with compulsive gambling include immaturity, rebelliousness, thrill-seeking, superstitiousness, psychopathy, and a strong need for adulation from others (Bolen, Caldwell & Boyd, 1975; Custer, 1976; Graham, 1974; Rostin, 1961). In a recent study by Graham (1978) pathological gamblers were found to have much in common with alcoholics and heroin addicts.

The individuals in each group are self-centered and

tense. They tend to overreact to stress and respond to negative stimuli in an impulsive manner. Pessimism and anxiety are their primary responses to stress. In general the people in each of the three groups are uncomfortable with their circumstances yet seem to have few if any positive coping mechanisms for dealing with stressors. Although each groups' members state a desire to turn over a new leaf, Graham found the prognosis for behavior change in traditional therapy is poor.

As these studies indicate, the study of gambling has been dominated by an individualistic bias. One notable exception is the Gamblers Anonymous literature. Although this organization considers gambling a psychological disorder, its therapy is based on the assumption that compulsive gamblers must be provided with rewarding social alternatives to gambling.

Gamblers Anonymous offers support therapy through fellowship as an alternative to continued gambling. It has been the reported experience of gamblers that one-on-one analysis, by itself, has a very poor record of helping compulsive gamblers<sup>3</sup>

The effectiveness of Gamblers Anonymous, compared to other approaches, suggests that researchers need to pay more attention to the social aspects of gambling. Yet there are very few studies of gambling as a social phenomenon. One of

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<sup>3</sup>For further information pertaining to pathological gambling see the gambling studies listed in the references.

the few is David Hayano's (1982) investigation of professional poker players. Hayano, an anthropology professor by profession and poker player by avocation, studied professional poker players in Gardena, California. He was frustrated by the lack of sociological research on gambling, especially the absence of studies based on actual participation in the gamblers' world.

...I began to survey all of the written publications on gambling by social scientists. To my surprise only a few books and papers were based on participant observation. I could find almost no detailed comprehensive information on the life and work of the professional gambler, and virtually nothing describing the professional poker player (Hayano, 1982, p.153).

Hayano learned about the esoteric world of professional gamblers by becoming a participant. He spent many months learning the game and as he became familiar with it he also became aware of the social world developed by the professional players.

Hayano's approach for studying the social world of professional poker players was to focus on the small-world realities in their natural environment. Subjective understanding of the dynamics of daily life in the professional poker players' world was achieved by his participant-observer approach. He found the "pros" to be exclusive in their endeavors. They considered themselves to be separate from non-professional players and marked the boundaries of their social world through the development of

a poker argot. Common face-to-face activities such as discussing poker strategies and retelling stories were also included in the social interaction amongst the poker pros which excluded nonmembers. Hayano discovered an esprit de corps between the poker pros reflected in their willingness to lend money and moral support to one another and in their "soft play" when pitted directly against one another in a game. Soft play is defined in the poker argot as not betting one's hand aggressively, usually as a favor to others in the hand that the victor likes.

By participating in the everyday life and work of the professional card players Hayano was able to analyze the socially constructed meaning which both creates and maintains their social world. "I take it to be the primary task of the ethnographer to understand and reconstruct how individuals experience and define their social lives" (Hayano, 1983, p.155). Hayano's analysis helps others to better understand the dynamics of gambling behavior.

Another examination of the subjective world of gamblers was conducted by John Rosecrance (Rosecrance, 1986, Pp.357-378), a professor of sociology and an avocational gambler. From his study of casino gamblers Rosecrance published articles and a book on the subject of why gamblers don't quit. Like Hayano, Rosecrance looked at the social world of the casino gamblers from a participant-observer perspective. His personal expertise in off-track horse race betting and sports

betting made inclusion in these subcultures easily attainable. He was much more limited in his poker studies due to absence of personal expertise and thus was relegated to a strictly observer role. He found gambling to be socially rewarding behavior. "Analysis of the data revealed that gambling commitments are developed and strengthened through binding social arrangements that form among the participants" (Rosecrance, 1986, p.365).

Rosecrance interviewed his fellow regular gamblers questioning why they continued to play even when they frequently lost. He received consistent responses which led him to develop a process model of escalated commitments to gambling and to other gamblers:

- 1) The stimulations of gambling are discovered.
  - 2) Some financial success is achieved, thus heightening stimulation and encouraging continued participation.
  - 3) The gambling world becomes familiar and safe, even in the face of decreasing stimulation (loss of money).
  - 4) Social relationships focused on gambling develop within the social world.
  - 5) Gambling relationships become increasingly important through a process of socialization and differential association.
  - 6) Relationships can be maintained only through continued participation.
  - 7) Gambling participation continues.
- (Rosecrance, 1988, P.86).

Rosecrance divided gamblers into two broad categories: occasionals and regulars. Within these categories he examined the insiders' and outsiders' roles and status. He clarified the difference between occasionals and regulars by noting that

these are self-designated groupings and that regulars would agree their lives have been changed and influenced by their gambling; occasionals would not. Moving from occasional players with few significant ties to other gamblers, to becoming regulars whose identity is bound to like-minded others, is accomplished through networks of communication built on shared perspectives of reality.

This shared understanding of the gamblers' social world creates an insider-outsider distinction. Insiders are privy to the inner sanctum of the gamblers' world. They know and perpetuate the lore of their social world. They understand the inside jokes and share in the common misery and exultations of their fellow gamblers.

Outsiders are those players who may indeed be familiar with the gambling pursuit at hand but whose exclusion from the inner workings of the social world relegate them to task-oriented interactions with insiders. While their participation is often central to the game, and to that degree they are part of the game, they are not part of the social world.

Empathetic understanding via peer support is a central coping mechanism identified by Rosecrance as a bonding factor in the gamblers' social network. One common hazard all gamblers struggle to overcome is a "bad beat." In poker a bad beat constitutes losing a poker hand to a player who took a long shot. Rosecrance notes that virtually all regular horse

players have experienced bad beats of varying degrees of seriousness and can empathize with other gamblers who are attempting to cope with one. Players often initiate communication by assuring the losing gambler that his or her experience is not unique and that someone else understands. He places major emphasis on argot as an integral part of gamblers' social reality. Argot-based accounts of bad beats are very common in the gamblers' social world.

Both Hayano and Rosecrance call for a rounding out of gambling studies to better understand the dynamics of poker players' social worlds. Rosecrance declares he does not have the poker expertise to function as a participant-observer and Hayano has only studied professional poker players.

Louis Zurcher cast some light onto the social world of a small stakes private poker players' clique. Zurcher's development of the theoretical concept of the ephemeral role in his studies of a disaster work crew (1968) and a private, closed group poker clique (1970) was invaluable to my efforts to analyze the subjective realities of the poker players' social world. He defined ephemeral role as "a temporary or ancillary position-related behavior pattern chosen by the enactor to satisfy social-psychological needs incompletely satisfied by the more dominant and lasting roles he regularly must enact in everyday life positions" (Zurcher, 1970, p.156). Zurcher maintained that people adopt separate identities when participating in a focused gathering. These new identities



call for different role behavior than their outside status would demand. Freedom from dominant role expectations is a large part of why actors choose to participate in focused gatherings.

Like Zurcher, I became aware of the difference between players' everyday life positions and their ephemeral roles as I interacted with them on a regular face-to-face basis. When I first began to examine the Oxford poker players' social world from the perspective of a participant-observer rather than strictly as a participant, I began to notice the phenomenon of the ephemeral role. As I was unfamiliar with Zurcher's work on this concept, I dubbed this phenomenon, "their other lives." Later, when I discovered Zurcher's concept I felt a strong sense of identification. The behavior he described as ephemeral role behavior was clearly enacted by the members of the Oxford poker world. The common denominator of the social behavior in Zurcher's study and my own is the conscious undertaking of an ancillary role by players to satisfy social-psychological needs unmet in their everyday life positions outside of the poker world. I have developed this idea in the chapter on the social world of the players.

In connection with this construct, Zurcher analyzed the social dynamics of the two groups. His main thrust was the benefits of membership in a focused group and how socialization into the group is attained. Argot, scripted

competition, style of play, bluffing, insider knowledge, and camaraderie are central to Zurcher's examination of the private poker game. Scripted competition, where members "knock heads" with one another in a very competitive but friendly manner maintains balance within the group. Players are chosen for their ability to play at a challenging level which is neither too easy nor too slick to undermine the flow of the game. Argot functions to reinforce the esoteric nature of their closed group. Teasing and poker talk are predicated upon the understanding of their specialized language. Within the closed focused group cohesion and camaraderie are strengthened by bluffing. Getting caught in the act leads to retelling and contributes to the lore of the group. Bonding is also strengthened by the sense of insider's knowledge, because the group shares something outsiders don't have access to.

Since the important thing to poker is not the cards but the betting, not the value of the players' hands but the players' psychology, as one gets to know the strengths, the weaknesses, the habits, quirks and tendencies of the other players, the play becomes increasingly interesting (Zurcher, 1970, p.166).

Another study of the dynamics surrounding why people play poker was conducted by Martinez and LaFranchi (1969). They suggest that poker is a substitute for other social deficiencies. They perceive losers at poker as attempting to use gambling as a substitute for satisfactory primary relationships. Those who need action in their lives can seek

a release of tension not afforded in their normal activities in a brisk poker game. Winners and break-evens seem to play poker for the opportunity to enjoy successful gamesmanship with its concurrent financial and status rewards.

Very few participant-observation studies of bar room poker exist. Of the three I located, Hayano's dealt specifically with professional card room players. Rosecrance's studies examined casino gambling and while they are outstanding for their contribution to the understanding of the social world of casino gambling in general, they offer no input from a participant's point of view on non-professional poker players.

Of limited benefit to my study was a thesis written on poker playing as a dramaturgical event (Boyd, 1975). I was very excited when I discovered this thesis because it was one of the few studies on poker players and it was conducted here in Missoula in three local bars including the site of my own study, the Oxford. As I read this paper I kept looking for common denominators. With the exception of her development of an excellent and thorough glossary of the poker argot, I was unable to identify with the scene she described. I asked some long-time poker regulars what they thought of the study. Each responded that they didn't understand it and didn't recognize any of the players she wrote about. My own sense was that it was rather inadequate. I believe this could be due to the very early nature of legalized poker in Montana at

the time she wrote her thesis. Perhaps not enough time had elapsed to develop the rich scene I observed at the Oxford in the 1980's. Again my sense was reinforced that an ethnography of the Oxford poker player's social world could yield valuable insight into gamblers' socially constructed world.

I wanted to understand the dynamics of gambling behavior of non-professional poker players. To my surprise only a few studies could be found in the literature on this very common occurrence in Montana. Despite numerous studies of gambling from psychological perspectives the basic question of why gamblers don't quit remains unanswered. Rosecrance's research began to fill in some of the informational gaps by looking at gambling from a sociological perspective.

...persistence at casino gambling can be explained meaningfully in terms of the participant's relationship to the social structure. The mechanisms of commitment to gambling have been located in the binding social arrangements that develop among the participants. Previous attempts to explain the ubiquity and persistence of gambling have stressed the economic dimension--the winning or losing of money and the psychological implications--the ineffable drives that propel the participants whereas the sociological components have been largely overlooked. Data from the study reveal that for many regular casino participants, the sustaining dynamic of gambling is not the game itself but the interaction of players. The seemingly complex issue of why gamblers don't quit is that, for them, the rewards of social integration outweigh the costs of participation (Rosecrance, 1986, Pp.374-5).

The paucity of research from a sociological perspective concerning the social question of why gamblers don't quit especially in the wake of repeated loss calls for a joining

of disciplines. Studies such as mine will help to shed light on this paradox. Central to the understanding of the dynamics of gambling behavior is the sociological examination of social worlds. People develop social worlds around common interests or needs. The number and variety of social worlds is limited only by human imagination.

Rosecrance's conclusion that the social rewards of gambling outweigh the costs of participation is echoed in other studies of social worlds. One example is Straus's (1979) study of the religious cult known as Scientology. Straus rejected the argument that Scientologists have been "brainwashed." Instead he claimed that the process of becoming a Scientologist is the same as the process of becoming a member of any social world.

The focus of his research was the "colonization" of members into religious cults. He defines colonization as "immersing oneself in the social life, interests, activities and institutions of a world" (Straus, 1979, p.6). Straus hypothesized that seekers are groping towards a maximization of such desired values as gratification, contentment, solidarity or self-esteem. Having achieved membership in a social world (in this case a religious cult),

...they attempt to progress through its various status passages. As they stake more and more of the time, money, reputation and self-image upon such participation and begin to accrue the world's things of value, such as status, esteem and affection, it becomes easier and easier to continue and more and more difficult to give up this socially-ordained line of conduct (Straus, 1979, P.18).

Straus concluded that the central phenomenon of colonization is that the world and its activities become the focus of the person's living. These ideas are directly related to the phenomenon of the poker players' social world at the Oxford. As the Oxford poker players become socialized into membership in the social world, by increasing involvement and group identity, they too become colonized. Although the poker players' social world is vastly different in substance from that of members in a religious cult, they develop out of a similar socialization process. In this regard a parallel exists between all social worlds regardless of their particular focus and serves to illuminate an understanding of group behaviors.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

In order to study the social world of poker players I adopted the method of participant-observation. Rosecrance and Hayano are trained social scientists who belong to a particular social network of gamblers. Their studies clearly reflect both their sociological background and their empathetic understanding of that social world. Insiders' knowledge gleaned from participant-observation and, they agree, unobtainable through any other research techniques, provided them with crucial insight into the dynamics of the social behavior of poker players. My study of the social world of the Oxford poker players is of the same genre.

My role as an observer in the subculture of the Oxford poker players developed in what can best be described as an oblique fashion. After completing the course requirements for a master's degree in Sociology, I began to concentrate on a project for my thesis. I had co-authored a paper on another subject with Dr. Robert Balch, and for two unproductive years I struggled with various aborted attempts to isolate and further explore some aspect of our paper for my thesis. Although I thoroughly enjoyed the research and subsequent development of the paper, I never identified this project as my own area of expertise.

While I was intellectually thrashing around with this

dilemma, I frequently entertained myself by playing poker at the Oxford. After two years, I went to Dr. Balch, and proposed a change of research projects. I convinced him that during the time of my indecision, I had inadvertently discovered a world rich in qualitative sociological data.

Initially I was a stranger to the Oxford scene. As I began to play poker frequently and familiarize myself with the specialized language of the poker players, I became a part of the scene. I made many friends and became acquainted with most of the regulars. Along with becoming a regular player and kibbitzer, I also accepted employment as a "runner" and "cage person." My duties as a runner were to act as a waitress to players in the game. I would take orders for food, drinks, and cigarettes, and deliver these goods to them at the various poker tables. The idea was to keep players at the table and, of course, concurrently to maintain a steady "rake" (percentage of each pot) for the house. In my capacity as a runner I interacted very closely with players who I might otherwise not have known since I played only at the Stud table during my early years at the Ox.

I also experienced a variety of attitudes and behaviors from players and less central figures in my capacity as a cage person. The cage is the central nervous system of the Oxford. It is the office and teller station from which all checks, chips and cash are handled and disbursed. Because it is the site of all the fiscal interactions, the cage person is often



keenly aware of the financial state of regular customers. As a cage person and fellow gambler, I frequently dispensed cheer and words of encouragement or condolences along with the monetary transactions. A great deal of bonding was established in the ten months I was employed at the Oxford.

The more I became familiar with the Oxford, and especially the world of the poker players who were part of the Oxford community, the more I realized that here, indeed, was the perfect topic for my research.

I will examine the various facets of this scene from the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism. This sociological approach was initially influenced by Max Weber, who emphasized the importance of understanding society from the viewpoint of the individuals who act within it. He applied the term verstehen to this subjective approach (Robertson, 1977, P.20).

Symbolic Interaction is the interaction that takes place between people through symbols such as gestures, shared rules, and most important, written and spoken language. People respond from the meanings they place on symbols not simply the symbols themselves (Robertson, 1977, P.21).

The Chicago School of Sociology has produced a number of renowned Symbolic Interactionists all of whom examine human behavior in its natural face-to face setting. Their studies ask the fundamental questions of how social life is possible, what kinds of interaction are taking place between people, how

do they interpret and understand what is happening to them, and why do they act towards others as they do?

Housed within the Symbolic Interactionist framework is the theoretical perspective of the "sociology of everyday life." According to Jack Douglas this perspective has three major tenets:

First, the sociologist of everyday life studies social interactions by observing and experiencing them in natural situations, that is, in situations that occur independently of scientific manipulation.

Second, the sociology of everyday life begins with the experience and observation of people interacting in concrete, fact-to-face situations.

Third, all analysis of everyday life, of concrete interactions in concrete situations, begins with an analysis of the member's meanings [author's emphasis].... Sociologists of everyday life do not begin by imposing their own meanings on their observations. They are concerned with finding what the members perceive, think, and feel (Douglas, 1980, Pp. 1-2).

The principal method of Symbolic Interactionism is participant-observation. Herbert Blumer, a leading Symbolic Interactionist emphasizes the importance of grounding sociological generalization in first-hand observation. In a speech before a group of "Chicago School Irregulars" he urges...

Don't view the world through a whole array of pre-established images. Sociology, to be a true empirical science, must deal with the world as it is. It must attain intimate familiarity in depth. An empirical science must come to grips with its empirical world. If one is to study something, it is required that one must respond to the nature of what one is studying. We must not view people as finished products, as relationships of independent

variables and dependent variables. We must first recognize humans as dealing with a world and understand how they work out their relationship to that world. Sociology should be the study of people in the process of living (quoted in Henslin, 1972, p.9).

Following Blumer's lead, my study was conducted employing a participant-observation model to gather data.

Gold (1958) classifies the roles a field worker might employ as the complete participant, the complete observer, and variations of the two ranging from the participant-as-observer to the observer-as-participant. In my study I have employed two of these roles beginning with the complete participant and easing back towards the participant-as-observer. Bearing in mind that three full years had passed from my first exposure to the Oxford, my role as a participant-as-observer is appropriately described as after-the-fact. I was already familiar with the Oxford poker players' world and accepted into it when I decided to observe it formally.

While I readily recognized some of the inherent dangers of attempting to study a world one inhabits, I felt the richness of detail and variety of information available to me would override the hazards. I feel this rear-view mirror technique for examining the subculture of the Oxford poker players has lent credibility to my observations and helped to keep them sociologically sound. It has allowed me to immerse myself in the subculture while simultaneously talking with members and recording daily interactions from a perspective

of empathetic understanding. I know this world from both the standpoints of observer and participant.

David Hayano, in his study of professional poker players, notes that the only real way to understand the poker scene is to be a part of it.

As a poker player and ethnographer my interest lies in documenting the social mechanics of face-to-face confrontation. But poker, even at the highest competitive level is not a spectator sport. The real action in poker is concealed. The seeming simplicity of a small table around which sits a handful of participants repetitively handling cards and chips masks not one but many complex hidden worlds. The observable movements of chips wagered and cards dealt do very little to reveal the genuine heart of the game as it is constructed from secret plays, monumental deceptions, calculated strategies, and fervent beliefs. These deep, invisible structures are vital in understanding the ethnography of poker (Hayano, 1982, P.X).

As a complete participant in the Oxford, my role initially was similar to that of any other newcomer to the scene. I was interested in the people, the card and Keno games, and the interaction of players both in and outside of the games from a purely non-academic approach. I was strictly a layman interacting with others. My natural curiosity soon prompted me to look beyond the surface of the Oxford scene, however. I kept thinking: "This is very much like a family. These people fight and make-up, gossip, share time and money, sanction each other, and share secrets, sorrow and joy on a daily face-to-face basis."

As I became more interested in observing the scene and less so in simply playing poker, my role as a complete

participant metamorphosed into that of participant-observer. This was a gradual process which took place over several years. Once I decided to actually conduct a study of the Oxford poker scene, I was more cautious about not overly influencing the action. I found this to be quite difficult as I am by nature a take-charge kind of person and I frequently had to remind myself that I was no longer free to interact in a purely idiosyncratic fashion.

I collected my data over time by listening to players both at the table and in the Oxford at large. I would frequently engage players in conversations about the game, their strategies for luck management, the latest rumors or gossip about other players. Much of my information was gleaned from being on the scene at the time things were happening. I also took careful note of the current jokes and lore that were being passed around. These strategies were developed out of the belief that the daily, mundane facets of life at the Oxford are best learned by living them.

Once I actually decided to study the poker players' scene, I began to vary the times of the day, week, and month in which I participated. I did this in an effort to sample all of the aspects of everyday life rather than just the times I had become familiar with when I was strictly a player. I also made myself more accessible to non-poker players. I had always been friendly with non-players but I usually didn't seek them out for personal interaction when I was solely a

player.

I chose two key informants who were regular players and employees and whom I trusted for their honesty in relating to me. They were both instrumental in my learning the history of poker at the Oxford. These player-employee informants had been involved as players and dealers at the Oxford since the legalization of poker. They were very knowledgeable about the argot of the players and shared much of the lore of the Oxford with me in the oral tradition form of stories and memories, both remembered by themselves and passed down from others. Their recall of the players no longer present at the tables for whom many of the poker hands are named was invaluable in helping me to discover and make sense of the argot at the poker table. My key informants were also most gracious about sharing with me stories of the by-gone players whose portraits adorn the walls in the Oxford. Pouring over the photo albums was yet another opportunity for me to gather lore about the players, and my key informants were central to explaining this intimate recording of the players' world. They were aware of changes over the past ten years both in the physical and social make-up of the Oxford scene and their recall provided validation for my own observations. I was able to check out my observations with them to discern if my impressions were accurate from the standpoint of regular, long-term members.

One of the most obvious dangers in a study such as mine

is that of losing one's objectivity. Throughout the years of my study I have attempted to avoid this pitfall, or at least keep it in check, by varying the amount of time I spent in the Oxford as well as the activities I participated in while there. I sometimes would let several weeks elapse between visits, and would assess changes which had occurred by asking questions and catching up on the gossip. By periodically stepping away from the ebb-and-flow of daily life at the Oxford, I have tried to maintain my objectivity.

Another ploy I utilized to avoid losing my perspective was to seek a reality check by telling my chairman about the life I was observing and sharing with him what I thought was of sociological significance. On several occasions he pointed out to me that my objectivity was becoming obscured by my immersion in the life of the Oxford.

Argot is a central indicator of membership in the poker players' world and by its nature needs to be defined for the reader. Without an understanding of the specialized language, the reader will become confused and very likely will misinterpret the subjective reality of the Oxford poker players. I have indicated argot by placing those terms or phrases in quotation marks when they appear for the first time. A glossary has been added to assist the reader in becoming familiar with the specialized language of the poker subculture.

Though I anticipated problems with objectivity, I was

not prepared for the frustration I experienced when my work was misunderstood. I asked a friend, Mark, who is unfamiliar with the poker world but who has expertise in writing to co-edit my paper as an outside reader. I had frequent struggles with both my advisor and my outside reader over their misinterpretations of my writing. I hold them both in the highest esteem, particularly with regard to editing, but on numerous occasions we would do battle over their attempts to alter what I considered precise word selection pertaining to a facet of the poker players' social world. During one of these scenes I vented my frustration by exclaiming, "You just don't get it, do you? You've managed to change the meaning of this entire section by crossing out one word." My reader began to offer his rebuttal but was interrupted by George, one of my key informants, who happened to be sitting in on the editing session. With his insider's knowledge, George perceived the story exactly as I had meant it to be understood; Mark remained confused. While trying to sort things out, we realized it was by virtue of our shared understanding that both George and I were on the same wave length but my reader was not. The absence of insider's knowledge limited my reader. As Rosecrance explained...

Regular gamblers face specialized contingencies that often are unshareable with nongamblers. Lake Tahoe gamblers typically believe that only other regulars can appreciate and understand their social world. They view themselves as being engaged in a highly specific activity, the intricacies of which are unknown outside a gambling milieu. It is difficult to discuss gambling experiences with persons



unfamiliar with the activity. Communication with those who do not share a gambling perspective is farther complicated by the existence of a gambling argot. A distinctive argot opens specialized communication channels to which only regular gamblers have full access (Rosecrance, 1986, p.370).

An equally hazardous danger in this study has been the potential for violating my informants' privacy. Some serious ethical considerations arose when I began to write this thesis. Because my study was done in an easily accessible arena in a small city, I have come to realize how vitally important confidentiality is to the integrity of my informants and ultimately to my study as well.

When I began my rough draft, I used my informants' real names, though with one exception I did not identify their last names. Because these people are so familiar to me and because we all interact in a public place, I first thought it unnecessary to disguise their identities. What I have discovered by allowing several readers to examine my work is that, indeed, this thesis contains intimate stories about people who live in the same community in which my paper will be available for public perusal, and thus I have an even more stringent obligation to protect their privacy.

I have changed all names of my informants and others I observed with the exception of several key informants who granted me permission to use their correct identities. Even with their permission I have chosen to omit their surnames. I have also disguised their work sites outside the Oxford and

altered anecdotes to protect the privacy of the individuals central to them. Even the names of those who attained notoriety via newspaper accounts of their criminal behavior have been disguised out of respect for their families.

The problem of privacy was brought home to me in a most unexpected fashion. I requested my advisor to read and critique my work, and it was lying on a table in his home. A guest read portions of my paper without permission while my advisor was in another room. She then commented to him that she knew the person described in those pages and that "he would not be pleased."

When my advisor told me what had happened, I was horrified. Although I had every intention of speaking to the subject of my anecdote, and requesting his permission to use the story in my work, suddenly I was no longer in control of when or how this person would hear of his potential part in my paper. I felt that both his privacy and mine had been violated.

A large part of the attraction of the Oxford milieu is that when players enter the poker subculture, they check their outside roles at the door. My own reason for entering the Oxford poker world has been to escape from the demands of my roles as a single parent, student, and professional social worker. I needed to be able to shed these constraints and take on the ephemeral role of player. In the course of doing research and ultimately of writing down how members act and

react in the Oxford, I became extremely sensitive to my paper's potential for cutting off the escape route for others who likewise wish to flee the confines of their outside roles.

In light of the outrage I felt when my paper was read without my permission, perhaps this jolt was what I needed to reaffirm the seriousness of the ethical considerations in a study such as mine. By not disguising my informants' identities, I was not only violating their privacy, but creating a potential for undermining their willingness to participate in what they consider their private lives.

The task of examining and recreating the culture-within-a-culture at the Oxford has, at times, seemed overwhelming. As a participant, I experienced the life first-hand and like anyone familiar with the territory, the idea of reproducing that life seemed simple enough. But as a researcher, burdened with the demands of analyzing that world sociologically yet retaining its integrity, I often struggled with the enormity of my proposal. Hayano experienced the same dilemma in his study of professional players...

I felt many times of profound self-doubt about fieldwork since I had spent so much time playing and absorbing information on an informal level rather than conducting conventional inquiries as a stranger and unenlightened outsider. Almost any tact I took could not adequately portray the powerful personal feelings of frustration and elation and the many moods between that I had experienced in the thousands of long, hard hours in the cardroom (Hayano, 1982, p.151).

My advisor was invaluable in guiding me through the organizational morass in which I frequently floundered. While my natural bent is that of story teller, my advisor continued, often to my dismay, to bring me back to the task of providing a conceptual framework from which to analyze the community of the Oxford poker players. To that end, I have tried to link my observations to standard sociological concepts so my data will be useful to other observers of social worlds. Although I was both a participant and an observer, it has been my objective to present the social world of Oxford poker players in a fashion that could be replicated by any similarly trained observer.

## CHAPTER IV

### SETTING THE SCENE:

#### An Overview of the Oxford, Past and Present

The Oxford bar and cafe is a Missoula landmark. It is the scene of a host of activities, sights and sounds. Its mixture of patrons is like variegated strands of yarn woven into a tapestry of many colors and textures. Without the array of lifestyles, unique characters and outright eccentrics who make up the social network of the Oxford community, it would be just another old, shabby bar and cafe.

The Oxford has always been a thriving around-the-clock business. In fact, Bill Ogg, a former owner, claimed to have no keys to the door. He told Smith, "To my knowledge the place has never been locked" (Smith, 1983, p.45).

The Oxford, or the "Ox" as it is commonly known, is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. During the course of any given day, one might observe patrons ranging from the most shabbily dressed vagrants to elegantly attired and bejeweled gamblers. A popular stopping-off spot, it is not at all uncommon for wedding parties or prom dates to make the Ox part of their momentous occasion.

The Oxford is a long, narrow, zig-zag shaped building with the bar, cafe, cage, Keno counter and Stud poker table located in the front (see illustration). The center of the building holds many electronic Keno and poker machines as well

as the men's and women's rest rooms. The back room which is used exclusively as a card room, contains three poker tables a storage room, and a semi-private bathroom for gamblers use only. During the morning and early afternoon, one or two of these tables will be used for playing Pan, a small-stakes card game similar to Rummy. From late afternoon to the wee hours of the morning, the higher-stakes poker game known as Texas Hold'em is played.

It celebrated its centennial in 1983 and remains a popular spot for a variety of activities ranging from swilling inexpensive drinks, playing Keno, sampling the house specialty of Brains and Eggs ("He needs 'em" in the argot of the cafe), to playing poker.

Steve Smith, a former reporter, columnist and feature writer for the Missoulian newspaper, wrote a book on the history of the Oxford entitled, The Ox: Profile of a Legendary Montana Saloon (1983). Smith was a regular patron at the cafe and during the early 1980's I saw him there many times. In his book he comments on the Oxford's long history as a local landmark:

...a legend it remains, even though the place has changed from the days when a burly, brawling bouncer named Adolph "Chink" Cyr floored unruly loggers and miners with potent uppercuts, waiter Robert "Shorty" Hayden concocted unforgettable nicknames for an unforgettable bill of fare, former Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield won friends and votes at the lunch counter over big bowls of steaming beef stew, a woman entering the placed was all but gawked at by the generally male clientele, a hamhock-and-navy-bean dinner with trimmings set a working man back 50 cents, inning-by-inning major league baseball

scores spewed from a ticker-tape machine to be posted on a blackboard. Naugahyde booths, washable vinyl wallcoverings, non-dairy creamer, and electronic video games hadn't been invented, and a compassionate Bill McFarland readily fed and lent cash to men whose luck had gone sour (Smith, 1983, p.4).

The Oxford has sported gambling and competitive endeavors since its inception. Long before poker was legalized, high-stakes games were a daily occurrence at the Oxford. Old-timers enjoy reminiscing about the big games in which thousands of dollars could be seen on the tables. Many a player's life fortunes were reputed to have been won or lost before legalization limited the size of the pots.

A cigar counter, shoe-shine chairs, and ticker-tape machine were featured in the early days of the Oxford. Patrons could spend their days or evenings loitering with friends, keeping track of the latest sporting event by the noisy reports of the ticker-tape, perhaps throwing back drinks or enjoying a generous serving from the cafe.

The owners of the Oxford, throughout its history, have maintained an attitude best summed up by former owner Bill McFarland: "If they came in the Oxford, they got a full drink of whiskey for their money. They also got a full meal for their money" (Smith, 1983, p.21).

Even those down on their luck could enter the Oxford and enjoy a meal in exchange for spot labor. A working man's nonsense philosophy laced with respect for those less fortunate has always been a part of the Oxford's heritage.

Dr. Charles Brooke of Missoula, who at one time was a regular customer at the Oxford Cafe, said:

McFarland has a standing order that a certain number of 'soft' meals appear in the menu daily for the benefit of the establishment's many gummers. 'Gummers', Brooke explained, were old men with no teeth (Smith, 1983, p.21).

Harold Carr, an employee of the Oxford for 15 years remarked in the same vein:

I remember the Oxford as a home away from home for many people. Without the Ox, I don't know what a lot of those older guys would have done. They came in in the morning, and a lot of them were there until night. A lot of them never played cards; they just sat around and visited (Smith, 1983, p.36).

Today the ticker taper, shoe shine chairs, and cigar counter are gone but otherwise the Oxford has the same character as before. John Mulligan, the current owner notes:

Not a hell of a lot has changed physically, the faces may change, but the personality doesn't. I don't think there are too many places like the Ox left in these United States. We have customers from a wide cross-section, but they get along. They co-mingle and co-exist. I've noticed that our customers seem to have time to listen to each other's joys and problems, and when somebody's in trouble, I've never seen so many people willing to help. So many people these days don't have time for their fellow man, but that quality still exists here (Smith, 1983, p.46).

To better envision this scene in the 1980's I have included a slice of life from the Oxford via looking at a typical Friday night.



## CHAPTER V

### A TYPICAL FRIDAY NIGHT AT THE OXFORD<sup>2</sup>

It is Friday afternoon about five o'clock and I enter through the side door looking expectantly to see if a Stud game is in progress in the front. As I pass the cafe counter, I am greeted by both the waitress and the cook with calls of "How's Gwen? You gonna play cards tonight?" After exchanging banter with them, I proceed to the Stud table where a game is in progress. I check to see if it's a weak or strong game by scanning the number of chips on the table and noting how those chips are distributed. That is, are "tight" players (those who play hands with a high probability of success) in control of most of the chips? Are the players with the most chips those who are apt to abandon the Stud game once the Hold'em game starts up in the back? Hopefully the game is robust, with plenty of "live-action" players (those players using their own money), and lots of good "action" (betting and calling which builds a good sized pot). I also take note of any "shills" (players employed by the house to get the game started or to strengthen a game with too few players or chips to attract others).

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<sup>2</sup>This description of a typical Friday night is a composite of activities I have experienced or witnessed during my tenure at the Oxford.

I decide the game is strong enough to interest me. If a seat is open I "buy in" for the minimum amount of \$10 and begin my evening. If a seat is not open, I place my name on the blackboard located just behind the Stud table and await an opening, either via someone going "tits-up" (broke), or "cashing out" their chips at the cage.

I buy in for the least amount possible as a luck-management strategy. The philosophy behind this style of play is this: The most I can lose on a hand is \$10, so I have a fairly inexpensive opportunity to test the game. If I'm both lucky and skillful, I'll begin to make money from my minimal investment, and at worst I'll have to buy in again for another \$10.

After playing a few hands, I leave the table and wander through the rest of the Ox looking for friends and acquaintances with whom to "shoot the shit" (exchange gossip). Numbered amongst those I enjoy visiting are a trio of deaf people who are regular patrons of the Oxford. They play live Keno and through the use of extemporaneous hand signals and facial gestures we share information about our relative fortunes. A thumbs-up gesture coupled with raised eyebrows and a big grin indicates a Keno win for them. Conversely a hand gesture denoting cutting one's throat implies a series of losses.

I visit with the floorman on shift and usually any dealers who are currently taking a break. I also chat with

other poker players who are waiting to get into the game, taking a break like me, or just sitting around visiting.

The Keno caller is calling games in the front near the Stud table, and if any of my cronies are playing I check to see if they're winning or losing, and visit with them as well. I stroll past the Keno machines which are an exact replica of the live Keno except that players place their money in the machine, a quarter at a time, choose their numbers and the machine lights up the winning numbers. The machine pays winners by recording credits which are then cashed in at the cage at the rate of 25 cents per credit. In live Keno, the caller pays any winning ticket holder at the Keno counter. The advantage, or disadvantage as the case often is, of Keno machines over live Keno is that players can play at a much more rapid pace. Electronic Keno machines can complete a game in 15 seconds whereas live Keno is played at a rate of approximately one game every ten minutes, depending on the number of tickets sold and the skill of the Keno caller.

A good indicator of whether or not a machine might be getting ready to pay is to check the floor area near the machine for quarter wrappers. Ten dollars in quarters comes in a disposable paper tube, and their wrappers are thrown to the floor, often in disgust, when empty. Should an abundance of wrappers litter the floor, would-be players are tipped off to the fact that the machine has been heavily played. Players in-the-know will ask the cage person to "check the sheets",

meaning to look at the payout sheets which record the amount and to whom a machine has paid out that week. Records are kept daily and serious Keno players conduct regular inventory of other players' knowledge of whether the machine has "been hit," i.e., produced a payout.

I have developed propinquitous relationships with many regular Keno machine players via the common denominator of trying to beat the machines. These people represent all walks of life and, like myself, many of them are escaping the demands of their outside roles. They enjoy the mental games involved in trying to second-guess the preprogrammed patterns on the machine. If they are correct they will reap financial reward, and if incorrect they feel challenged to try new combinations for success.

One of the frequent Keno machine players is a woman whose husband, a retired engineer, is on the board of directors of the Standard Oil Corp. In contrast, another woman works at a low-income day care center. Both occupy their recreational time seeking the elusive Keno hit.

The Pan game is just breaking up in the back room. Most of those who play Pan daily are old men who have been coming to the Oxford for years. They enjoy the camaraderie of meeting daily around the card table, exchanging gossip and a few chips as the day progresses. Passing the day this way is tantamount to going to work for these older gents. Some become cranky with those of us who have the audacity to cuss

or cajole the nearby Keno machines while they are trying to concentrate. I dubbed these Pan players the "dead pecker circle" in one of my moments of extreme facetiousness, prompted by a scolding I had received from them for my effervescence at the Keno machine.

I check at the "cage," the office and teller station, for any messages from my friends or to see if any of those to whom I have lent money have left an "envelope" for me with full or partial payment enclosed. The cage received its nickname due to the barred windows that separate customers from the employers working inside. It houses the owners' private office and two separate safes which contain the "banks" (money) for the poker games and the cafe and bar. The two banks are counted and maintained separately as required by restrictions placed on gambling establishments. Legislation allows customers to cash checks to pay for food and drinks but it is unlawful to cash checks for the sole purpose of gambling. I frequently cash checks at the Ox since the cage is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and I know my checks will never be refused. Thus the Ox is much more handy than the Ready-Bank machines located around town. I offer that explanation to anyone who asks why I don't get an instant cash card. An added incentive for me is that I can request that the Oxford hold my check, or checks if my luck is progressing adversely, for a specific period of time. They have always been willing to accommodate me.

Having made my social rounds, I return to the table and re-enter the game. I take inventory of the players, checking for those I know and don't know, like and dislike, trust and distrust. I strike up a conversation with someone or enter into the general banter at the table. I will buy a drink or propose a "drink-pot." The result of starting drink-pots is often two-fold. First, the game almost always "loosens up." That is, more players will gamble on their hands "getting there," producing larger pots. Second, players will be less cautious as their inhibitions are liquidly reduced.

Between 5 and 7 p.m. those players who are getting off work for the weekend begin to arrive and sign-up for the Stud game in front or for one of the games in the back room. About this time a subtle transformation begins. The daytime players who have spent most of the morning and afternoon playing at the Ox drift away one by one depending on whether they are ahead for the day or "stuck," meaning suffering a financial loss. Most daytime players are elderly retirees who have more time than money to spend, and the faster paced evening games are seldom attractive to them. As the daytime players are replaced by the "weekenders" eager to begin their mini-vacations, or to escape their loneliness, or whatever forces cause them to gamble, the games almost always loosen up.

Jim is a classic example of a regular player who generally shows up on Friday night. He is a character I first met while working in the cage at the Ox. He is about sixty

years old and looks and dresses like the Marlboro man. His voice has a pleasing southwestern twang to it and he usually comes to town from his ranch "up the road a piece" about every three weeks.

He would always come up to the cage and in a flirtatious manner push his checkbook towards me and say, "Make this out for a hundred dollars, will ya Honey? I left my specs home." The first several times he made his request I didn't think much of it, but after four or five requests with a slight variation as to why he couldn't fill it out, I became curious. I suspected that he was illiterate. I asked the other cage people if they had the same experience with him. They replied yes, and one, who had known him for a long time, told me that Jim had always come to town with his son and the son had always taken care of the checkbook, but this son had been killed in an accident about a year before so we were being called on to fill in.

Jim's adroit behavior at the poker table belies his apparent limitation. He revels in playing the buffoon, pretending to have a weak hand when he has a "powerhouse" and vice versa. Frequently he feigns a much more advanced state of drunkenness than is true. Somehow it all works for him. I rarely see him lose, and after he accumulates two or three times his initial investment, he will quit the table, usually with a remark like, "This old cowboy's too drunk to play anymore cards today." At that point he gathers up the hired

hands he's brought to town with him and off they go until the next time.

The cafe nearly always has a steady flow of customers throughout the evening who arrive to dine from the inexpensive menu. Dishes range from an "Ox Burger" or hash browns and gravy for \$.75 to steaks and prime rib for \$5.95<sup>3</sup>. They can also choose Brains and Eggs for \$3.00. Unlike many restaurants where uniformity is the watch-word, including employee apparel, the Ox has mismatched crockery and silverware and no particular dress code other than a requirement that clothing be clean. Though the cooks wear hats as prescribed by law, they otherwise dress as they please, and waiters and waitresses are seen bedecked in various degrees of fashion from second-hand, clinging polyester tops and high-water pants, to fashionable western-style attire. A popular waitress is a vivacious red haired woman who favors brightly colored costume jewelry and feathers punctuating her ample bosom. She is a gregarious soul who bustles about chatting with customers and filling their orders while her flashing eyes and ready smile add the warmth and personal touch for which the Oxford cafe is famous.

Paul, the highly dramatic cook who hails from Baltimore and who had come out west to see what Montana was like is the cook tonight. He is adorned with one gold earring and wears

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<sup>3</sup>The prices have changed over the years. These figures reflect 1983 costs.



his Chef's hat at a rakish angle. He delights in carrying on numerous conversations at once, at least one of which always centers on the relative fortunes of the Baltimore professional baseball or football team, depending on the season. Paul plays his customers, who are seated along the counter, much like a good pianist would address his keyboard, giving attention to first this one and then another without ever totally leaving any of them. He does this while simultaneously cracking eggs by tossing them up to the nicotine-stained ceiling high above his head, flipping pancakes nearly ceiling high, and chopping onions and tomatoes with a great flair. Paul is indeed a virtuoso and many a late-night customer enters the Ox just to watch him perform. Paul is a hard worker who always has an eye for the downtrodden. He has served his fair share of free hash browns and gravy to men and women who otherwise might have gone hungry. This posture is condoned by the management whose roots are steeped in blue-collar penury. But even Paul's altruism is sorely tested, along with his pride, on this particular evening.

Kevin, one of the dealers who is playing cards on his day off has ordered a steak and has consumed about half of it when he notices the hungry eyes of the downtrodden fellow seated on the stool next to him. Kevin looks at Paul and Paul returns the glance. Kevin then declares, "I sure am full!" and he leaves his plate. Normally Paul would clear the place

very rapidly in preparation for the next customer, but he purposely busies himself at his grill leaving the stranger to seat himself at Kevin's plate without damage to his pride. The big mistake the stranger makes is to criticize how the steak was cooked! Needless to say, Paul is furious and he whisks the plate off the counter shouting, "Give me that God-damned steak!" and glares at the ingrate until the offender slinks from his stool perhaps ruminating on the adage that beggars should not be choosers! Paul and Kevin's sensitivity, carried out in a matter-of-fact fashion is very typical of the Oxford milieu and Paul's equally quick response to the stranger's rudeness is in keeping with code of behavior at the Oxford. Strangers are given respect at face value, until they prove themselves unworthy and then they are swiftly sanctioned.

A colorful character named Martian is seated in the game while this is going on. He watches with a detached air of amusement while Paul chastises the offender. I ask Martian if he remembers the time he was in trouble with Susie over a steak. He chuckles and replies, "You never forget anything do you Gwen?"

When I talk about the Ox to outsiders, it's always the people and their stories that intrigue my audiences. A policy at the Oxford pertaining to gamblers was to buy a meal for the players consisting of anything on the menu. The policy has since been revised to include anything except steaks or prime

rib. I was playing cards one evening and had taken a break from the table when the floorman, in this case a woman named Susie, came stomping up to me and exploded, "I've had it with Martian and that damned floozie! He just ordered a steak for her and returned it cause it wasn't cooked to suit him. I'm not buyin' another God damn steak for that floozie!" As Susie is usually mild mannered and not particularly given to profanity, and, as I had never known Martian, who is a bit of an eccentric, to have a woman in his company, I was terribly curious as to just who this "floozie" was. When I asked Susie to point the woman out to me, she burst into gales of laughter and managed to relay that Floozie was Martian's beloved pet dog. As a postscript, I might add that Susie regained her composure and sense of humor and sent the ill-cooked steak back to the grill.

Tonight, as usual, the bar's clientele is heavily represented by blue-collar men and women, Native Americans, and a large number of alcoholic welfare recipients. An abundance of crudely drawn tattoos, snaggle-toothed mouths and greasy, outdated hair styles worn by both men and women bear grim testimony to the neglect and poverty of the majority of the bar clientele. The relatively inexpensive drinks offered at the Ox, coupled with the non-racist and generally accepting demeanor of the bartenders attracts low income swillers. These patrons usually arrive early, drink steadily throughout the evening and buy a pint or six-pack to go when

the bar closes at 2 a.m. Along with the regular customers, the bar often swells with muscular college students and their obsequious piping-voiced female companions. The young men seem to delight in competing to see who can be the loudest and most obnoxious in the place, and frequently buy in at the Stud table to test their prowess against the old folks in the game. Nothing pleases the regulars more than the opportunity to provide these young studs and their adoring audiences a crash course in the Oxford School of Economics!

By 10 p.m. those patrons who have been to the movies or sporting events are beginning to arrive. The noise increases a few more decibels as the Keno caller broadcasts the numbers over a microphone. Cafe, bar and poker patrons all compete to be heard above the noise. Frequently when a dealer calls out the best possible hand to the table, as he is obliged to do at the culmination of each hand, he will be unheard by one or more players due to the racket. Many an irate loser has spat angry words of derision at the unfortunate dealer, blaming him for a foolish call made because he couldn't hear the dealer's caveat.

Between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. the evening's pursuits continue in a steady ebb and flow of activity. Losers are beginning to show the strain born of the knowledge that for tonight at least, their chances of getting even are decreasing. They are likely to remain stuck for the rest of the night. Drinking will often increase in a vain attempt to

drown their sorrows or to keep the party going. Tempers can wear thin. The floorman's diplomatic skills are nearly always tested between midnight and 3 a.m. when he or she is called upon by the dealers to quell gamblers' disputes or to help keep the peace at the bar or cafe. If things get out of hand, the floorman will instruct the cage person to "call 911", the emergency response center, which will dispatch police officers to the scene.

By 2 a.m., the bar has closed, sending its clientele over to the cafe or out into the night in various degrees of inebriation. The noise factor increases to a veritable din as late night revelers from other parts of town pour into the Ox cafe to consume its specialties. The period from 2 a.m. to 3 or 4 a.m. is called the "bar rush." During the bar rush, it is common for all employees in the Ox to pitch in and assist the beleaguered cafe workers. The floor and cage persons often clear and then set-up tables with silverware and coffee, thereby appeasing the sometimes impatient hungry hoards. A cacophony erupts as hastily set silverware, mugs and plates are plunked down on the tables and counters. Shouting merry makers and the Keno microphone all attest to the urgency of the bar rush madness.

A bar rush I remember clearly occurred when I was working as a "runner." My job was to serve food and drinks to the gamblers, but not to the cafe patrons. We had the most phenomenal bar rush that evening I ever experienced. It began

at 10 p.m. and lasted until 3 a.m. Orders were backed up for the grill and would-be diners were told they would have a 30 to 45 minute wait. Most people took it well but a few decided to go elsewhere. Like sailors in a sudden unexpected storm, we all pulled together and worked feverishly for five solid hours. I can easily remember that night as I made \$200 in tips in that five hour span.

Those who have endured losses or are enjoying a winning streak, continue to play poker during the pandemonium. The bar rush which occurs nearly every night is part of the everyday life of the Oxford. The zaniness of the after hours revelers and the amazing swirl of activities and sounds are part of the lore about the Oxford.

The games last until 5 or 6 a.m. though they often go around the clock. As dawn approaches, the place quiets down with only the poker players, some Keno machine players and a few stragglers at the cafe left in the place. At this point the contrast is almost deafening in comparison to the racket just a few hours earlier. The soft clatter of poker chips being tossed into the pot or stacked by players and the blip, blip, blip of the Keno machine, together with the murmuring voices of exhausted employees and players are the only sounds to be heard.

The "swamper" begins his shift as others are ending theirs. He sweeps and hauls out an immense amount of garbage: dead Keno tickets, quarter wrappers, left-over food, cigarette

butts and other debris left behind. He must surely have the constitution of an army trooper to withstand the stench of vomit, urine, and feces splattered on the walls and floors of the rest rooms he restores to their former clean, but shabby, state.

The cook and waitress restock their kitchen and prepare for the cafe shift change. By 6 a.m. the place slowly but surely begins to fill and another day begins.

I alternately play poker and the Keno machines throughout the long evening. Having gotten stuck in the game, I try the machine as a quick fix opportunity. Tonight I was lucky enough to be successful at Keno. I subtract my poker losses from my Keno wins, figure I had a pretty good time and only spent a few dollars total for the entire outing and prepare to take my bleary, smoke irritated eyes and aching back home. I call out my departure to those less fortunate still in the games and out into the morning I go. As I pass early morning travelers who all seem to be going in the opposite direction I reflect on the very real concept of "poker time." The night has flown by for me and my cronies and it seems quite surreal that people are heading in the direction of Missoula, fresh and ready to start their day.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE OXFORD**

The Oxford is known for its eclectic clientele. There is a wide parameter of tolerance for those who look or act unusual. Everyone who enters the Oxford is treated with respect as long as his or her behavior commands it. It is not uncommon to observe cowboys, hippies, blue-collar laborers, chronic alcoholics, and men in three-piece suits, going about their pursuits unmolested by any other contingent.

Within this loose social environment a players' world exists which is much closer knit. Those who regularly frequent the Oxford share in a camaraderie developed over time by mutual experience and understanding.

Katovich and Reese (1987) developed the concept of the "regular" as a generic social type in a study of barroom patrons. They define a regular as someone possessing a familiar and secure position within a given social world. Further, in contrast to other types of participants, regulars live through their existence as group members by anticipating a future of belonging within their community and participating in its collective memory. Regulars construct their identities as they form stable patterns of association. I have found the concept of the regular to be particularly suited to my study of the social world of the Oxford poker players, especially in identifying and describing membership in the Oxford social



world.

Being in the core of regulars at the Oxford entails more than just regular play. Players earn their status as members through ritualistic trials by fire. Regular status demands the ability to participate in the maintenance of the community. Members of the poker subculture take pride in their shared understanding about the world of poker and have constructed boundaries which mark insiders from outsiders. Players become members through an evolutionary process in which they shed their identity as strangers, or newcomers and don the exclusionary subjective identity of members.

The players' world is an encapsulated one where external statuses are irrelevant and often unknown. Participants in the players' world are first and foremost judged by the relative merits of their play. Later, bits and pieces of their personal lives surface, often producing a history quite different from the presentation of self at the poker table.

Throughout my eight years at the Oxford, I have come to know a number of unique characters. At first I judged them only from the perspective of my observations of their behavior at the Ox. I came to know them better, as often happens in a microcosm, via personal interaction with them, information from others who knew them more intimately, or through newspaper articles, rumors, and gossip--sometimes quite by accident.

Although I knew that some of these characters were

somehow different from other members of the community, it wasn't until I opened my newspaper one Saturday morning that I was struck with the phenomenon I have termed "their other lives."

I was taken completely off guard by what I read about my acquaintance Omar. I like to think of myself as a tolerant person who, in the best Oxfordian tradition reserves judgment on my fellow man, but in telling this story I must admit to succumbing to intellectual snobbery. Omar was one of the few persons with whom I had frequent contact at the poker table, but had never shared a conversation. I chose not to initiate any interaction with him other than the playing out of hands because like others in the poker players' network, I had prejudged him by his consistently poor skill at cards. Omar is a small, swarthy, dark-haired man who dresses casually and doesn't visit much with anyone at the table, even though he plays fairly often. Quietly and methodically he goes about losing his money time after time. He routinely makes very bad calls and I have become accustomed to his shrugging, almost apologetic look when at the culmination of an expensive hand, he turns over an amazingly weak combination of cards. Omar impressed me as not being very bright.

Imagine my surprise when I turned to the Community section of the Missoulian. I wondered to myself, "What the hell's Omar's picture doin' in the paper?" As it happened, the article accompanying his picture was a celebration of his

recent return from New York City where he had given a concert at Carnegie Hall!

My response as I read that article ranged from amazement to mirth as I realized just how bigoted I had been. That "not very bright" poker player turned out to be a renowned and highly respected performer whose gift for music is rapidly becoming legend. I went to a concert he gave the following week and listened to this marvelously skilled, gifted performer who was clearly in command of his audience. Like Omar at the poker table, I shrugged inwardly and mentally thanked him, not just for his beautiful music, but for my well earned just desserts--a wonderful lesson in humility.

Omar's situation is typical. One's standing, or lack of it, in the outside world is often unknown or irrelevant in any case.

For about a year I played cards with a colorful woman who would arrive each month toting a backpack stuffed with three or four days changes of clothes. She usually wore a low neck leotard top which accentuated her braless bust. She sported billowing skirts and lots of showy jewelry. Her hair would be bright red one month, platinum another and jet black on other occasions. She adorned herself with long black false eyelashes and brightly colored eyeshadow. Her one concession to comfort and practicality were heavy workman's boots. I asked her why she wore them and she reported that because she "hitchhiked from Wallace and sometimes stood awhile or walked

a ways, the boots are necessary." The first time I saw her I thought, "God, this woman looks just like a prostitute." Sure enough, she was. She would hitchhike from Wallace during her days off. Although she wasn't a very good player, she was beginning to be integrated into the players' social world by virtue of her shared understanding and interaction with the regulars. She was always anxious to catch up on the stories of how her fellow players had fared during her absence. I really grew to like her and genuinely missed her when she decided it was too expensive to play cards and quit coming to Missoula. Had she continued to play at the Oxford, I believe this woman would have become a regular.

Stu showed up at the Oxford and played cards regularly for about a year and a half. He was a rather quiet man who was quite reticent to talk about himself. He was a fairly young man whose premature balding made it hard to tell just how old he was, but I gathered from references he made to music and books we mutually enjoyed that he was close to my age, in his mid-thirties. We talked about why we were there, what we enjoyed about playing cards and commiserated about the pitfalls of poker playing.

It was quite by accident that I discovered Stu was a psychiatrist. Someone had come up to me and asked if I'd seen Stu. As there were several Stu's who regularly hung out at the Ox, I asked "Which one?" "The psychiatrist," he replied, "you know, that bald guy who plays poker all the time." Stu

was considered to be a pretty good poker player but by no means an excellent player. Neither his dress, demeanor or skill gave any indication of his highly elevated status outside the poker milieu. Indeed he was considered a likable but very average poker player, and he occupied a moderately low status in the poker players' world.

A member whose outside status is similar to his position in the poker players' subculture is Ed. He is a fascinating man in his early sixties whose exploits remind me of Hemingway's without the anguish and torment. He is a widower who lives in the Bitterroot and keeps a large menagerie of birds and farm animals "just for the fun of it." He says it gives him a reason to go home at night and keeps him out of trouble.

Although he comes to town every day in an old beat up pickup, he owns his own plane and travels throughout the United States competing in trap shoots. He told me not long ago, that he and another young man each won \$50,000 shooting competitively in Europe when they were 21 years old and spent the next year blowing every last cent gambling and seeing the sights. He assured me they had a wonderful time and he doesn't regret it a bit.

An interesting facet of Ed's life is that he is a chemist who works as a scientist at a highly respected laboratory. To look at this ordinary man clad in jeans and a work shirt with his ready smile and not a hint of self-importance as he

chats with other Oxford community members, one would never guess what a wealth of knowledge and experience he possesses. In the Oxford Ed is highly respected for his skill at the poker table, and although his high status is similar to the position he claims in the outside world it, is bestowed for entirely separate qualities.

Martian's external presentation is one of eccentricity. His clipped accent strongly reflects a Dutch ancestry and his longish hair and headband coupled with his well known devotion to Floozie clearly signals a liberal, non-traditional philosophy. Martian frequently protests environmental and military policies. He even designed and marketed a tee-shirt with an anti-nuclear message a few years ago.

When I worked in the cage, Martian would deposit rather large sums of money and draw from his account whenever his poker or personal demands dictated. By using the safes at the Ox instead of a bank, Martian was able to keep his money in a relatively safe, convenient location without having to pay any monthly fees. I asked George if he knew where Martian got all his money and he said he'd heard it was from rental property he owned in Boston. I teased Martian about being a slum lord when we were drinking and dancing one evening. He flushed and very emphatically corrected me. He told me he was a property owner but his interest was in urban renewal which just happened to be profitable.

Though many members of the Oxford community consider him

to be an eccentric, Martian is very well respected for his tenacity and finesse at the poker table. The wide-eyed, seemingly gullible, aging hippie is a shrewd and calculating tactician when playing cards and his high status in the poker world reflects his poker prowess.

Each of these members is unique in their own way. The common denominator is their insider's status in the players' world. Not until after their acceptance into the poker community were these and other members' lives outside the poker milieu of interest. Their identity outside the Oxford social world is frequently unknown, and regardless of the position they occupy outside, they are judged within by the ephemeral roles they play.

Within the separate world of the Oxford, vague but significant divisions are recognized by regular patrons. These divisions constitute a rudimentary social structure which can be likened to a set of concentric rings defined by frequency of participation, familiarity to others, and most importantly, involvement in the game of poker.

At the core of this structure are the regular players who are known to each other by name, and the employees whose jobs are directly related to poker. It is within this group that information concerning players' "other lives" is known and shared.

The Oxford core members enjoy a number of privileges not available to less respected players. Included in these

privileges is access to the cage. Core players frequently use the cage as a bank and can be granted loans predicated upon their rank within the social world. As these loans are strictly based upon trust, only the innermost core members are afforded this privilege.

Strong identification with each other is another component of the core players. Like any closely knit social world, the members of the Oxford protect their own whenever possible. I became involved one evening in an altercation with a man who is a regular Oxford customer but not a regular player. Unbeknownst to me, he was on the tail-end of a week-long drunken spree and I accidentally offended him. I had known him for several years and he had always been a gentleman, but on this evening he was in the state of surly irrationality frequent to saturated alcoholics. We were both at the poker table, and when I put out one of the two cigarettes he was smoking, he became enraged. He attempted to jump out of his seat to strike me while screaming, "I ought to kick your ass!". Needless to say, I was shocked, but to my utter relief, the entire group at the table, all males, leaped from their seats to physically restrain him. George, who was the floorman, came running up and told him he was "eighty-sixed," banished from the premises. The would-be assailant spat back, "I ought to kick your ass too!" as he was being half dragged and half pushed out the door. It took a while for calm to be restored and an even longer time for my



heart to quit pounding.

One evening an inebriated player who was an outsider began to verbally abuse an Asian female dealer. Although dealers frequently are the target of abuse regarding the poor cards they are distributing or their skill at dealing, this verbal abuse was racially predicated towards a dealer who was also a core member of the Oxford poker player's social world. After ignoring several verbal sanctions from players at the table, the perpetrator was physically removed from the game. His considerable number of chips were cashed out by the floorman and he was eighty-sixed from the Oxford.

The formal roles within the social structure of the Oxford social world are defined as dealers, runners, floormen, cage operators, and owners. It is the specific task of each of these persons to keep the games running smoothly, to produce a maximum house profit.

The floorman, dealers and cage persons are central to the everyday life at the Oxford. They interact daily with the players and non-playing regulars in the course of their jobs, sharing latest news about money either being lent or repaid; and exchanges of moral support are part of the daily ritual of key employees and members of the social network at the Oxford. Their job-related proximity to the players world, renders the key employees part of the inner circle.

Dealers are trained by the house to distribute the cards in a rapid, steady flow. Their task is to complete as many

hands per hour with as few errors as possible. At the same time they are to keep an eye on the players so that no one slows down the game or cheats. They must know at all times how much money is in the pot so they can pull out the exact amount for the rake. Dealers are judged by the house and the players for their ability to perform all these tasks simultaneously and correctly. Should a dealer push the pot to the wrong player, the house is obliged to reimburse the legitimate winner. The dealer can also cost the house money by not taking the correct rake. Conversely, should a dealer take too much rake he'll surely hear complaints from the players. Hence, a slow or error-prone dealer won't be tolerated by either the house or the players and is quickly replaced.

Floormen<sup>4</sup> bear the responsibility for initiating the daily games, keeping a constant tally on the chips and cash in the racks at the tables, making sure their totals match. The floormen are also responsible for decisions on contested poker hands and they are the only ones with the authority to pay off an error.

As noted earlier, runners are assigned the specific task of serving food and drinks to the players. The reason for this service is that it tends to keep players active in the

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<sup>4</sup>Always referred to in the masculine even though some floormen are females.

games. They don't have to take time away from the table to order food, drinks, or cigarettes. I spoke with many players about their feelings regarding this service. The consensus was that the house "owed" them the services because they were providing the six percent rake.

I made very good tips when I worked as a runner. Since they weren't paying for their meals, most players were generous towards the runners; however there were always those who were just cheap and also players who were very "stuck" which could result in a long night with only mediocre tips. (An ironic note is that my average earnings as a runner were more than my current wages as a professional social worker.)

The cage person's chores are numerous and often hectic. Like a bank teller, he is responsible for the correct tally of both banks, house and poker. He also cashes checks for customers, cleans and resorts decks of cards, as well as counts and replenishes the bar and cafe tills during shift changes. The cage renders chips to the floorman for the poker tables and counts and stores the cash exchanged for the chips.

The cage person has his finger on the pulse of the Oxford, acting as the central message center and switchboard operator. Like other employees at the Oxford, the cage person frequently goes about his tasks in a frenzy of activity and is expected to be both efficient and courteous.

One of the essential functions of these employees is to perform the role of keeper of the peace. In an ascending

order from dealer to cage person to floorman these workers sort out the skirmishes, be they at the card table, cafe, or bar and attempt to restore order. If they are unsuccessful the bouncer hired for weekend evenings is called upon to physically remove the offending party, and if things really get out of hand an urgent call to 911 will result in police officers being dispatched to the scene.

The various owners of the Oxford have played their roles in a remarkably similar vein. Throughout its history, the tolerant climate of the Oxford has remained much the same under the direction of its owners. While renovations are a necessary response to aging equipment and an increased patronage, for the most part the owners have respected and attempted to retain the simple, unpretentious, blue collar atmosphere which greets the Oxford customers, new and old.

The intermediate positions in the Oxford social world are primarily occupied by the regulars who aren't players but due to their propinquitous relationship to players and other regulars, are recognized as an integral part of the Oxford scene. They are well known at the Oxford and freely interact with all other members of the social world.

A very large, dramatic fellow known as Fat Tom the paper boy takes great vicarious pleasure in inventorying the fortunes of his fellow regulars during his nightly rounds hawking newspapers. He is a welcome sight to both winners and losers as they anticipate sharing their stories of victory or

loss. Included in this category with non players are shills and other infrequent poker players. Regular Keno and Keno machine players also occupy this place. The key element in the intermediate category is their frequent social interaction which is built upon secondary activities at the Oxford. Although they are not the most central ring in the social structure, the intermediate members add form to the social world which serves to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

The perimeter or outermost ring in the Oxford social world is occupied by two types of people. Late night revelers who drop in for the bar rush activities and other occasionals who stop by to sample the various non-poker activities represent one facet of the social world perimeter. The other half of this outer ring is made up of sporadic and deviant players and frequent players from other houses. All of these poker players are tolerated in the game and in fact are encouraged to enter but are not afforded the social amenities core and intermediate members would exchange.

Frequent players from other houses often have access to some of the insider information of the Oxford social world but they are not acknowledged by the members as insiders. They are usually treated courteously as is the custom at the Oxford, but they are not privy to interactions beyond playing poker. They are not included in the parties, or other social activities shared by members and only rarely will they be "given air" in the game. To give air is to show a portion of

one's hand, usually the most powerful part of one's hand thus allowing others a free look at the probable winning hand. Although giving air can be a strategy of intimidation, when a player does indeed have the winning hand giving air functions as an indicator of mutual respect.

Boundaries exist between the concentric rings of the Oxford social world though they are more fluid than those of families, fraternities, or office mates. These boundaries are vague and fluid as are the positions within the social world but they are still recognized by the regulars. This amorphous social construction has been described as a metaphorical membrane by Goffman. The application of labels with their corresponding behavioral expectations help define boundaries between members of the social world. Stud players tend to hang out with other Stud players and Hold'em players generally choose to fraternize with other Hold'em players. Tight players usually enjoy the company of like-minded members and can frequently be heard discussing philosophy and strategy of play. Loose players often congregate to share their latest escapades or woes. Boundaries are marked between the intermediate and core members by the amount of time spent kibitzing and the degree of bonding. Core members tend to spend most of their time and energy interacting with one another. Rarely is money lent between core members and intermediates although players from each of these categories tend to lend amongst themselves.

Extreme stressors such as acute illness or an accident will foster the blurring of boundaries between core and intermediate members. It is very common for both these groups to contribute time and money towards easing the burdens of a fellow member who has become ill or injured. These care giving actions are not specific to one group or another. Core members will respond to the crisis of intermediate members and vice versa. Those on the extreme outer fringes of the social world tend not to be included in the social interactions but serve more as a demarcation between insiders and outsiders. Traditional holidays also break down these barriers and social time which is non poker-specific is often shared.

**CHAPTER VII**  
**THE PLAYERS' WORLD**

Poker defines the core of the Oxford social world. Other activities such as playing Keno or Pan or sitting around with coffee or drinks generally revolve around the game. Players who are waiting to get into a game or for a game to start often while away their time at these other pursuits but clearly their focus is poker. As soon as their name is called they quickly abandon their non-playing activities and enter the game. Other players who have cashed out or gone broke, likewise entertain themselves by loitering at the Oxford and talking with their cronies about the relative merits and folly of the game.

In this chapter I will take a closer look at the game of poker and the players who are central to the life of the Oxford. Despite the players' social ties with other denizens of the Ox, they constitute a social world unto themselves.

As poker is central to the activities at the Oxford, much of the players' non-gambling time is spent rehashing previous events and incidents. Most of the stories I heard at the Oxford during my eight years have had poker as the central theme. Players enjoy telling stories on themselves as well as others and will frequently make themselves the butt of their own stories. Tenacity is a favorite theme which surfaces frequently in the lore of the Oxford poker players.



Someone called-in a bomb threat one night and the whole place cleared out, including cooks, bartenders, Keno callers and their customers. The only people left were the hard core players in the back room. When the police finally insisted they leave so a search could be made for the bomb, the players left grudgingly. The next day when people had reconvened, a Stud player teased several of the Hold'em players that, "Maybe there had been a bomb and they were just too busy to notice." He went on to expound that, "Maybe they were all dead and they'd gone to Hell which looked just like a Hold'em game so they kept on playing!" Lots of good-natured kidding was exchanged for several days before everyone settled down and forgot about the incident.

Another example of the tenacity of the poker players was demonstrated during a cloudburst one summer night about midnight. All the power in downtown Missoula was knocked out for several hours. While the swamper and floorman scrambled frantically to find candles and lanterns, players just covered their chips to protect them from possible theft. After twenty minutes or so in total darkness, candles and lanterns were located and the game went right back to normal. The ceiling collapsed in several areas of the building and huge kitchen buckets were placed everywhere to catch the dozens of leaks. Undaunted, the poker players went about their business.

A similar story told to me involved the night the grill caught fire in the cafe. Though the flames were quickly

extinguished, smoke filled the building producing a terrible stench and irritating players' eyes and throats. Most people evacuated the building but the Stud players kept playing. When my friend Barb told me about it the next day, I asked her if she, too, had vacated. "Hell no," she retorted, "I was stuck forty bucks and I figured I'd either get my forty bucks back or choke to death trying!" I knew just where she was coming from, and we both had a good laugh.

The players' world is constructed around two types of poker games, Stud and Hold'em. Acceptance in the players' world requires, as a minimum, a good working knowledge of these games.

#### Rules of the Games

The rules of poker can be divided into three categories. The first consists of commonly understood rules of play that are relatively standard from one gambling house to another. Stud poker and Hold'em fall within the standard rules of poker. The second category includes formal rules established by the management of the Oxford. Many of these "house rules" are unique to the Ox. Finally there are informal rules developed and enforced by the players themselves.

#### Standard Poker Rules

The general rules pertaining to poker are quite consistent regardless of where one chooses to play, but each gambling house has its own set of regulations in addition to the standardized rules.

### Stud Rules

With respect to the standard rules, Five Card Stud poker is a slower, usually less expensive type of poker than the Hold'em game played primarily in the back room. The first card is distributed face down to every player and all others will be dealt face up. Everyone antes a quarter chip and the dealer distributes one card face down and one card face up to each player in clockwise progression. After each player has received his first face-up card, betting commences with the player showing the highest card starting the betting round. Each player must either "call" the bet, or "fold" his hand. In other words, the player must match the amount bet by the opening player or cease playing that hand by returning his cards to the dealer.

The only other option is "checking" which means to pass the opportunity to bet. Only if every player in the hand agrees to check will the dealer distribute the next series of cards. Otherwise they must bet or fold.

When the players receive their third card, which is actually the second round, the betting begins again with the player displaying the highest combination of cards beginning the action. This same format pertains to the fourth and fifth cards.

At the end of five cards the final round of betting commences. Each player attempts to "read" the other players' hands by determining the highest combination possible.

Guesswork, skill, and often folly come into play at this point, as players will have to decide if others in the hand can beat theirs.

#### Hold'em Rules

In Hold'em each player receives two cards face down, "hole cards", and only he knows what they are. One card is "burned" (placed face down and not used). The next series of cards is dealt in the middle of the table, face-up, and will be used in common by every player in the hand. Each player combines one or both of his hole cards with the common cards, known as "the flop," in an effort to produce the best possible five-card hand. Betting takes place after the distribution of the hole cards and again after the flop is placed in the center. Another card is then burned and one card is placed face-up in the center. This placement is called the "turn." Betting again commences and then a final burn and one last card is placed face-up in the center. This card is called the "end." A final round of betting takes place. By using the center cards mutually, the odds of achieving a difficult hand are much greater than in the Stud game and each player must be alert to the multiplied hazards.

#### House Rules

The house-enforced rules include the formally posted rules at the Stud table limiting the amount one can bet (four dollars in the Stud game). They also warn that all house decisions are final, a player must protect his own hand, only

one short buy-in is allowed, the minimum buy-in is ten dollars, the ante is twenty-five cents, a six percent rake is taken, and no check and raise allowed. The listed rules for the Hold'em games in the back include a twenty dollar minimum buy-in, check and raise allowed, an ante of one dollar, a six percent rake, each player responsible for protecting his own hand, house decisions are final, fifty for thirty-five for the first eight players in the game per evening.

Players who receive a "buy-in", meaning a bonus amount of chips offered by the house to get a game started, must remain at the table for a predesignated period of time before cashing out. Each house has the prerogative of setting the amount of time a player is obliged to stay in the game. An example is the "fifty-for-thirty-five" buy-in players receive when the floorman wishes to begin the Hold'em games in the back. The first eight players to register by signing their names on the board in the back are issued fifty dollars in chips for thirty-five dollars cash. They use the money as their own but if they leave the game before the time limit elapses (usually one to two hours), they must return the bonus amount to the house. The rule is automatically nullified if a player goes broke on his original buy-in or if he wins from his second investment, since he did not receive a bonus on the second buy-in.

House rules at the Oxford dictate that a player is allowed to leave the game for 30-minutes at a time. This

allows players to take time out to eat, use the bathroom, relax with friends or to make a mad dash to the bank, home, or wherever else one's stockpile of cash can be found. The thirty-minute time limit also keeps players from holding a seat that they don't intend to use until later--thereby freeing that seat for a new player.

Within the category of unwritten house rules is the "table stakes" rule which limits players to betting only the amount of money and chips they had showing on the table when a hand commenced. Players are not allowed to reach into their wallets during the course of a hand to add more money to the pot. This rule protects players by keeping them from being driven out of a hand due to a lack of funds. It also keeps them from attempting to force out others in a like manner.

In the same vein is the "all-in" rule. This is a house rule which protects players who run out of money before the end of a hand. Going all-in is accomplished by the player betting all the money he has left on the table. At the point in the progression of the hand that the player is all-in, the dealer begins to build a "side pot" which only the remaining players with money to invest are eligible to win. At the termination of the hand it is the dealer's task to sort out which player has the winning hand and to which of the pots, both main and side, the victor or victors may lay claim. If the player who goes all-in wins the main pot with a pair and no other player left in the hand can beat his pair, then the

player with the next best hand will win the side pot made up of the continued betting after the all-in player ran out of money. The result is a split distribution of the money on the table and two or more winners depending on the combinations and permutations involved.

"Rooting" is defined as sharing of chips. It is a bonding, supportive interaction where players align with one another. The stricture against passing chips has produced some heated debate. Many players feel it is their right to share their chips as they please since they paid for them. The house views the passing of chips as a practice which weakens the game because less new money enters the game. Between the six percent rake taken from each pot and the normal cashing out of successful players, eventually the chips become too sparse to be inviting to prospective entrants. To this extent rooting is lumped into the same category as passing chips and only a token ante chip is allowed by the house.

Players are at liberty to ask for a change of decks. Cards often become oily and sticky after being in use for a while and the house supplies a fresh deck upon request. Some players will call for a new deck after only one or two hands. This is time consuming and ultimately costly to both house and players. To counteract abuse of this privilege, the house has developed the rule that unless a deck is damaged it must be in use until a hand has been dealt for each player at the

table. Thus if eight players are seated a new deck cannot be substituted until nine hands from its original introduction. Cutting the deck is limited for the same reasons. Players are only allowed to ask for a cut twice during each round of a hand.

The posted rules serve the purpose of letting the players know the basic procedure for the games but the nuances of the game can only be discovered by actually participating. To a great extent awareness of these rules distinguishes core members from other players at the Ox.

#### Player and House Combination Rules

Though the player-developed rules are informal they are respected as much as the formal house rules. An example is when a player is drinking and is either unable to keep pace with the flow of the game or perhaps becomes belligerent, the players themselves will admonish the culprit usually with a high degree of success. If things don't improve, one or more of the players will exercise the option to ask the floorman to take action. If a prospective player is known to be a frequent offender, players will often request that he or she not be allowed in the game.

When I first entered the game I quickly learned the unwritten player-enforced stricture allowing only one player to a hand. I had chosen not to play my first hand and thus was free to observe the dynamics of the game. As the betting progressed, a substantial pot was built and competition was



keen. One player was showing signs of wavering and another verbally urged him to make the call. Very rapidly the transgressor was verbally sanctioned by those still in the hand to respect the one player to a hand rule. The guilty party quickly apologized and agreed he would be unhappy if someone violated that rule against him. The one-to-a-hand rule requires a player who is holding a hand to make any, and all, decisions on how to proceed with his hand without assistance, either verbal or nonverbal, from any other player or observer.

The aftermath of this incident was an analysis by the players of the hand called a "post mortem". Several players at the Ox are called "morticians" behind their backs because they spend so much time discussing past hands they frequently must be admonished for slowing down the game. Slowing the game violates another unspoken rule. It is costly to both the house, which takes a percentage of each pot, and to the players, whose objective is to see as many hands as possible during their stint at the table. Thus this rule falls in the category of player/house rules and is considered a combination rule. Most card players occasionally discuss past hands, but the morticians continue discussion well beyond the comfortable limits of conversation.

Another player-enforced rule pertains to "drink pots". This is an informal, rather than house-enforced, rule which maintains that all those who agreed to participate in the

drink pot in advance of the cards being dealt, are eligible to receive a drink from the winner of the drink pot hand. Drink pots are initiated by the players and they usually will agree in advance as to the minimum size the pot must reach before the victor is required to buy drinks for the others. This is done in order to protect the winner from having to pay out more for drinks than he won in the hand. If the pot is too small, then the next hand will again be designated a drink pot and players will again have the option to participate.

A combination rule developed by the house but insisted upon by the players is that a player who cashes out of the game must wait a full hour before buying in again in the same game, or must buy in for the amount he took from the table. This rule protects players from losing their money to another who would cash out after winning a big pot and then buy back in for the minimum amount. The net effect is a more stable game with little "hit-and-run" activity (scoring a win quickly and cashing out of the game). The exception to this rule is that players can leave one game and enter a different game with no waiting period. Thus players might take a lot of money from one game and put it into another, leaving the disgruntled losers with little or no opportunity to recoup their losses. This exception to the combination rule where the house interests take precedence produces ambivalence. Like poor legislation in which a rider is attached to a bill to protect a vested interest, it allows the house to maximize

its rake opportunity when a winning player switches games but creates animosity from those left behind.

The rule which allows only one short buy-in is a combination rule. When a player loses all the money (chips) he has on the table, he can buy back into the game once at less than the minimum entry fee. This allows a player to try to recoup with less of a financial burden but if the player is unsuccessful he will either have to relinquish his seat or buy in for the minimum amount. This rule produces a healthy game with either new money or new players with enough capital to build good pots.

With the exception of the rules set down by the Montana Gambling Commission, the Oxford maintains the right to establish all the rules of the games both written and informal. Like any good business, the management constantly keeps tabs on players' wishes and they attempt to please the majority. The use of the joker is a good case in point. When I first went to the Oxford a joker was used in the Stud game but not in Hold'em. Over the years the use of the joker has fluctuated as requested by the players.

My observations of the rules at the Oxford indicate that over the years as the players changed, so did the rules. When I first entered the Ox, there was a stricture against swearing and throwing cards. At that time many of the players were influenced by several ill-mannered regular players. The posted rules were a response to their disruptive actions.

About the same time a house rule was initiated which required any player who deliberately bent or creased a card to pay for a new deck. This may seem like a small item but the brand of cards used by the Oxford at that time cost sixteen dollars per double deck. Being required to pay for the decks quickly put a stop to the mutilation of cards, which had become the fad.

I asked Margaret, one of the house managers who runs the floor during the day shift, why she thought the rules changed. She commented, "It seems like different players bring along certain trends. When they leave we don't need those rules anymore." Thus even the rules that new players take as given are subject to constant evolution.

#### Types of Players

Just as games can be classified by their rules, so players can be classified by their relationship to the games they play. In his article "Heroes, Villains and Fools," Orrin Klapp (1954) develops the concept of social type. A social type is a category of individuals that is recognized by members of a group or by regular participants in a social world. A social type is a folk concept created through the normal course of everyday social interaction rather than a formal category in a logically-consistent classification system.

Typing is essentially a labeling process. For instance a very conservative player who consistently plays only those hands with a high probability of success is labeled a "nuts"

or "tight" player. Once this label is affixed, other player will respond to the label itself even when the player is playing in an uncharacteristic fashion. Although the nut player may indeed vary his play from time to time, the group has a sense of how to read him.

The process of typing can set up self-fulfilling prophecies. Players who are labeled as "tight" will generally tighten up the game (decrease the actual "gambling-on-the-come"). Because tight players rarely participate with a weak combination of cards, their presence in a hand signals those who do have weak hands that their opportunity to win is limited. Knowing a player doesn't need to draw a lucky card to produce a strong hand tends to inhibit other players and thus the game becomes more conservative. Players typed as "loose" whose style will influence the others to play less carefully also produce a much more flamboyant game wherein players often bet and win weak hands.

The labels applied to players can be positive or negative. An easily bluffed player will be considered weak and so labeled. Others in the game might respond to the label and perhaps become more aggressive than normal. Conversely a player whose label is that of a high roller may be successful in bluffing or at least intimidating others.

The use of negative labels in the form of epithets defines the norms by which players evaluate themselves and each other. Few regular players would attempt to follow the

style of a very poor but successful player who happened to amass a great number of chips knowing that pure luck can only last so long. Rather they would respect and emulate skillful but perhaps less fortunate player.

The more I became familiar with the Oxford, the more I realized there are several distinct types of players marked by their particular style of play, dress, attitudes, strategies, and time of day, week, or month in which they play. It is vitally important that the reader be aware that players can, and often do, fit into more than one category. Part of what makes the poker subculture alluring are the multiplicity of roles members play. Using myself as an example, while at the poker table I have functioned in the roles of teacher, novice, newcomer, loose player, inebriated player, clown, bon vivant, avocational player and shill. This chapter will discuss the various types of players.

### Daytime Players

With rare exception, daily players are retired men with a limited fixed income. They usually arrive around 11 a.m. and will gather informally, drinking coffee, chatting and waiting for enough players to begin a game. The Stud and pot players are similar in their interests and many of them will alternately play either game. Stud players "sign up", which means to place their names on the blackboard behind the Stud table, or otherwise stake out their position at the table by placing money or a chip to mark their seat. Even though

game has not commenced, they mark their name to become entitled to the "opening buy-in". When at least five live players and sometimes one or two shills are congregated, the Stud game will begin.

Daytime players are known as extremely tight players. They usually play only those hands in which they have a high probability of winning. It's not that these players don't enjoy taking a risk, but that their limited resources restrict the number of risks they can afford. They know another hand will be dealt within a couple of minutes and their chances of winning will begin anew. The fact that they play every day and see hundreds of hands in a given day, provides them with a great deal more patience than the drop-in player who only plays occasionally and is out for the big win, or at least the thrill of "rattling his chips", i.e., betting extravagantly.

#### Nighttime Players

Daytime players usually end their gambling and fraternizing by early evening. They are replaced by the more aggressive nighttime players. The games often loosen up as the nighttime players' betting style dictates. Nighttime players usually gamble more in their play and generally buy into the more expensive games in the back.

There is a definite status distinction between players who play only in the front and those who play only in the back. A few players straddle both games but they are known by that section where they play primarily, be it either front

or back, and are looked upon with suspicion by both factions.

Straddlers are considered predatory by both front and back room players since they don't have a clear cut loyalty to either group, Stud or Hold'em. They will go wherever the game is strongest and often will cripple a game by cashing out to enter a different game. Players who are relatively aligned with one group are more predictable. They are more apt to stay in a game. Straddlers violate this unwritten code of allegiance, consequently reaping the distrust of both Stud and Hold'em players.

#### Hold'em Players

Some of the "back room players", as the Hold'em players are known, view the Stud players as second-class poker players, and their lower stakes game is the subject of derision. Many Hold'em players fancy themselves semi-professional players and only play in the front until a Hold'em game opens up in the back. These would-be prima donnas frequently whine and complain aloud during the game, about what terrible players the Stud players are. It is of interest to note that these "terrible" players will often beat the Hold'em players, but their accomplishments are never attributed to skill by the losers, but rather to fool's luck.

In regard to strategy of play, the regular Hold'em player is an entirely different breed of player from the Stud player. Some of the Hold'em players are older, retired men but most are younger, more aggressive players. While the older Hold'em



players are usually very patient and very good players, most of the regular Hold'em players are young men (mid-twenties to mid-forties) who are aggressive in both their style of play and their verbal interactions with other players and the dealers. It is from these aggressive players that the hostility originates.

An example is Alex, a well-known Hold'em player who frequently comes into the Oxford in the early afternoon. He cruises around the building, making small talk with Hold'em players if any are around. If none are to be found, he will join the Stud game and pick out a Stud player to converse with. He attempts to establish a conspiratorial union with the chosen player while ostracizing others at the table. He constantly criticizes the style of play at the Stud table and frequently tries to "bull-the-game," that is, intimidate other players into folding superior hands by aggressive betting and raising. When his strategy fails he assures all the Stud players that "you'd never win in the back room". Alex is clearly off his turf and he knows it. Tension builds at the table as a result of his arrogance and the friction between Stud and Hold'em players is refueled.

#### Stud Players

The Stud players return the enmity of the Hold'em players by laughing at their pretentiousness and delighting in "sticking it to them." Hold'em players are viewed by the Stud players as vultures who will light in the Stud game, attempt

to pick it clean and abandon it the minute a Hold'em game opens up in the back. Many Stud players will "give air" to a fellow Stud player as they mutually recognize their commitment to the Stud game, but will gladly take a Hold'em player for all they can.

The allegiance Stud players have for one another is partially based on their limited incomes and partially on their interest in keeping the Stud game "healthy," so they can continue to play throughout the day and early evening.

#### Professional Players

A fifth type of player, who usually can be found in the back room, is the professional who makes a living playing poker. There aren't many of these in Montana because state law prohibits the pot from exceeding \$100 on any given hand, and thus it is hard to bet enough to protect a really good hand. A normal poker table seats eight players. At that rate if all players continued to bet the maximum, the most it would cost per player would be \$12.50. Since no pot can exceed \$100, players can afford to stay in a hand to see if their long-shot card comes in. With those kind of odds even a very strong hand in the beginning is frequently bested by the end of the hand. A few who do make their living at poker are willing to settle for a less lucrative poker lifestyle in exchange for the other benefits Montana has to offer. These players rarely play Stud and they rarely play during the daytime, since both render small returns for their investment

of time and money. Professional players usually wait until later in the evening to play when other players are either "stuck" (having lost one's money) or drunk or both, and therefore can be more easily manipulated. They never buy into a "weak" game and thus travel from house to house looking for the strongest option. A strong game means one with numerous players and a lot of money on the table.

The professional poker players are also interested in garnering points at the different gambling houses, which entitles them to participate in weekly tournaments for additional profits (see Appendix B). Many gambling houses sponsor a weekly tournament which can only be entered by amassing a specific number of points. The points are accumulated by the players for each ten dollar increment in the pots they win. Only the top twenty point collectors are seated in the weekly tournament which pays a large bonus. Competition is keen to build good pots and win not only the money in the pot but the bonus points as well. Expertise is a major factor in tournaments because, unlike regular poker games, tournaments are constructed so that any player can bet all the chips he has amassed at any point and drive out or break a weaker opponent. The player who ends up with all the chips wins the tournament and is awarded a cash prize.

The incentive for the house in sponsoring a tournament is that during the week gamblers will play in games that they might otherwise eschew due to outside interests. The lure of

collecting enough points to get into the tournament has changed the mind of many homeward bound gamblers.

Though professionals are usually very tight players, they somehow seem to sense just the right time to "gamble," and frequently they can maximize their winnings at the expense of other players who are experiencing a run of bad luck.

Professional players will play out a "hot streak," a series of lucky but high risk hands, and then will quit when they see the tide changing. Less skillful strategists will continue to press their luck long after their "rush" has ended, with the obvious eventuality of their monetary demise.

#### Paraprofessional Players

The paraprofessional is a regular, serious poker player who makes his living on the outside, but who sees himself as much more than a recreational player. He almost always play Hold'em and make-up the faction referred to earlier who are frequently at odds with the Stud players.

These players are primarily young to middle-aged adults. They are usually aggressive in both their style of play and their personal demeanor, and frequently are embroiled in petty squabbles with one another, sometimes leading to physical altercations. They consider their own play highly skillful, regardless of how reckless, but respond in an egregiously surly manner to everyone else's play even when it parrots their own. An example is the behavior of Tom, a belligerent Hold'em player. He routinely makes risky calls or even raises

on the come. When he is successful, he gloatingly rakes in his chips and laughs in his opponents faces. When he loses however, especially to a player who is playing just as badly as himself, Tom will accost the victor and demand an answer to his query, "How can you play so f\_\_\_ing bad? Though Tom is one of the worst offenders, he is by no means the only rude player. Many of the paraprofessional players behave in a surly manner towards one another and even more so towards outsiders and Stud players.

I find it telling that while these players envision themselves as far superior to Stud or other Hold'em players, they can't seem to see that they are the ones who are out of line and consequently spend a lot of time tattling on one another in an attempt to recruit support for their latest transgression. The most severe of these transgressors are considered deviant by their peers in the poker milieu and are sanctioned by the subculture members. If their actions become too outrageous they will also be sanctioned by the house, perhaps by being asked to leave the game.

#### Avocational Players

The avocational type is comprised of players like myself who enjoy the competition and camaraderie of the Oxford. These players are frequent, though by no means daily players. Due to their recreational approach to poker, they are generally less patient than the daily players but much more knowledgeable and self-assured than the novice. They are the

most apt to vary their style of play as the mood strikes them, rendering them much more dangerous to steady players who can read the more predictable players.

### Shills

The shills are players recruited by the house to fill in when the game is weak because of too few players. Their task is to keep the game from collapsing until more live players arrive. They play with house money and are cautioned to bet conservatively.

Shills are generally men or women who know how to play cards well but whose financial straits render them unable to enter the game as live players. They are chosen mostly because they were available at the moment when the floorman determined the game was weak enough to require shoring up. Like the retired daytime players, they always have more time than money and so the slow, conservative play required of them presents no problem since they would just be loitering around the Ox drinking coffee and visiting anyway.

It is to the shill's advantage to play well as the house splits any profit he amasses after deducting his initial stake (entry amount) in the game. A shill is put into the game and exits the game upon demand of the floorman, whose job it is to keep the games healthy. Whenever a game gets close to being full (populated by live players), the shill will be pulled (cashed out), and if he has not made a profit, he'll generally be paid a small stipend for the amount of time he's

invested. A good skill can make a few dollars with no personal financial risk and will often hang around hoping to be of service later. It would be of little value to the house to have their skills "break" live players and further weaken the game. Another reason for skills being cautioned to play conservatively is that the house doesn't want to invest a lot of money into a game that may not develop into a strong one. If the game breaks up and the house has a lot of money invested, they're in the same predicament as the individual player who is stuck. The house has lost its money and has no opportunity to regain it. Hence the myth of the house player as a card sharp who lays in wait for the unwary gambler is indeed a fabrication, at least at the Oxford.

#### Drop-In and/or New Players

The drop-in player, known as a "flinger," is another type of player who elicits the wary watchfulness of regulars due to the unknown element regarding his play. This caution is likewise extended towards any new player. Those of us who play regularly have come to know more or less the style of one another's play. A new player has both the advantage of being unknown to the regulars, and the disadvantage that while the rest of us know the subtleties of one another's play, he doesn't. Thus he must assume the best possible play from all of us and vice versa. Many regular players will watch a newcomer in an attempt to determine if he is a novice or a skilled player.

### Novices

The novice is a particular type of new player. He is not only new to the Oxford, but just learning the game as well. The novice is often a college student whose exposure to poker has come from a fellow student caught up in the fever of the get-rich-quick world of poker.

The novice is easily spotted by his inconsistent play. He will play one hand too tight and another too loose. He is unaware of the nuances of the game including familiarity with the regular players and their style of play. For example, he rarely knows who can be counted on to have the best possible hand, known as the nuts. A nuts player usually plays only the best hands and will wait until he has a very good hand to participate, whereas the novice will play every hand believing that he'll "get there" in the end. The novice's style of play is defined as "calling on the come."

To a more skilled player, calling on-the-come can be profitable if he takes into account the number of cards already dealt and thus no longer available to him. A novice is often unaware that the exact card he needs has already been distributed and thus he is "drawing dead," meaning he can't possibly receive the right card. Drawing dead also means that another player's hand can't be beaten even if the drawer does catch the card he needs. Novices rarely are aware that they're drawing dead in either event.

### Intoxicated Players



Highly intoxicated players are both the scourge and the boon of the poker table. They often slow down the game which invariably costs the house money since the house revenue is collected by taking a percentage of each pot. They frequently play and win hands that have only a remote chance of success. These players commonly confuse other players and the dealer by betting or calling out of turn.

Conversely, many a stuck player has been fortunate enough to redeem his losses by capitalizing on a drunk's reckless play. Therefore the players and the house maintain an ambivalent posture towards intoxicated players. If a player is providing good action and not slowing down the game too much, he will most likely be allowed to play. Unless they are extremely out of line, by using profanities or verbally or physically threatening other players, inebriated players are tolerated at the table in the interest of both the house and players of making money from their action.

### Women

Women make up a distinct category of players based not just on their gender but on the response of their male counterparts. When I first began playing at the Ox, I noticed that nearly all of the women players were also employees of the Ox, usually poker dealers or runners. Those few who weren't were spouses or girlfriends of poker players.

In those early days I was the only regular female player who didn't fit into the above parameters. This made me of

interest to many of the regular players, both male and female, and my unusual status often prompted the query, "What's a girl like you doin' in a place like this?"

It has been my observation that women have a tendency to play more conservatively, i.e., bluff less and not bet superior hands as aggressively as men. Consequently many men make the error of discounting a woman's ability to play poker successfully. They often will attempt to bluff on an obviously inferior hand, assuming that a female opponent either can be scared off or is too ignorant to know what she has in her hand.

I have rejoiced many times in both observing and delivering a fiscal lesson to sexist players who failed to recognize both the potential of a woman's hand and her ability to parry their aggressive play.

Often when a male is bested in a hand by a female his response will be one of indignation. I've witnessed many of these occasions when he'll turn to a nearby player and mutter words of derision under his breath. Some are more open in their hostility and will verbally insult the victor with sexist remarks such as, "Only a woman would play a hand like that!"

Sooner or later most wise players come to the conclusion that since the cards speak for themselves, regardless of the gender of the players, their best interest, financially, will be served but not underestimating their female opponents.

Women have won the weekly tournaments numerous times. Many of those who are frequent players have been given the respect their prowess demands, but female players, like newcomers, must earn that respect.

Over the years I have witnessed a vast increase in the number of female players and also a definite increase in aggressive play by women. On a weekend sometimes half the seats in the Stud game will be occupied by women. They still represent only about twenty-percent of those playing Hold'em, however. As women become less of an oddity in the once all-male establishment of the Oxford, their interaction with the poker players becomes more egalitarian as well.

#### Deviance and Social Control

Like the dominant culture, the Oxford poker subculture has its share of deviants. Erikson theorizes (1962) that, "deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior, it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them." Like Durkheim, Erikson believes deviance serves to define boundaries. It is through deviance that the outer limits of the group's norms are established.

Thus deviance cannot be dismissed as behavior which disrupts stability in society, but is itself, in controlled quantities, an important condition for preserving stability. (Erikson, 1962, p.310).

Deviance in the Oxford poker players' social world falls under the guidelines set by Erikson. Members are judged not just by the accumulation of chips but also by their respect for the norms and values of the subculture. In this regard, some members who are outstanding card players occupy a low status due to their aberrant behavior.

Five players quickly come to mind. One is addicted to cocaine and is reputed to be a drug dealer to support both his gambling and drug habits. He is loud and obnoxious and frequently flashes huge wads of money while attempting to "bull the game." When I asked informants who had identified him as an outcast why they had placed him in that category, the responses varied from those who liked to see him in the game because they could usually win large pots from him to those who abhorred him so thoroughly they would immediately cash out when he arrived or refuse to enter a game he was in. None of my informants liked him, and more importantly, none of them respected him. When asked why, they all cited his obnoxious behavior and his acquisition of money via drugs. The outsider may be surprised by the members' attitude about drug dealing since the Oxford members are noted for their tolerance of deviance. Most members tolerate private drug usage but view it entirely differently when the proceeds from dealing are used in an aggressive fashion against them at the table.

The second player occupying a low status despite his

skill at poker, is a man who makes his living as a card dealer. Though his skill at cards is impressive, his extremely poor manners and childish behavior when playing undermine his status in the players' world. He throws cards, calls the dealer names and constantly insults the other players. The fact that he is acutely aware of the rules of etiquette due to his profession but chooses to violate them continually when he is a player reduces him in the eyes of the regulars. When I queried my informants about this player, the general consensus was that he was a "pain in the ass". Along with his egregious behavior, he further exacerbates the ill feelings of his opponents by hitting and running. Many players vacate the game once he enters or refuse to enter when they see him seated at the table.

A third low-status player is a man who, like the others, is an outstanding player, but whose bizarre behavior creates tension and discomfort at the table. He claims to be a gun runner and hit man for the Mafia. He often insults both men and women at the table and has been known to physically assault either sex without provocation. He is described as "a time bomb, ready to explode at any moment" by one of the regulars and is given a wide berth, especially when he is drinking. I once witnessed a dealer push him a good sized pot though he clearly had not won the right to it. Neither the dealer nor the legitimate winner was willing to risk his wrath by confronting him. He then returned the pot to its rightful

owner and treated the matter as a big joke. The laughter that accompanied his was nervous indeed.

These deviant members are sanctioned by the group via ostracism and verbal put-downs. Like spoiled children, their punishment only partially keeps them in line. The most extreme sanction is to be "eighty-sixed" from the games and premises. The underlying meaning of eighty-six is that one is dead and is in a hole eight feet long and six feet deep. Only the management can eighty-six a player. Since the setting for the poker players' social world is a private business, the management can refuse service and entry to any player whose behavior is inappropriate. Management rarely eighty-sixes players because it relies on them for revenue, but if a player is continually disruptive or participates in violent behavior, he can be banished. If his "crime" is serious he can be permanently eighty-sixed. A case in point, my fourth example, is a local attorney who was permanently eighty-sixed before I arrived on the scene. His behavior was so odious that, despite spending large amounts of money, he is no longer welcome. He is described as "a slimy little grease ball" by one of my informants. He is reputed to have destroyed many games by his vile language and tantrums directed at both the dealer and other players. Even after all these years his name still causes those who knew him to curl their lip and make sneering remarks. He is one of only two players I know of whose ostracism is permanent.

The other permanently banished player differs from these other deviants in two ways. First she is the only female I know who is permanently banished and secondly, she is a very poor player. Generally extremely poor players are required by their financial limitations to alter their play in an attempt to regain solvency. This player simply solicited the exchange of sexual favors for money to get back into the game when she had depleted her resources. Most players tolerated her foul language and hustling at the table, but the day she was seen urging her six year old daughter to ask male patrons of the Oxford for money was the final straw. She was very quickly and unceremoniously escorted to the door by the floorman who let her know in no uncertain terms that she was permanently eighty-sixed. The floorman then made written notation to the owners to ensure the banishment would not be overturned, and he also made a referral to social services regarding her inappropriate behavior towards the child.

Short-term banishment is generally the rule. Though the management actually carries out the banishment, the social control is levied via members' request. Should a number of members, especially those with high status, request a player be eighty-sixed, chances are very strong he or she will be.

Orrin Klapp (1954) has developed the concept of social types as a means of explaining social behavior. Erikson's development of deviance is from a generic perspective whereas Klapp's focus is specific. In his article, "Heroes, Villains

and Fools as Agents of Social Control," Klapp examines the ways in which social typing serves to express group judgments, facilitate consensus, and define roles. Klapp maintains that it is the group's consensus which applies a label via epithets which then becomes the definition of the situation. Klapp defines heroes, villains and fools as deviations from the norm. The hero would represent a "better than" departure from ordinary behavior while the villain clearly represents "antagonism" of the group standards. The fool falls short of the expectation of ordinary behavior and thus occupies a low level of status.

An example of this social procedure in the poker social world is the categorizing of poker players by consensus of the group into various types of players.

In keeping with Symbolic Interactionist theory, the social world of the Oxford poker players is amorphous in form yet very real to its members. Contrary to other social entities there are no permanent leaders, elections of officers, or formal initiation ceremonies. Nor can membership simply be purchased. Those who belong to the poker players' social world are subject to its specialized norms and values. Because of its amorphous structure members of the Oxford poker players' social world have developed a system for categorizing players into various types. This typing is achieved by group consensus and is consistent with Klapp's concept of social types as a means of explaining social behavior. Players such



as Omar and the unnamed woman who was permanently eighty-sixed would fit into Klapp's definition of the fool whose play was significantly below the norm. Those at the Oxford fitting his hero definition would be Ed, Jim and Martian whose skillful play and pleasant demeanor rendered them high status within the poker players' social world. The eighty-sixed attorney, ill-mannered card dealer and the gun runner who use their considerable skills in an antagonistic manner clearly fit into the villain social type.

While other social groups utilize formal sanctions as well as internal regulators to maintain control, the Oxford poker players rely on insiders' knowledge produced by labeling to provide a semblance of predictability in a world founded on risk-taking and the unknown. To this end typing of players serves to help sustain the poker players' social world.

**CHAPTER VIII**  
**PLAYING THE GAME**

In the highly competitive world of poker, players constantly attempt to scope out the maximum information about their opponents in order to best secure a profitable return. While virtually every other player is essentially an opponent in the poker arena, members will often treat one another in a much less competitive fashion than is accorded non-members. Exchanging information with other insiders is invaluable to both the individual and to the group. Sharing helps to bond members by defining boundaries between insiders and outsiders. A great deal more than playing cards goes into successful poker strategy.

Learning how to play poker involves far more than just learning the formal and informal rules. New players must learn how to size up the game and read their opponents. They must learn how to present themselves to others as competent players and how to minimize their failings. They must learn how to manage their luck so they can continue to play without suffering severe losses. Even cheating must be learned. True insiders in the players' world share countless taken-for-granted understandings that are integral to the culture of poker at the Ox.

Sizing up the Players

Sizing up the players is a technique members employ to

determine the strategy required to best return a profit. New players are sized up by watching how facile they are with their cards and chips. The manner in which a player handles these items conveys a great deal of information. Whether a player is tight or loose is of paramount interest to those at the table and careful scrutiny of his action is taken. In the competitive world of poker, the more information gleaned about one's opponent, the better one's chances of besting him. Thus newcomers are given a thorough inspection, though in such a nonchalant fashion as to appear that nothing but a card game is in progress. An example is the manner in which a player stacks his chips. New or infrequent players have a tendency to pull their chips toward the edge of the table in front of them without counting their bounty, and thus never really know how much money they have at any given point. Experienced players will carefully assemble their chips in individual arrangements which range from the simple building of stacks of \$10 or \$20 to the elaborate pyramids and designs affected by some of the professionals.

The ritualistic arrangement of chips serves the dual purpose of entertaining the player when he is not involved in a hand and presenting a visual inventory of exactly how much money the player has at any given moment. A large, carefully arranged assemblage of chips can either intimidate the faint-hearted or challenge the adventurous. By observing the flow of profits, the owner can readily adjust his strategies to

avoid "going off" (spending all or a major portion of one's accumulated chips).

In one common stacking ritual a player will take two stacks of chips and place them side by side. He will then deftly combine the two into a single stack by simultaneously lifting the two stacks and moving them together using only one hand. This is a difficult maneuver and only the most skilled players are successful. Their degree of expertise can be noted by how tall the stacks are and how swiftly a player can alternately build, disassemble and rebuild these stacks while either considering whether to make a call or carrying on a conversation. Any player who can build these stacks has been around awhile and it certainly behooves others to give him respect when involved in a hand with him.

The way in which a player picks up and returns his cards is a subtle but definite cue as to his familiarity with the world of cards. Those well-schooled in handling cards develop various flicks of the wrist or fingers which send the cards towards the dealer in a well aimed trajectory. Less adept players often accidentally expose their hand when returning it or send it into the non-neutral area of another player's space thereby fouling his hand and making him ineligible to win that pot. Without question, these blunderings result in tension and animosity directed towards the offender and alert knowing players to the potential weakness of their clumsy opponent.

Seasoned players often can tell if a new arrival is a Stud or Hold'em player by watching how he checks his "hole cards." Hold'em players usually arrange their hole cards at an angle and will lift only the corner of their hole cards while Stud players usually bend back the top half of their hole card and look at it straight on. The reason for this variation is that Hold'em players are looking at two cards and are required to be more surreptitious in an effort to keep from exposing their hole card to players on either side. The more simple game of Stud puts only one card down on the table and thus the exposure of one's hole card is less likely.

The manner in which a player returns his cards to the dealer either at the termination of the hand or when he opts to fold telegraphs information about his familiarity with the game and often his current state of mind. If a player is angry or frustrated he may respond by throwing his cards at the dealer or swearing, thereby signaling an out-of-control condition, perhaps rendering him more susceptible to manipulation. "Hot Sucker" is the term coined to describe aggressive play following a series of bad beats. Along with throwing the cards and swearing, a hot sucker will often bet and raise the maximum amount regardless of the strength of his hand. This is done in an effort to both intimidate others and maximize the amount of the pot which the hot sucker intends to claim in his quest to get even. These factors, even though temporary, are of prime importance when sizing up players.

Subtle as well as obvious cues are read by players as they continually filter information about one another. Such obvious factors as the degree of intoxication or state of personal hygiene can tell a great deal about a player. Several days growth of beard or unkept, greasy hair and rumpled clothes announces that a player has been at the game for a marathon session and his or her judgment is probably impaired by fatigue and most likely depression over losses. It is safe to assume he is a loser, since few people stay beyond the comfortable limits of sleep deprivation or hygiene when they are even or ahead. These players are a ready target, as they can be counted on to gamble heavily in an attempt to reclaim their losses.

Bearing in mind the caveat pertaining to judging a book by its cover, a player still can gather some information about another by his attire. A person's dress and the condition of his hands often gives clues about his status. Well worn clothing and calloused hands with jagged nails signal a working man whose money is probably limited and who rarely has the luxury of calling-in sick when stuck in an all night game. Consequently these players are usually part of the ebb and flow of the ever changing Stud game as opposed to the more stable population in the Hold'em game.

Players who are dressed and bejeweled expensively often play in the more costly games and in a more predatory manner than players whose dress signals a living garnered from

physical labor. Frequently the more affluent players will attempt to drive out their opponents by sheer flamboyance of betting without giving credit to their opponents for the ability to play their hands skillfully.

Perhaps it's the fact that many white collar workers, particularly attorneys, consider themselves superior to their more humbly attired opponents, or perhaps it's due to the love-of-the-underdog phenomenon, that a certain knowing smile invades the faces of Oxford members witnessing a showdown between highbrows and their less wealthy adversaries, in which the victor was determined not by the artificiality of his demeanor but by the skill of his play. Once again, the unique hierarchy of the poker world contrasts with the status distinctions outside the Oxford.

Dress is an important factor when sizing up opponents but it's the foolish player who puts too much stock in the apparent affluence of his opponents. Many players survive, and survive well, in the less crystallized social order of this social world where they compete successfully with players who would easily dominate them in the social and economic world outside the environs of the Oxford.

A good barometer when sizing up a player is to watch his body language. Frequently a player's hands will shake, giving away his nervousness, which could signal an extremely good hand or a bluff. Some players blush upon receipt of a longed for card or the vein in their neck or temple will throb.

Regulars tell of watching an opposing player's jaw clinch and twitch during those seconds spent deliberating whether to call or fold. The obvious danger when sizing up opponents via body language alone is that too much credence can be given to their physical behavior, causing a misread of their current state.

Some players will offer information about themselves while visiting which is used to size them up. For instance, a player who is escaping an unhappy personal situation, either at home or on the job, is usually much more vulnerable due to his distraction than the player who is merely entertaining himself. Likewise, a player who is on vacation will often have a holiday attitude and will play his cards accordingly in a very loose fashion.

Players who verbally or physically bully other players or the dealer can be counted on to use less finesse when playing cards, and they are often beaten by others who observe their weakness. Poker is primarily a mental endeavor. Thus the player who plans his strategies to fit the current mood and tempo of the game will recognize the mental errors of other players. A bully usually has his mental energies directed towards intimidating others, rendering him much less acutely aware of the nuances vital to success.

Paying attention to how players interact is an important factor when sizing up both the game and the players. Some players will operate as a team and will attempt to force others out of a pot by alternately betting and raising until



only they are left in the hand. An understanding of this form of collusion is of vital importance to sizing up players.

Some players are biased against others based on their gender, race, or ethnicity. It pays to note how players compete against women, Native Americans, Asians or other minority members. Occasionally players will succumb to the myths that women can be easily bluffed or that Native Americans or Asians play every hand regardless of how weak. These biases cause them to commit the folly of playing only the players in the hand rather than a combination of the players and their cards. The astute observer can catch them in a bluff by registering and acting on their bigotry.

#### Sizing up the Game

In conjunction with sizing up their opponents, players in-the-know will also size up the game before entering. This means to take into account all aspects of the game which make it attractive and weigh them against the negative factors.

The number of players in a game is of vital importance, exceeded only by the amount of money on the table. Players who gamble frequently are much more aware of how the money is distributed. If a game has only three or four players it is considered weak and will not be attractive to potential players, since any given player could go broke at any point and leave the game even more "short handed."

The amount of money on the table is the most important factor when considering entry. If there are only a few

dollars in chips in front of the players, a gambler's chances of building and winning large pots are minimal. Since the object is to enjoy oneself while attempting to make some money, it is considered foolish to buy into a weak game.

Another very important element when sizing up the game is who has the most money at the table. If the one or two players in control of most of the money are either very tight players or professionals, a gambler's chances of separating them from their stakes is minimal. Of equal import is whether or not the players in control of the chips are the ones apt to abandon the game once another game opens up.

Part of sizing up the game is knowing whether or not one is likely to get stuck in a game and then have the further ignominy of not being able to retrieve one's losses because of too few players or money at the table.

The dealer is another factor when sizing up the game. Perhaps it is only superstition, but most frequent gamblers will have certain dealers they have confidence in, and some they abhor. A new or careless dealer will be slow and inevitably make more errors, thus costing players both time and money. Many players refuse to enter a game if a poor dealer is in the box.

Frequent gamblers, especially professionals, consider the rake when sizing up a game. The amount varies from house to house. A difference of two to four percent from each pot represents a substantial amount in a vigorous game.

Typically, new players are unaware of the rake but seasoned players calculate it carefully, and often more accurately than the dealers.

Time of day is important when sizing up the game. If a game is robust in the early afternoon it can often be counted on to continue through the evening, but if a game is weak around supper-time, it might "fold" because of daytime players going home before the evening contingent arrives. If it looks to the management as if a solid game can be built, the house will usually shore up a weak game during these slack periods by putting in shills to keep the game alive.

Aside from the supper-time lull, another risky period for entering a game is early in the morning. The bar rush from 2 to 3 or 4 a.m. will usually bring in some new players, but after 4 a.m. it's quite risky to enter a game. Those players in a game this late are usually either stuck, drunk or ready to cash out their winnings if they've been successful. Thus a player must be especially aware and cautious as to the distribution of chips and number of players in the morning hours.

Other temporal factors besides the time of day are of vital importance. Included are the time of the week and month. Most games are stronger during mid-week--Wednesday through Friday. Friday is often the best night of the week at the Oxford, as avocational gamblers celebrate the end of their work week. Family considerations seem to be weakest on

Friday night and a general holiday atmosphere prevails. Often this attitude extends to Saturday night as well, but by Sunday evening only the most desperate or devoted gamblers are in evidence.

During the early week the regular players, along with the professional and paraprofessionals, are the mainstay of the games. They continue to play both for the money and the accumulation of points for the weekend tournaments. The abundance of highly skilled players render the games much harder to beat and demands a higher degree of awareness on the part of participants.

The first of the month is the period in which the most spirited play takes place. Social Security and other types of pensioners and welfare recipients are in evidence during the first few days of each month. Many of the older men I play cards with will be seen only at this time. They spend their monthly allotment and won't return until the next payday. Occasionally one will be absent for a month or two, which always prompts concerned questioning about his whereabouts. After a period of absence, he is warmly welcomed back like a family member returning home.

Often I play cards with people whose dress, speech and demeanor advertise their poverty. These players are usually to be found at the bar drinking mugs of beer and perhaps playing Keno, but the first of the month finds them seated at the poker table hoping, like the rest of us, to make an easy

buck and to have some fun.

For the most part I've observed that even though these seedy players sometimes get ahead in the game, they rarely leave the table with chips. They stay too long and ultimately, as the tides of chance turn, spend back their gains. When sizing up a game, too many welfare recipients at the table signals a weak game due to their limited ability to purchase new chips. The opportunities for good action are reduced by the number of impoverished players in attendance.

#### Managing Impressions in the Game

Along with sizing up one's opponents and the game itself, players affect a number of strategies designed to present the best possible image and to enhance their opportunities for winning. The dynamics of the game require an awareness of self as well as others and players must constantly adjust their strategies.

Impression management is a key element in the players' world. Members have a certain self image they wish to present to others and they perform in a fashion to maintain that image. Such an approach is valuable when examining players roles and their efforts to maintain face amongst their peers at the Oxford. When their actions are inconsistent with their expected role behavior, players construct accounts, i.e., after-the-fact justifications for their behavior. They also offer before-the-fact explanations for their actions in the form of disclaimers.

Accounts and disclaimers are important factors in an examination of the subjective world of the Oxford poker players. In contrast to the dominant culture where lying and fabricating are rarely considered positive modes of behavior, successful bluffing, in the poker milieu, is considered an art form. Being caught bluffing is not what causes a player to lose face. It's being unsuccessful that demands explanation. Players attempt to recover by offering such accounts as: "Musta misread my hand;" "I gotta bluff cause I want calls; next time you'll call me;" "You caught me;" "It was my only out;" or "I missed" (a flush, straight, etc.) and "I had to play it like I had it." A conservative player who takes an out-of-character chance by gambling on a long shot offers such accounts as, "I had over-cards" (that is, cards of a higher value than the highest hand showing and if they paired up would produce the winning hand) or "I had the bug" (joker). "Well, I was all-in," is a common face-saver for players who bet on a very long shot.

Players don't always take responsibility for their play. It is not uncommon for a player to blame a dealer for his bad luck, especially if the bad luck is really an account for his own poor play. "No wonder this seat was open" is a frequent account in the blaming genre. "Some people play bad and get there--I should be so lucky" also belongs in this category.

Perhaps the most significant use of accounts in the poker subculture are the tales of woe leading up to the request from

one member to borrow money from another. For example consider the following exchange between two players:

"I can't believe it! I've had aces cracked, trips no good all night long. I swear to God I must have 'she can be sucked out on' written on my forehead!"

"I know just what you mean. I haven't been able to beat the game in weeks. Makes ya jist wanna get a rack and have a rack attack. Maybe we could force some of that shit-house luck our way!"

What frequently follows such accounts is the request for a loan with a lightning quick assurance from the petitioner that he'll pay it right back on a given date or if she "makes a hit." The exchange serves the dual purpose of saving face and getting refinanced.

A typical disclaimer made by players who are offering advance explanation of their play is "The pot's got me now," or "the action's hooked me". Both comments pertain to the size of the pot as explanations why the player is about to play in an uncharacteristic fashion. "I'm just playin' my rush" is another common disclaimer offering the player a face saving reason for playing weak cards. The implication is that the player is wisely responding to a series of lucky hands. "I'm gonna see if I can 'suck out'," is a pejorative disclaimer usually following one or more "bad beats" where another player caught up and won the hand.

"I can't go home now--I'm stuck like a pig" is a disclaimer letting all others know a player's inconsistent role behavior is due to the urgency of his financial

situation. "I'm gamblin' now" is a disclaimer usually offered to stave off the pejorative remark, "He's gamblin'." "I'll just have to jam-it-up" announces that a member is going to play in a risky fashion as a tactic to recoup his losses.

### Cheating

Cheating is a form of deviance which has always been a factor in any form of gambling. Prior to legalization, poker was played in the wide-open river boat gambler's style made familiar to most laymen by the popular television series Maverick. The milieu was one in which each player took a turn at dealing the hand (dealer's choice) using his own deck and all players were at the mercy of one another's relative ability to spot and deter cheaters.

Common cheating techniques include "crimping" (bending the corners or rounding the backs of cards by cupping them in the hand), "Nailing" (marking the sides of the cards with a fingernail gash), "spotting" (smearing a foreign substance like grease or water on the cards' back), "shaving" (thinning the borders of the cards), and "peeking" (eyeballing someone's hand) (Boyd 1975).

Any players caught cheating at the Oxford are promptly eighty-sixed from the game. A popular college football player, who was a leader amongst his peers, was caught sharing cards with a teammate. Both players denied culpability but were cashed out of the game and strongly admonished by the floorman not to ever try that again. They were both allowed



to play the next time they requested entry, but they were warned they would be eighty-sixed permanently if caught again.

Occasionally a shill will "palm off" (steal) chips and cash them in later when he has been a live player. This is a ruse to cheat the house of chips accumulated during shill play. If the player cashes them in as a private gambler he will receive all their value as opposed to the fifty-fifty split arrangement between shills and the house. Some very clever and adroit dealers are able to take part of the rake instead of putting it down the "slot" (narrow opening in the poker table where the rake is deposited). This is extremely risky on the dealer's part as detection will undoubtedly lead to being fired. In spite of the attention given to cheating in movies and TV shows about poker, most dealers and players are amazingly honest considering the amount of money flowing through the Oxford on any given day. With the advent of legalized poker, cheating of all sorts is much less prevalent. The use of a "house dealer" who is not a participant but functions solely as the distributor of the cards has reduced the opportunity for cheating significantly. Since I began playing at the Ox, a few players have been known to cheat to pay off gambling or drug debts, but they are rare exceptions.

#### Luck Management and Self-Regulation Strategies

Various machinations are employed by the poker community members to remain solvent. Being "stuck" is a very common phenomenon and in fact the shared understanding becomes a

vital link within the poker players' world. The members are attempting to avoid the debilitating hazard of going broke. All persons who gamble with regularity are in various states of self-regulation. When pertaining to playing poker, self-regulation means to employ measures to minimize loss during those times when even the best players experience bad luck. For the gambler who is on a roll, enjoying the fruits of his luck and labor is tempting. Most gamblers will readily admit that just being "good" (at cards) is not enough. Being lucky also plays a big part in the life of the frequent poker player and therefore stashing a portion of one's surplus is a must to guard against those times when one's luck is primarily bad. In the easy-come, easy-go world of a frequent player, keeping back a portion of winnings is tantamount to an insurance policy. In the poker world, as in real life, many are sadly uninsured!

Other methods of self-regulation are limiting the amount of time one plays and more importantly, limiting the amount of money spent. By limiting the time spent playing, an individual is less likely to stay too long and "blow-off" (spend) the profits he has amassed.

On countless occasions I have observed players get "on a rush", which means to enjoy a series of successful hands resulting in a substantial monetary gain. As a result of the rush they got even from an earlier deficit, or even made a little money, but their folly was simply to stay too long and

eventually lose back their gains. From personal experience and the frequent testimony of regular players, I am painfully aware of how debilitating it can be to know that you had squandered your money not once but twice! Players usually have serious inner conversations about their foolishness as they ruminate on this situation.

Still another self-regulating ploy is to change one's style of play hoping to likewise change one's luck. A player using this technique will frequently employ either the method of "playing tight" or the "hell-bent-for-leather" strategy of betting and raising at every opportunity. This may not appear to be a self-regulating device to the outsider, however many frequent gamblers will decide to use one method or the other, especially after observing that the game has several novices at the table who just might succumb to such a maneuver.

Players are often superstitious and consequently will interpret their run of bad luck as peculiar to a given gambling house. "I just can't win here anymore" or "I can't beat that game no matter what" are very frequently heard utterances amongst daily gamblers. Moving to different gambling establishments is a method commonly utilized to "change their luck," with the obvious effect of a steady shifting of players from one house to another. (It is interesting to note, however, that even when players change houses, they are still identified as being "from the Oxford.")

Other less dramatic strategies for changing one's luck

or "run of cards," are to change decks or seating. Players pay attention to which seats at the table seem to be "hot" i.e., the previous occupant made money, or "cold" which alternately means the previous player lost money while sitting there. As soon as a hot seat opens due to a player leaving the table and cashing out his chips at the cage, the first of the remaining players to request that seat will be allowed to take the vacated position. I have observed that, while players rush to fill a hot seat, only rarely are they eager to sit in a seat whose previous occupant has gone broke.

"Cutting the deck" is another short-term strategy players employ to change the run of cards. Cutting the deck is achieved by requesting the dealer to place the deck of cards on the table and manually lift the top half of the deck and place it on the table. The bottom of the deck is then placed on the top with the obvious result of a different series of cards being subsequently dealt. Cutting the deck was at one time a ploy to counteract a "stacked" (prearranged) deck which was a fairly common cheating technique in less strictly controlled games. The Oxford certainly would have nothing to gain by stacking decks because their revenue comes from a percentage of each pot regardless of who wins; hence the idea of cutting the deck has become superstitious strategy rather than a measure to reduce cheating. When I question players as to why they cut the deck the replies vary from "I'm lookin' for an ace" to "I want to cut him off his run." Trying to cut

off a run occurs when the player who cut the cards has noticed a series of suited or numbered cards which would strengthen his opponent's hand, so he attempts to interrupt this flow via cutting the deck.

**CHAPTER IX**  
**LANGUAGE, HUMOR AND SOCIAL BONDING**

Being in the core of regular players involves more than just regular play. It requires insiders' knowledge. Before a player is fully accepted in the players' world, he must be fluent in the language of poker as it is spoken at the Ox, and he must possess an intuitive understanding of the taken-for-granted meanings that enable one to appreciate and participate in the humorous exchanges that occur around the poker table.

The Argot of Poker

The use of argot (specialized language) is the most obvious indicator of membership in the players' world. By definition the poker argot denotes an insider's knowledge. I was fascinated by the unique terms for poker hands and other aspects of the poker world at the Ox. Argot sets boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Without the insider's knowledge of the language, people cannot participate as members of the subculture. Argot can be likened to a foreign language. Even if a visitor has extensive knowledge of the rules and values of a foreign culture he cannot directly participate in the culture until he has solved the mysteries of its language.

An example of the insider-outsider phenomenon occurred when I went to a party hosted by one of the dealers at the Ox. It was a celebration of the return to Missoula of three

regulars who had taken jobs dealing poker in another community. Even though they were making good money, they all returned "home" because they claimed things just weren't the same in the other town as at the Ox. With one exception, everyone at the party was a member of the Oxford poker world. We shared a potluck supper, played a vigorous game of volleyball, and settled down to an evening of visiting and reminiscing. People were having a great time telling poker stories and jokes about themselves and others at the Ox. The man seated next to me was the only nonmember in attendance, and as the rest of us were rolling with laughter over shared memories, he looked a little ill-at-ease. I mentioned that I hadn't seen him at the Ox, and he replied that he had never been there. He said he was a neighbor who had been invited over for the party. He had enjoyed dinner and the volleyball game, but was feeling like an outsider because he didn't understand the jokes or stories. He remarked that it was like listening to a foreign language. I told him about my thesis, indicating that argot would be one of my primary indicators of membership in the Oxford community, and he concurred wholeheartedly.

As this example illustrates, the use of argot is not confined to the poker table. It seeps into other interactions between members as well. A group of regulars were playing volleyball at another get-together one afternoon and one of the teams was about to score the winning point. In our

huddle, as we discussed our plight a player verbally urged a strong defense by reminding us that we were "all in."

A typical interaction between members of the poker social world takes place as members are seated at the card table. As they receive their cards and settle into the routine of betting, calling, or folding, several players will begin a conversation which to an outsider is unintelligible. The conversation is unique in two aspects. First it takes place in the absence of segue--players simply begin their litany of horrors--and secondly, it is filled with argot.

I had aces wired, queen garbage comes on the flop,  
I pour on the heat, really jam-it-up. I get four  
calls, Christ, they got no call comin'! Jack comes  
on the turn. I had the nuts til the end and some  
SOB stays in there and back doors me!

"Ugly suck-out," replies the other player, and he then proceeds with his own confirmation of the perils existent in their world.

What has transpired is a typical interaction between two members of the Oxford poker subculture. It takes insider's knowledge to unscramble this conversation. The first player has been dealt a pair of aces in Hold'em which was the best possible hand at the beginning. The player tries to protect his superior hand by betting the maximum allowed but is unable to pressure the other players out of the hand. Those remaining players have clearly inferior hands. As the next two series of hands are dealt, even though their chances for success are statistically remote, one of the remaining players



receives the card in the deck which produces a straight. A straight beats any pair and thus the player who began with a strong hand, in fact, "the nuts" at the beginning, responds in frustration by complaining to his cohort while the victor stacks his chips.

Sexual innuendo is a common theme at the poker table. Argot plays a central role in the development of these word games. Included here are such hands as "The French Connection," or "two for lunch" as a six-nine is known; two queens, referred to as "whores;" and the "me-offs" or two jacks. "The nuts" or "gonads" is the title given to the two best possible cards dealt at the beginning of the hand or the best five combination at the termination point.

Late one evening one of the female members, Tracy, was retelling an incident she'd observed in Great Falls. One of those listening to her story was Dan, a dealer who enjoys making the announcement, "one small pair" when he's describing his hand. Tracy told the group about having witnessed a buxom player remove her blouse while seated in the game in Great Falls. Apparently no one paid any attention to the would-be exhibitionist. They just went on with the hand. Dan greeted this story with skepticism and replied, "You mean if I were to take my pants and shorts off, none of you guys would even notice?" "Not at all, Dan," replied another player, "We'd probably just say, that's a mighty small pair you got there, fella." The whole table burst into laughter and Dan, who was

trapped in the box because he was dealing at the time, laughed good naturedly along with them, but his face was scarlet. For days afterward members would walk up to Dan and ask if it was true about his mighty small pair. Having fun at Dan's expense was possible because he had a high degree of integration within the social network of the Oxford. He not only worked there but was considered a member of the poker subculture and thus had the idiosyncrasy credit to allow himself to be teased by the whole subculture but not lose face.

The poker argot travels with its originators and becomes blended into the language of the dominant culture outside the Oxford milieu. The Oxford poker players are the genesis of many of the christened poker hands and cliches used in other gambling establishments.

Naming of hands is a way of identifying regular status both to members and to outsiders. Many hands are named after a player at the Ox who regularly plays that particular combination. Katovich and Reese point to a similar phenomenon in their study of bar regulars.

One way of saving a regular's place and validating a lifetime pass was to continually and publically identify mannerisms or habits that missing regulars had displayed (1988, p.317).

Some of the picaresque hands that originated at the Oxford are the "Jet Black" hand, a jack-nine; a "Ricki special" which is a king-deuce; and the "Warm Springs" hand, a seven-three, not so lovingly named for a player who spent

several months at the Warm Springs state mental hospital. "Chip White" is a six-seven, "Linda Rae," a seven-deuce combination. A renowned local player with the auspicious moniker of Jack King, who makes a good living as a professional poker player, can be counted on to play his namesake whenever the opportunity arises, with the explanatory account, "I always play my 'favorite hand'." The "me-offs," "square root" hand, "Montana banana," and "stone cold mortals" (a take off from the nuts) also originated at the Oxford and the stories behind them are part of the lore about the Oxford.

#### The Humor of Poker

People who spend long periods of time together, especially when engaging in a competitive activity, need to relieve the concomitant stress and tension. One of the modes for achieving relief is to play word games by exchanging banter or one-liners pertaining to poker. Many of the jokes contain poker argot or allude to the shared understandings of the subculture, rendering them of significance to insiders but either unintelligible or at least non-humorous to outsiders.

When one of the Hold'em players was chiding another player for successfully playing "rags" (low ranking cards), the winning player retorted, "It's a dirty job alright, but somebody's got to do it." His remark was met with laughter from the others at the table, and even the disgruntled Hold'em player smiled and nodded in concession. A different player smiled and explained, when being chided for "sucking out"

(coming from behind to win), "Even a blind sow gets an acorn once in awhile."

A joking account when a player has been caught bluffing is, "Oh, I must have misread my hand." Often players who have a weak hand will attempt to draw another card without betting. This procedure is called "checking" and a player with perhaps a good hand or one who is attempting to run a bluff will remark, "No checks here, you get your checks at the bank." A kidding remark about a good player who just played a bad hand successfully, or conversely about a poor player who just won is, "He only plays the nuts," meaning just the opposite, of course.

A common joke pertaining to any player who has had particularly bad luck of late but has just won a hand is: "Call the Missoulia! Get the photographers! We've got a feature article here. John Doe just won a hand!"

A joke which has become part of the oral history of the poker players' social world developed out of a very non-humorous incident at the Oxford. A regular player and member of the Oxford subculture named Ted was mugged in the men's room after having cashed out around a hundred dollars one evening. Ted is a poor poker player who spends vast sums of money "chasing an ace" (trying to pair the aces in his hand), or calling at the end of a hand when prudence would dictate folding. A drifter had observed him cashing in at the cage and followed him into the men's room striking him on the head

from behind. As Ted fell to the floor, the assailant stole his wallet. Everyone was appalled at the incident, and it was the subject of much conversation for several weeks afterwards. One of the other members of the poker players' social world was involved in a hand with the victim several weeks later, when, much to his surprise, Ted "laid down" (meaning he folded a good hand) to what he surmised was a superior hand. As the other member did indeed have a superior hand, Ted's uncharacteristic lay down prompted the winner to remark, "Hell, maybe that guy knocked some sense into old Ted. It will probably end up saving him thousands!"

Humor, aside from providing stress relief and defusing potentially volatile situations at the poker table, is also used as an avenue to express concern or to reestablish the status quo. In this instance, players had already expressed their outrage at Ted's victimization and the humorous remark functioned to restore him to his pre-victim status.

"He's starin' at the green" is a light-hearted explanation for a player who is all in. It's also called being "down to the felt," which means he has no chips or money. Nothing is left on the table in front of him but the felt. When a player has been down to the felt a number of times in an evening, he'll sometimes decide to buy a large number of chips to bolster his ego and to give the appearance of power and money. A rack holds one hundred blue one-dollar chips in five partitioned rows. If he buys a hundred dollars

worth, his action will frequently prompt the exclamation, "Oh, oh, he's havin' a rack attack." Another take-off of this inside joke is to buy a rack of red chips. These chips are worth 25 cents each and thus a player plays the buffoon and eases his tension when he buys a rack of red chips. The humor surrounding the red rack is that players will talk about cashing in a rack with the implied understanding that they cashed in one-hundred dollars. Occasionally a player who has only a very few chips will call for an empty rack and jokingly assure the others at the table he's about to cash in.

One-liners that have brought laughter and relieved tension, particularly after expensive pots were built, includes "No pair," which a player declares as he turns over a straight or flush, and "all red" or "all black," a self-effacing remark made about a hand when the player misses his flush. He has all the same color cards but they are essentially worthless as they don't match suits which would have resulted in a winning hand. "Two pair" is one of the trickiest and thus most witty remarks. The player who announces he has two pair usually waits until all the other hands have been turned over. Some of them may be very good hands such as flushes or full houses. When the player makes his two pair announcement, what he really means is that his two pair are actually four of a kind which is a "monster hand"!

"Monster" is a term given to both an outstanding hand and

in jest to a successful, but very poor hand. Players will tease one another with remarks like, "you checked that monster into me?" after a checked showdown produces an extremely weak winning hand. "Why don't you wait for a good hand?" is often the kidding hyperbole after a player has gone all-in on a hand that turns out to be a monster. When a player accidentally flips over his hand or somehow gives away his possession of a monster hand via verbal or facial cues, another player might tease him with, "Way to go poker face."

The humorous use of argot reinforces the bonds among regular players. A good example is the postcard two regulars on vacation in Mexico sent to their cronies at the Ox, addressed to the cage. The postcard relayed the following message:

Having a great time. You guys wouldn't believe this place. We love Mexico, the shopping's great, in fact had a rack attack at el mercado. P.S. send a rack of negro, ahora!

The joke here is that black \$20 chips are very rarely used. In fact the Oxford only owns two racks of them. The merry travelers were requesting \$2,000 in chips immediately, knowing fully well they would be back home before the postcard arrived, and also of course, that the chips weren't legal tender outside the Oxford.

The common identity of Oxford players is also reinforced by occasional humorous barbs directed at players from other gambling houses. "Brand X" is the name given to any competing

establishment. When a player whose identity is tied to one of the other houses enters a game, a player from the Ox might jokingly inquire how things are going at Brand X.

It is important to note that outsiders often fail to appreciate the humor of the Oxford's jokes and stories. For example, consider the story told about a dealer named Clark who announced to the bickering, late night players that the following was his last hand. The humor here is that dealers have absolutely no control over how long a game goes on, in contrast to players who are always announcing that this is their last hand. True to his word, Clark dealt one more hand and then "fanned the deck" and walked out leaving the nonplussed players gaping at one another. Fanning is done whenever a new deck is called for, hence Clark's ritual of fanning the deck and leaving produced an ambiguous situation at the table. Normally, fanning the deck signals the beginning of a new deck or a new game. Since fanning the deck is the procedure in which the cards are spread out on the table for inspection to ensure all the cards are in the deck, when Clark fanned the deck and then shut down the game, his audience was nonplussed.

The story about Clark is a good example of insider humor. Clearly it is part of the lore about poker at the Oxford since it has been told and retold. I heard about it from several players the day after it happened and again at the welcoming home party for the returning dealers. The visual image



members describe when they tell this story to other members is one in which the protagonist leaves the churlish Hold'em players sputtering. For those fellow members who have suffered abuse when sharing the table with the offenders, this presents a humorous and welcome mental image. Outsiders tend to perceive it merely as an angry dealer stomping away from a table full of bickering players.

Another incident, humorous only to insiders, pleased me so much I smiled for days whenever I thought of it. One of the regular players at the Ox is a self-appointed historian and photographer of the subculture. She has spent hundred of dollars in film, processing, frames and albums over the past ten years photographing each member separately and in group interactions. Along with her albums, she has made three framed collages of candid shots which are hung at the Oxford. One of those shots is of three players all named Ken who were seated next to one another one evening. She entitled this shot, "Trip Kens," which is a take-off from the poker hand "trips," for three of a kind. When she and I and another member looked at that photo we rolled with spontaneous laughter, but when I tried to share that mirth with two of my friends who are outsiders, I was met with straight-faced replies of, "I guess you had to be there." The more I tried to explain the humor, the more I realized this was an excellent example of insider's knowledge. I still think it's incredibly funny, but my outside friends remain adamant that,

"You had to be there."

But just being there is not enough. As these examples illustrate, to appreciate the humor of the players' jokes and tales, one must be intimately familiar with the game of poker and the argot that has developed around it. The creation of humor requires insider's knowledge of the players' world. Humor, like the specialized language it is based on, has two functions. It binds regular participants together and it separates them from outsiders. Humor and argot create a sense of community among the players. They produce a feeling of belonging that has led some participants to liken their world to a large, extended family.

#### Social Bonding in the Player's World

Linda Rae, the woman a seven-deuce is named for, is the Oxford's unofficial photographer.<sup>5</sup> She has taken hundreds of photographs of the regulars who frequent the Ox, and collages of her pictures adorn the establishment's walls. From time to time she brings her albums to the Ox and regulars take turns poring over them and enjoying the memories they evoke. Looking through these albums is exactly like going through a family photo collection.

Not everyone in these photos belongs in the core of regular players. The pictures include many marginal characters who occupy the intermediate status between the core

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<sup>5</sup>She has allowed me to use her real name

and the periphery of Oxford patrons. But most of those appearing in Linda Rae's photographs, as well as those who appear most often, can be characterized as members of the core group. The word "member" is a deliberate device on my part because it denotes acceptance in an exclusive social world.

Although regular play at the poker table is a prerequisite to acceptance in the core of regulars, socializing together outside the Oxford is a truer indication of membership in the community of players.

I knew I was considered a new member to the subculture when I was invited to a Halloween costume party. This party was a very popular, eagerly anticipated annual event given by a couple who had worked and played cards at the Oxford for years. It was by invitation only and was carefully planned to allow most of the members who work at the Ox to attend. The party usually was held on the Sunday before Halloween since a minimal number of dealers are scheduled to work Sundays. It began in the early evening and continued until around bar rush when the revelers would go to the Ox for breakfast and to share the fun with those unlucky few who had to work that night. Two years ago the couple who hosted the annual event moved out of town and the parties discontinued but regulars still recall the fun. Linda Rae has of course included photos from some of these parties in her albums.

Other indicators of bonding and membership include the sharing of holiday meals and gifts. The Oxford cafe prepares

a fine holiday meal on Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. In the spirit of taking care of its own, these meals are always free to the regular patrons. Few core members are to be seen partaking of this generous repast, however. Like a family, the poker players make sure every member has a place to go on these days and those people who dine at the Ox are either not members of the core group or are only very marginally involved.

Members take pride in looking out for one another. When one becomes ill or dies, others rally round. In the eight years I have been a member of the subculture, many of the old-timers have passed away and a few young people have died as well. I have personally participated in a number of hospital visitations and have donated money for flowers and memorials in honor of my ailing friends. The kindness and caring demonstrated during these times of crisis further strengthens the bonds of group membership. One old dying member who was an outstanding card player and who had generously shared the bounty of his garden with his friends at the Oxford was honored with a round-the-clock vigil by these friends. When he died he was surrounded by a large assortment of his cronies from the Ox. For the members, the social world takes on the aura of an extended family.

One of the female members, Cheryl, had radical surgery for cancer which rendered her unable to speak. She is a woman of very modest means and the members took up a collection

while she was hospitalized and purchased a robe and slippers for her. Though she can no longer converse verbally, members take the time to visit with her. She writes her conversation on a small notebook she carries with her, but frequently runs out of paper and uses the back of the Keno cards. She always sits by me and roots when I'm playing the Keno machine. It is customary to cuss and cajole the machine in an effort to coax or shame a win out of it. One evening a regular who was employed as a secretary brought a packet of "Post 'ems" note pads to Cheryl as a gesture of friendship. Cheryl was pleased and thanked her benefactress on her first yellow note. A few minutes later, after a string of losses, we all had a good laugh when I turned to Cheryl and said, "Well don't just sit there, write a bad Post 'em and put it right on this damn machine." As it is customary amongst the regulars who play the machines to speak to them as if they were animate objects in an effort to change one's luck, this novel use of Cheryl's note sheets has evolved into an inside joke.

An act of thoughtfulness and respect extended to the oldest member of the subculture was an annual gathering of members at the Ox to sing Happy Birthday and share a birthday cake with Ike. Ike's physical appearance belied his age. Even in his nineties he always dressed in a most dapper fashion with a tweed sport coat and expensive felt hat. He was a good card player, highly respected by the other members. Ike was 97 years old when he died in 1987 and he is sorely

missed.

The senseless murder of Ford, a daily Stud player at the Oxford provides an excellent example of the Oxford poker community's sense of interconnectedness. Ford was an elderly pawn shop dealer whose ill health had caused him to reduce the amount of time spent both working and playing cards shortly before his death. When I first met him seven years ago, I was struck by what a kind and sensitive person he was. He enjoyed playing cards during his lunch hour or in the early afternoons while waiting for his wife to get off work.

Many of the people at the Ox would ask him about pawning while he was playing cards. His reputation was one of extreme fairness. In fact, he was well known for giving gamblers from the Ox a break, should they be unable to meet their pawn ticket deadlines. During the robbery Ford was stabbed in the back and died in his shop. The whole Oxford community mourned his loss. We were beside ourselves wondering who would do such a thing to our friend. We took up a collection to add to the "Crime Stoppers" fund for information about his murder, and many members attended his funeral services. Intense emotion ranging from sorrow to extreme anger filled the Oxford for weeks. People were frustrated that his murderer, who had committed this heinous act in broad daylight, was still walking around free.

The discovery of the culprit is perhaps no less bizarre than the crime. One afternoon a dealer, Teresa, was working

and during a break she went behind the kitchen counter to wash the oil and grime from her hands. As she rinsed her hands she chatted with the afternoon waitress. Teresa's eye was caught by a vary familiar ring the waitress was sporting. She commented that she had one just like it and inquired if the waitress had purchased it at a local jewelry shop. The woman replied, no, that she had bought it along with another for \$40 from her roommate. She showed Teresa the other ring as well. Teresa was stunned by the implication her recognition wrought: The waitress was wearing her rings. They had been stolen from the pawn shop by the murderer. Teresa later told me her legs were shaky as she said to the waitress, "Come on, Alice, we're going across the street." The police station was their destination and it was through Teresa's very accidental discovery that Ford's murder was solved.

Ford was strongly bonded to the Oxford poker community and vice versa. Though solving his murder did not erase the sense of loss, it did help to return the poker community to a more homeostatic condition. When close members die, especially suddenly, the community responds just like a family and collectively seeks relief for the anomic condition.

Like an extended family, members delight in sharing news about its absent members and this sometimes degenerates into gossip. Though I doubt that members deliberately set out to malign others via gossip, what often happens is the aberration of the message consistent with information received aurally.

Gossip is like the "telephone" game we played as children where a message is told and retold. When it is checked against the original to see how oral presentation has altered the content, a surprising degree of inaccuracy is nearly always found. Since virtually all the information exchanged in the social world of the Oxford is delivered by word of mouth, the rumor mill is constantly replenished.

When a member is angry with or doesn't like another, he uses direct argot-based pejoratives as the vehicle to let his nemesis know unconditionally his ill will. As would be expected in such a competitive milieu, poker players often exchange verbal put-downs. While these interactions are clearly negative in tone, they serve a positive function by providing ventilation of anger and frustration which might otherwise lead to more serious consequences.

Such exchanges would have very little meaning to the man-on-the-street but are bitingly significant to those who understand them. "Nice hand" seems an innocuous remark but in the reality of the poker world it is a definite put-down, particularly if the hand were the successful culmination of a very long shot. Several others in this same vein are "Nice suck-out," "Ug-ly" (with emphasis on the first syllable), and "He's gamblin'!" Badgering remarks while the hand is in progress are another form of put-down and act as a control of other players. "Get there Yet?" or "You married to that ace?" reflect this category. Thinly veiled sarcasm is expressed via



such facetious remarks as "I love your action," with its underlying meaning that, anybody stupid enough to make that kind of a call will soon be broke. "Masterfully baited!" is a pseudo-compliment offered to a victor with its concomitant sexual innuendo.

The pejoratives mark boundaries between insiders and outsiders. They are used to confront a player who is deemed to be playing in an egregious fashion. While they control members' deviance, they are often misunderstood by nonmembers. The unregistered put-down is the members' subjective affirmation that theirs is a separate world. Outsiders are expected to comply with the formal rules of poker while members are subject to compliance with the insiders' codes as well, by virtue of their membership status.

#### Collusion: A Form of Bonding Built on Shared Understanding

Collusion is the secret sharing of information during the game. It is a mark of membership in the players' world since it is essentially an underground telegraph system. Its evolution and decoding takes place over time. To benefit from collusion a player must have an understanding of the argot and inside jokes of the subculture. Many players kibitz about their hand while it is in progress as an intimidation factor. Eye contact and specialized body language also telegraph information to those who understand it. Even the familiarity of participants with the style of play of one another signals messages unavailable to outsiders. Two of my friends and I

have devised a hand signal which resembles the curved talons of vultures waiting for prey. With this seemingly innocent hand gesture we signal a strategy of keying in on the new player and also reinforce the bonds of our association by signaling an insider/outsider status.

Although poker players compete with one another, their goal is not to destroy other regulars but rather to 'beat up' on outsiders. Poker players thrive on 'live ones'... A veteran poker player described this attitude: 'When I'm playing with a bunch of locals, I play soft and don't try to hammer them. But let a live one walk in and I pull out all the stops.' (Rosecrance, 1988, p.79).

A player will sometimes "give air" to another by showing his cards when he has the nuts. Rarely will a member show this courtesy to an outsider. Another courtesy members extend one another is to "soft play" a hand. This form of play allows another to stay in the hand at little or no expense and is usually offered when a member has suffered a series of losses. Members often attempt to "protect" one another by betting and raising the maximum to drive an outsider out of a hand in which a member has gone all-in. The net result in successfully protecting a member is that one member wins the side pot and the all-in player's hand stands up and he wins the main pot.

"Trapping" is a similar form of collusion. It consists of two players alternately raising and re-raising the bets resulting in a very expensive hand and lucrative pot. Though only one player will win, they might later share their night's

profits or at least split the profit of that hand. This must be done after players leave the game as no passing of chips is allowed at the table.

When I first entered the Oxford poker milieu, players were allowed to "root" (share chips). Many bonds were formed and strengthened via rooting as a member enjoying a lucky streak kept his less lucky "rooter" in the game by supplying chips at the culmination of each successful hand. Rooting was one of the few forms of collusion outsiders were aware of. Some players complained to the management about this practice, maintaining that players were ganging up on them. The management responded by disallowing the practice of rooting beyond the token sharing of an ante.

Collusion functions as an important element of social bonding. It requires insider's knowledge and status to participate. Though they are indeed central, the financial rewards of collusive play are less important than the social rewards of belonging to a community and participating in a united effort.

## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON WHY PLAYERS DON'T QUIT

In this paper I have referred to the community of players at the Oxford as a family. To the members of the Oxford players' world this analogy is as close to capturing the essence as I know how to create.

Like family members, the players at the Ox squabble and make-up. They stick together when things get tough and especially when threatened by outsiders. They have their heroes and their deviants. They record and cherish special moments.

The development of a sophisticated argot to communicate and entertain themselves is similar to the development of language amongst family members. Nonverbal cues are exchanged and correctly interpreted by virtue of an insiders' knowledge of huge proportions developed solely through experiences shared over time.

I have found the Oxford poker players' world to be a culture-within-a-culture, and like all cultures it is a dynamic, ever changing phenomenon. Members come and go. They become ill, some recover, and some die. Throughout all the changes the members continually respond to the ebb-and-flow of life's forces.

I was a daily member of this world for three years. I became tightly bonded to my cohorts at the Oxford and I am

still very close to them.

I left the Oxford when I became employed as a social worker. Family demands, raising two teenagers as a single parent, and the stress of long, intense work hours depleted most of my energy. I could no longer devote the time and attention to playing poker that my avocation previously allowed. Though I no longer interact on a daily basis, I am treated like a family member whenever I return to the Oxford with warm greetings and invitations to share in the games and the social world. When I return to the Oxford, I am immediately enveloped by enthusiastic members anxious to hear what I've been doing with my time. They invariably ignore my companion, not out of rudeness, but rather simply by virtue of not having a mutual foundation from which to interact with him or her.

No matter how long I stay away, when I see my cronies, they begin their tales as if it were only yesterday since we had spoken, and within a short time I will be apprised of any significant changes since we last met. I always feel like I am going back home when I visit the Oxford. The Oxford has changed physically very little since I left in 1985, though internally it has continued to evolve. Many of the people I worked with have also left the daily life at the Oxford to seek their life's fortunes elsewhere. Each of us is secure in the knowledge that we share with our fellow members a kindred spirit and we will always be welcome whenever we

return.

I recently had a conversation with another member who, like me, has left the daily life at the Oxford. Although she seldom plays poker these days, when she does play, it's always at the Ox. We were talking about the fact that the Oxford always has a game while other houses frequently struggle. Our conclusion was that we could play poker anywhere in town but we don't because the other houses can't reproduce the social aura of the Oxford.

In the true spirit of a social world, there are many people I love dearly at the Oxford and a few that I detest. I've had my share of fights and alliances. I have incurred financial disaster and wonderful windfalls. Without reservation I truly believe I am far richer for having entered through the smokey looking glass door at 225 N. Higgins Ave.

My examination of the social world of the Oxford poker players began as a result of my personal interest in poker. I was seeking a place where I could play the game regularly. I had no intention of developing social bonds with my opponents. In fact, I was unaware that anything like a social network existed.

My discovery of a social world where poker players gather to compete daily and exchange far more than chips has been a most serendipitous experience. My examination of the Oxford poker players' social world has been via a case study. The intent was to describe a specific social world from an

intimate face-to-face perspective. This study was not designed to be explanatory in nature as in a controlled experiment or systematic survey study. The ethnographic approach was employed to describe the poker player's social world and to provide insights into how that social world serves to maintain gambling behavior.

The more time I spent in the Oxford, the more I became aware that poker was the common denominator which brought these people together and around which they had developed a community. The Oxford is the site of a familiar world providing identity, friendship, entertainment and self-esteem for those who act as regulars. When weighed against these positive group reinforcements it becomes easier to understand why gamblers don't quit.

Poker has become ritualized in the players' social world at the Oxford. Klapp defines ritual as, "a nondiscursive gestural language, institutionalized for regular occasions, to state sentiments and mystiques that a group values and needs." (Klapp, 1969. P.121)

In this instance, not just the playing out of the game is central to the social identity of members but also the ritual of choosing which games to join, of discourse regarding the current and previous games, and maintaining the group camaraderie via argot based insiders jokes and rules. Klapp posits:

Ritual is the center of one's identity. It contributes to the fullness of emotional life and

is absolutely necessary for giving people a full sense of themselves, of their place, of belonging; it fills the emotional void of mechanized and routinized life (Ibid, 1969).

The social world of the Oxford poker players has many of the same dynamics of a religious cult. Parallels between cult membership and membership in the poker social world include a high level of commitment. The binding social arrangements amongst members act to sustain gambling behavior. Like cult members the poker players share a common focus and a relatively esoteric insider's knowledge.

As in the cultic milieu, ritual is a primary facet of the social world of the Oxford poker players. The game of poker functions as the central activity around which the members construct their social reality.

Within the poker milieu at the Oxford the ritual of the game promotes solidarity. Players enter the Oxford as individuals who, through a process of socialization become familiar with the game. Those who choose to immerse themselves into the social world of the poker players progress from the sense of "I" within the poker milieu to a sense of "we" through the ritual of the game. Reflecting on the Durkheimian tradition, Randall (1985) reminds us that social rituals such as common gestures and chants help people to focus their attention on a common interest. As they become more and more conscious of the group, the group begins to take on a sacred significance, transcending the ordinary and



enforcing respect.

In the poker milieu some of the commonalities of shared phenomenon are its language, inside jokes, esoteric values pertaining to time, money and various strategies of play which are observed and responded to within the group. The value players place upon these shared phenomenon in rituals of highly focused attention (that is, the game) ultimately produces a highly cohesive social world.

The ritualistic use of esoteric language as it pertains to the world of the poker players serves to strengthen group solidarity by establishing and maintaining boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Only those "in the know" will understand and benefit from the specialized language which has evolved within the poker world. Collusive play, parties and nurturing during times of crisis are social rituals which also reinforce group identification. As one's personal identity becomes more tied to one's social identity within the group, the individual becomes closely bonded, producing a sense of naturalness, familiarity and comfort within the group.

Shared understandings beyond the nuances of the game create an atmosphere of connectedness separating insiders from outsiders. Straus (1979) studied Scientology from the perspective of an ex-member. In his study of religious seekers and the process by which they settle into social worlds defined as "colonial networks," he theorizes that regulars act in a capacity as participants in a network of

like-minded others. To this end he determines that social worlds serve as a supportive reference group.

Goffman (1961) defines colonization as an individual's attempt to make a home for himself within the confines of a particular social world by constructing an orderly, stable and contented existence within its social context.

Straus notes that colonial networks often develop around one's work or specialized interest. He further posits that "colonization, immersing oneself in the social life, interests, activities and institutions of a world is an ubiquitous phenomenon in modern life" (Straus, 1979, p.6).

The Oxford poker players' social world is a colonial network. Its members seek the company of like-minded others. Members of the poker players' subculture have a strong sense of identity which serves as an antidote to the social isolation in an increasingly detached world. Insiders' knowledge garnered through regular intensive interaction coupled with an insiders' mentality reinforced by such bonding measures as collusive play and argot-based verbal interaction confirms their status as members in the social world. Consistent with Straus' discussion of membership in a cultic world, the Oxford poker players, through the immersion in their social world, become progressively more involved in the poker world and less so in competing outside interests. As they stake more and more of their time, money, reputation and self-image upon such participation and begin to accrue the

world's things-of-value, such as status, esteem and affection, it becomes easier and easier to continue and more and more difficult to give up this socially-ordained line of conduct. Players support one another through common rationalizations pertaining to their financial losses. Their talk about the losses and mutual strategies for beating the game serve as bonding elements to the poker players' social world. To leave this protective milieu where they are well-known and accepted is often very difficult.

When players attempt to quit they often struggle with the loss of the rewards of the social world which can be more debilitating than their financial losses. For those who have only weak ties to outside interests and support systems trying to quit produces an anomic condition. The ritual of poker serves to reaffirm the group identity. Thus when players contemplate leaving the familiar and secure social environment of the poker world, they often experience a phenomenon common to ex-cult members known as floating (Balch, 1982). They vacillate between the urgency of their financial constraints and the social rewards of fellowship.

Durkheim's conception that the social structure itself creates a moral cocoon around individuals who are closely connected to a group is consistent with continued gambling even when players have good reason to quit. In this vein, with higher social density, the meaning of life is attached to participation in the group, not to one's own wishes

(Durkheim, quoted in Randall, 1985).

The most severe measure employed by gamblers to regulate their luck is to quit playing cards altogether. For regular players quitting presents a very drastic change in their lives. Suddenly they are left with a lot of free time and usually not much money to entertain themselves. Their friendship circle often revolves around other gamblers, hence they frequently feel cut off from their peers and set adrift. Because this anomic condition is emotionally painful, efforts to stop playing rarely last for long.

This anomic condition is recognized in the Gamblers Anonymous literature. Gamblers Anonymous maintains that in order for players to successfully quit gambling they must replace the supportive network of players with a different support group.

My understanding of the Oxford poker players' social world allows me to speculate from a sociological perspective that gamblers who are closely connected to a social world don't quit because the social rewards outweigh the financial losses.

## GLOSSARY OF MONTANA POKER TERMINOLOGY

**Action:** 1) any round of play at the poker table; 2) a round of play which has a good pot on the table; 3) creating action means to drum up a better card game by performers and Looseys.

**Action bet:** 1) usually an opener by a hand that may be likely to win; 2) any bet or raise.

**Advertise:** show another player all or part of one's hand during the hand.

**All-in:** when a player has wagered all the chips and cash he has placed on the table.

**Ante:** a set amount of money required to play a hand. Each player puts in the ante to get into the action.

**Back door:** making the winning hand on the last card in Hold'em.

**Bad beat:** losing a poker hand to a player who took a long shot.

**Balancing pot odds:** players will figure the ration of their investment to the pot size and the strength of their hand.

**Bet:** to place money into action. The bettor may open the hand or continue to bet or raise.

**Big slick:** a Hold'em hand consisting of an ace and a king as the first two cards dealt.

**Blind opener:** a player makes a blind bet before his cards are dealt. A forced blind opener means that the player to the left of the dealer must open blind.

**Box:** area in the center of a poker table where the dealer sits.

**Bridesmaid:** second best hand.

**Bug (the):** the joker. A wild card joker with different functions in different poker games.

**Building pot:** to bet, to raise and to increase the pot size.

**Bullet (the):** an ace

**Bulling the game:** 1) shoving in a large raise or series of raises to force opponents to fold; 2) to control game action by overt aggression or covert skills.

**Bull shitting:** a lot of talk during a hand designed to confuse or deceive players.

**Bumping:** shoving in a raise to nudge players for a decision to call, raise or fold.

**Buried:** to be very much in debt in the game.

**Burn:** 1) to beat a player; 2) a one-card discard off the top of the drawing deck.

**Bust:** 1) a bad hand or bad play in a game; 2) to bust a player means to bankrupt your opponent.

**Button:** the symbol used to identify which seat the dealer will distribute cards to first.

**Buying the pot:** see bulling the game.

**Buy-ins:** 1) each game establishment has a set amount to buy one's entrance into the game--a game entrance fee. 2) Bonus chips given by the house to entice players to begin a game.

**Call:** to match the amount bet.

**Card sense:** 1) intuition on what your opponent holds; 2) a "sixth sense" about card playing; 3) a player who is experienced and takes well-timed risks.

**Case card:** 1) any fourth card of the same denomination received in the draw; 2) any card which fills out a straight, flush wheel or four of a kind.

**Catch:** to receive a desired card from the draw.

**Center deal:** house dealers control all card handling.

**Chase:** trying to out draw an opponent in the hand.

**Chatter:** 1) game talk designed for color, entertainment; 2) creating tension; 3) creating deception.

**Check:** to pass the action to the next player without betting or raising.

**Chip White:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a six and a seven. This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named after a player who always played it.

**Cinch:** a hand that is a sure winner.

**Cincinnati:** poker games with more than seven players.

**Cold deck:** a form of cheating--to stack the deck, pre-arrange the cards so the dealer knows what cards have been dealt to players.

**Crimping:** 1) bending the cards to mark a place in the deck which is cut at that spot; 2) marking the cards by bending corners or entire back of the card like a turtle's back.

**Crossroad:** a professional gambler who moves from town to town; plays tight but talks loose.

**Dealt-out:** a player leaves the game temporarily.

**Donate:** to make a call when one is reasonably sure they are beaten.

**Down to the cloth:** broke. Also known as down to the felt.

**Drawing dead:** drawing for a card which has already been distributed or drawing for a hand which, even if received, cannot beat a hand held by another player.

**Drink pot:** a hand in which the winner buys the losers a drink.

**Drop box:** another term for the box which contains the chips deposited for house profit at the end of each hand.

**Eighty-six:** to banish. Taken from the literal placement of bodies for burial, i.e., eight feet long and six feet deep.

**End:** the last card dealt face-up in the center of the table in Hold'em.

**Family pot:** all players at the table are participating in the hand.

**Fanning:** to spread a deck of cards on the table in the shape of an open fan. This procedure allows all players at the table to inspect the deck and assure themselves that all the cards are in the deck with no duplications of any card. Fanning takes place whenever a new deck is introduced to the table.

**Fish:** 1) a non-house player; 2) a non-house player who is a sucker.

**Flashing:** exposing cards accidentally or deliberately during the deal or when at play.

**Flinger:** a player who only competes sporadically and whose play is very loose, reflecting an attitude of "what the hell, I only play once in awhile."

**Flop:** the first three cards, dealt simultaneously face-up in the center of the table in Hold'em.

**Flush:** any five cards of the same suit.

**Fold:** to drop out of the hand and lose claim to the action.

**Flush:** any five cards of the same suit.

**Freeze out (frozen out):** 1) a player who forces an opponent out of the game; 2) a poker game with stakes limit in which a busted player may not re-enter.

**French connection:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a six and a nine. This pun is part of the argot of the social world of the Oxford poker players.

**Full boat:** a poker hand; three of one kind and two of another. e.g., three aces and two kings. Also known as a full house.

**Garbage:** poorly ranking cards which produce a weak hand.

**Give air:** to show a portion of one's hand. Usually the most powerful part of one's hand, thus allowing others a free look at the probable winning hand. Can be used as a strategy for intimidation or as an indicator of mutual respect.

**Going off:** to spend all or a major portion of one's accumulated chips.

**Gonads:** same as the nuts. A hand that is the best possible.



**Green:** the felt of the poker table is all that a player has in front of him. Meaning to have no more chips or cash on the table.

**Gut shot:** to fill an inside straight.

**Heads up:** only two players participating.

**Healthy game:** a robust game with an adequate number of players and chips.

**Heat:** 1) any unpleasant pressure; 2) police pressure on a house or a game.

**Heavy action:** a round of betting and raising which produces a large pot.

**High rollers:** players with lots of money.

**Hit & run:** to score a win quickly and cash out of the game.

**Hit the cage:** taking one's chips to the cage to be redeemed for cash.

**Hold'em:** a two-hole Stud game from Las Vegas.

**Hole card:** any card which is concealed from view.

**Hook (the):** a jack.

**Hot seat:** a seat occupied by a winning player.

**Hot streak:** a series of successful high risk hands.

**Hot sucker:** an angry, frustrated player.

**House:** gambling parlor

**Hung-up:** 1) inhibited behavior; 2) behavior of a person who cannot or will not change his behavior, especially the older generation.

**Hustler:** anyone who tries to get a game going with hopes of taking someone's money. Hustlers are quite overt about organizing games and people know their intent.

**In the blind:** see blind opener.

**In the dark:** 1) a player who is seated to the left of the dealer; 2) a player who shows off by betting blind.

**Jack King:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a jack and a king. This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named after a player who always played it and whose name is Jack King.

**Jacked off:** 1) a fouled-up hand; 2) any higher hand beating pair of jacks.

**Jam-it-up:** very loose play designed to maximize the pot size by heavy betting at every opportunity.

**Jet Black:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a jack and a nine. This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named for a player who always played it.

**Jock:** an athlete

**Joker:** also known as the bug. A wild card with different functions in different poker games.

**John (the):** restroom

**Kalispell Wheel:** an ace-high straight.

**Keno:** a bingo-type game drawing action from bar patrons.

**Kicker:** when two players have an identical pair the next highest card (kicker) will determine who wins. e.g., both have a pair of aces but one player also has a king in his hand as the next highest card. The other player has aces with a ten. The king and ten are the kickers and the player with the highest kicker, i.e. the king, wins.

**Kingpin:** 1) a professional gambler-manager, an organizer; 2) any top-notch poker player who is adept and ruthless.

**Lay-down:** to fold one's hand after several rounds of betting.

**Let's gamble:** a common phrase at the Oxford spoken by players who are playing very loosely.

**Linda Rae:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a seven and a deuce (two). This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named after a player who always played it.

**Live one:** any player who plays with his own money, a non-house player.

**Lock:** a winning hand which is a sure thing, i.e. can't be beat.

**Loose player:** an offensive strategist who believes in and relies on luck to out draw or bull his opponents.

**Loser:** 1) anyone who does not play poker well; 2) a habitual or compulsive loser who cannot win--he wants to lose.

**Make a hit:** to win at poker.

**Make a move on the pot:** bet or raise the maximum in an effort to force others out of the hand.

**Me-offs:** a poker hand in which a player holds two or more jacks. This pun is part of the argot of the social world of the Oxford poker players.

**Misread (hand):** when a player either accidentally or purposely incorrectly determines his hand. When done purposely, a player will be betting as if he has a very strong hand. This is a form of bluffing strategy, which if caught, will result in the player declaring as a face saving strategy, "Oh, I must have misread my hand."

**Monster:** a very powerful hand.

**Montana Banana:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a nine and a deuce (two). This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford.

**Mortals:** the best hand possible.

**Mortician:** a player who discusses past hands.

**Nailing:** 1) the cards; means to mark the edges of cards with a fingernail gash; 2) a player, means to beat him soundly, especially when the player thinks he is the winner; 3) nailing the nuts, getting the best hand.

**New blood:** new players providing additional money to the game.

**Nuts (the):** refers to gonads - a hand that is a sure winner.

**On a roll:** a player who enjoys a series of winning hands.

**On a rush:** see Rush

**On the come:** to bet or call before one's hand is made, hoping to receive desired card or cards to produce the winning hand.

- On tilt:** a player who is betting recklessly and losing badly.
- Open blind:** see Blind opener
- Open card:** any card not concealed from view.
- Out draw:** chasing cards and receiving a winning card on the last card drawn.
- Over-cards:** any cards in Stud which are higher than the open cards of your opponents.
- Paints:** face cards, i.e. kings, queens or jacks.
- Paint factory (a):** a handful of face cards.
- Palm:** to place cards or chips in the palm of ones hand and produce them at a later time. A form of cheating.
- Pan:** a rummy-type of card game with small stakes.
- Pat hand:** a winning hand that is a sure thing from the beginning.
- Pay to see me:** forcing an opponent to a showdown call of your bet or raise. He pays to see who wins.
- Peeking:** to cheat by eyeballing an opponent's hand.
- Pegging:** 1) knowing a player's probable moves; 2) cheating by punching tiny holes in the cards' backs for touch clues.
- Performing:** 1) any behavior out of context; 2) loose talkers who chatter; 3) anyone who drank too much.
- Picture card:** any of the cards also known as face cards, which have pictures of kings, queens or jacks on them.
- Play position:** 1) to pick an advantageous seating arrangement; 2) to play against an opponent's known strategy.
- Play the odds:** 1) see Balancing pot odds; 2) knowing the probabilities for filling out your hand; 3) or opportunities for your hand to beat an opponent's hand during the draw.
- Plowing:** shoving in a very large raise to intimidate opponents.
- Poker face:** either to be unrevealing in ones facial expression or conversely to expose ones hand by facial expression.

**Poker god:** fictional character analogous to the religious creator and ruler of the universe.

**Poker time:** temporal attitude in which time is measured by the circumstances of the game i.e., winning or losing as opposed to the traditional measurement of hours and minutes or day and night.

**Post mortem:** to analyze a previous hand.

**Pot:** the amount of money wagered by the players which is claimed by the winner of the hand.

**Pot odds:** see Balancing pot odds.

**Powerhouse:** a very strong hand.

**Protect:** to bet the best hand aggressively in an effort to keep others from continuing in the hand.

**Pull in one's horns:** 1) to control your self-expression; 2) limit aggressive and deceptive behaviors.

**Put down:** to criticize or ridicule another person.

**Rack:** a chip holder which is divided into five segments. A rack will hold \$100 worth of dollar chips, \$25 worth of quarter chips and \$500 worth of five dollar chips.

**Rack attack:** when a player buys a rack of chips (usually for the value of \$100) and plays loosely.

**Rags:** low ranking cards.

**Raise:** to increase the amount of the bet which is passed to you.

**Rake-off:** a percentage of the pot which goes to the house. This is the source of revenue for gambling houses.

**Ran:** see Running scared.

**Rattle your chips:** to bet or pretend to bet the maximum in an effort to scare off other players or to measure their commitment to staying in the hand.

**Read:** 1) the cards, means to peek into another's hand; 2) to read the cards means to size up opponent's potential; 3) read the game, means to know how to react to an opponent's strategies.

**Ricki Special:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a king and a deuce (two). This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named after a player who always played it.

**Rooting:** to share chips after a win. Also a bonding, supportive interaction where players align with one another.

**Rotating deal:** all players may deal the cards and call the game of their choice.

**Ruff 7:** 1) a Lowball hand with 76 or 75 as highest two cards.

**Running bad:** when a player's luck and/or cards are poor over a series of hands.

**Running good:** when a player's luck and/or cards are successful over a series of hands.

**Running scared:** when a player becomes intimidated because of a series of bad beats. Running scared often results in players not betting their hands forcefully because they previously lost on a similar or exact hand.

**Rush:** over a series of hands. A number of successful hands in quick succession.

**Sabotage:** to deliberately set a trap for your opponents.

**Salt Lake Pair:** an ace-king combination.

**Sandbag:** 1) not betting your hand to its full potential; 2) not playing your hand to its full potential; 3) pretending to appear sleepy; 4) a method of sabotaging.

**Scared money:** 1) a player who is afraid of his opponent's potential and folds; 2) a player who has no confidence in his hand or ability and tries to bull the game.

**Screwball(s):** 1) a player who plays everything that is dealt to him; 2) a disruptive and nutty player.

**Screwed:** beaten, "royally screwed" means that you have been soundly beaten.

**Sharp:** 1) a good player; for example, one who would pick up an opponent's accidental flash, which means exposing one's cards.

**Shaving:** thinning borders on the cards to mark certain cards or a place in the deck.

**Shill:** a player employed by the house to fill in during shorthanded games.

**Short game:** a game with either few players or small a amount of money on the table or both.

**Short handed:** a game with only a few players.

**Short money:** a player with very little chips or cash on the table.

**Shoving in:** see Plowing.

**Showdown:** usually two players who square off against each other in the final round of betting. (This can occur before the draw.)

**Shy:** 1) a scared player; 2) to come up financially short; 3) not to bet, only call; 4) to fall short of cards needed from the draw.

**Side pot:** the subsequent betting action which continues by other players after a player has gone all-in.

**Slot:** narrow opening in the poker table where the rake is deposited.

**Slow betting:** to check or bet very small amounts in suckering opponents to contribute to the pot. (A slow better usually has a very good hand.)

**Slow play:** same as slow betting.

**Smooth call:** to call but not raise by a player who knows he has a superior hand.

**Soft play:** to not bet ones superior hand aggressively, usually as a favor to others in the hand that the victor likes.

**Speaks for itself:** 1) the cards are turned up at a showdown and reveal the player's hand; 2) the dealer will call the highest combination of the winning hand to protect a player who might have overlooked his best combination.

**Spotting:** to mark cards with a foreign substance for visual clues in cheating across the table.

**Square root hand:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a three and a nine. This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford.

**Stacked deck:** prearranged cards in the deck.

**Starin' at the green:** to have lost all of ones cash and chips leaving only the green felt in front of a player.

**Stick:** to aggressively bet ones hand, especially when one doesn't like ones opponent.

**Stiff:** the dealer. To refuse to tip a dealer after a win.

**Stone cold mortals:** a poker hand in which the best possible hand wins the pot rather than simply a hand of high value as is usually the case.

**Straddle:** a player next to the player in the dark buys the right to waive first round commitment.

**Straight:** any five cards in a sequence.

**Stuck:** losing one's money.

**Stuck like a pig:** having lost a substantial amount of money.

**Suck-in:** to lure others into a hand when the player has the sure winner.

**Suck-out:** coming from behind to win; a weak hand that improves enough at the culmination to win.

**Suction:** betting lightly to lure losers into the hand.

**Table stakes:** a player can bet only the amount of money and chips he had showing on the table when the hand commenced.

**Talking loose:** deceiving players and creating tension by chattering.

**Tap off:** bleeding off money from a player, to tap him off.

**Tell:** 1) create a ruse, for example, a physical tell-tale quirk which players read as a clue to your strategy or hand; 2) some people read unconscious tells of their opponents, for example, rubbing your nose, squinting, biting one's lip may give clues to your hand and how one will play it.

**Tight game:** when players only play and bet on very high percentage hands.

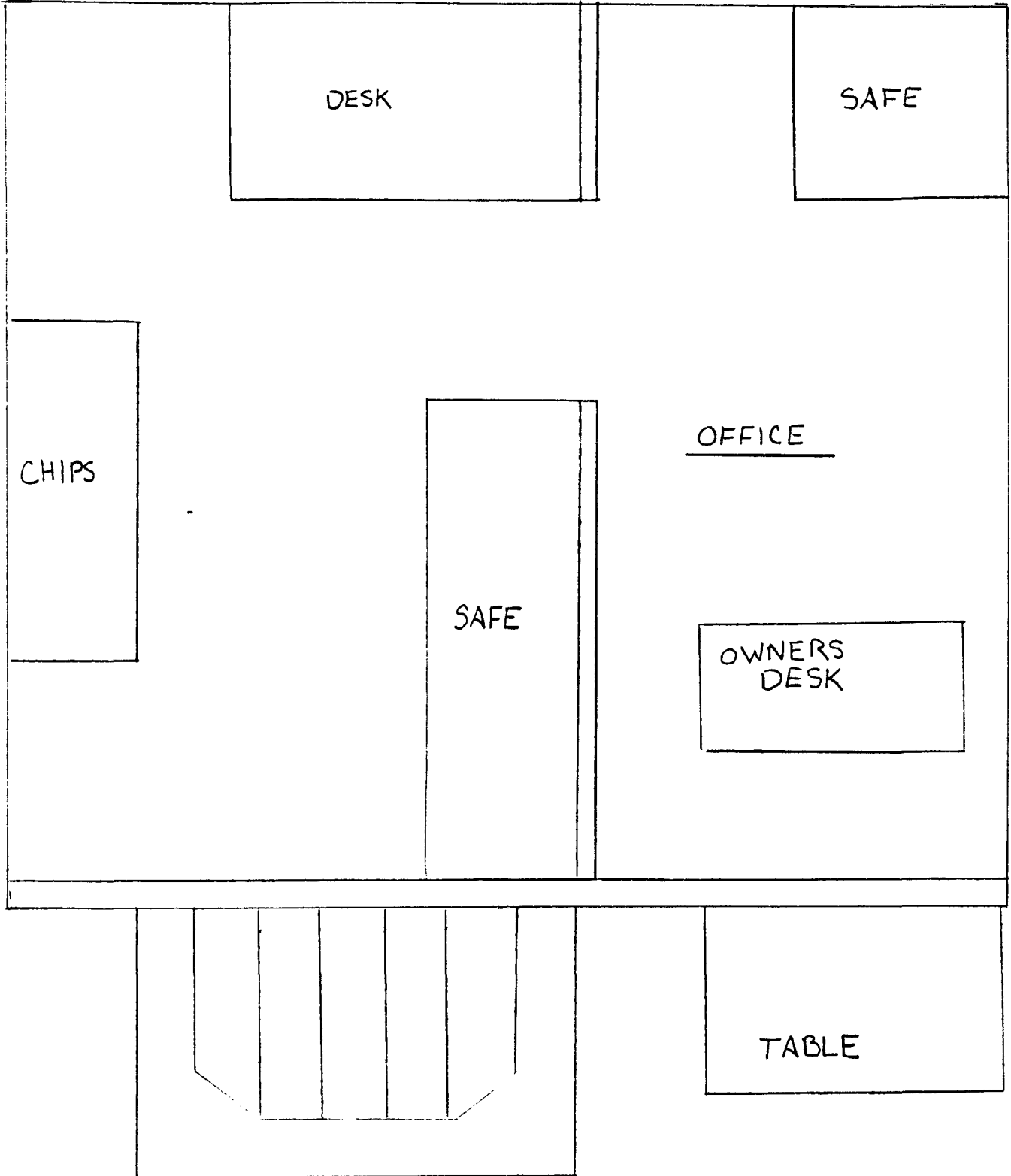
**Tight player:** a defensive strategist who believes in and relies on statistical probabilities for hand and strategy.

**Tits-up:** to go broke

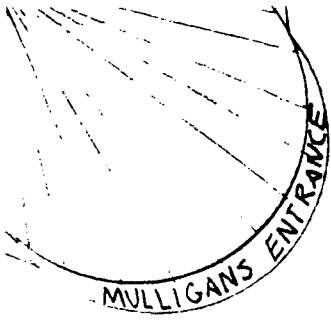


- Trapped in the middle:** when a player with a good hand is caught in the betting cycle between a bettor and a raiser. Player must then wager more than he/she wishes in order to stay in the hand, hoping the others are either bluffing or over betting their hands.
- Trips:** any three cards of the same denomination or any three face cards with the same faces.
- Turn:** the fourth card dealt face-up on the middle of the table in Hold'em.
- Two for lunch:** a Hold'em poker hand also known as The French Connection in which the first two cards dealt are a six and a nine. This pun is part of the argot of the social world of the Oxford poker players.
- Ugly:** a bad turn of events.
- Unconscious:** when a player repeatedly wins not due to skill but as the result of long shots.
- Under the gun:** a player behind the dealer who must open the action.
- Union Oil:** a 76 in Lowball. Lowball is a poker game in which the object is to produce the five lowest ranking cards. A 76 means the highest card in a player's hand is a seven, followed by a six with the remaining three cards valued at less than a six.
- Warm Springs:** a Hold'em poker hand in which the first two cards dealt are a seven and a three. This picaresque hand originated at the Oxford and is named after a player who always player it.
- Weak game:** a game with too few players and or too few chips.
- Wheel (a):** In Lowball poker this is a sequence of the lowest possible cards ranging in decreasing value from a four, a three, a deuce (two), an ace and the bug (joker).
- Whipsawing:** two players will squeeze out an opponent seated between them. The first player raises, and his partner will re-raise (usually double the amount of the first raise). The player in between finds the action too rough and folds.
- Whores:** a poker hand in which a player holds two or more queens. This pun is part of the argot of the social world of the Oxford poker players.

**Wired:** matching hole card with first open card in Stud; example, one hole card jack "wired" to the next open card jack.



\*CAGE  
↑



VENDING MACH.

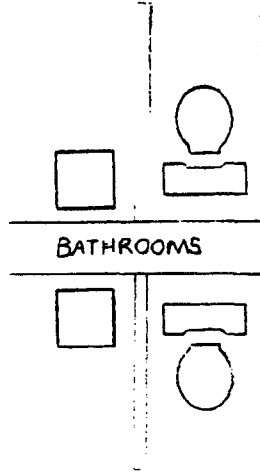
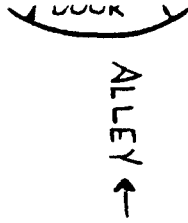
POP MACH.

PIN BALL MACH.

KENO MACH.

POKER MACH.

KENO MACH.

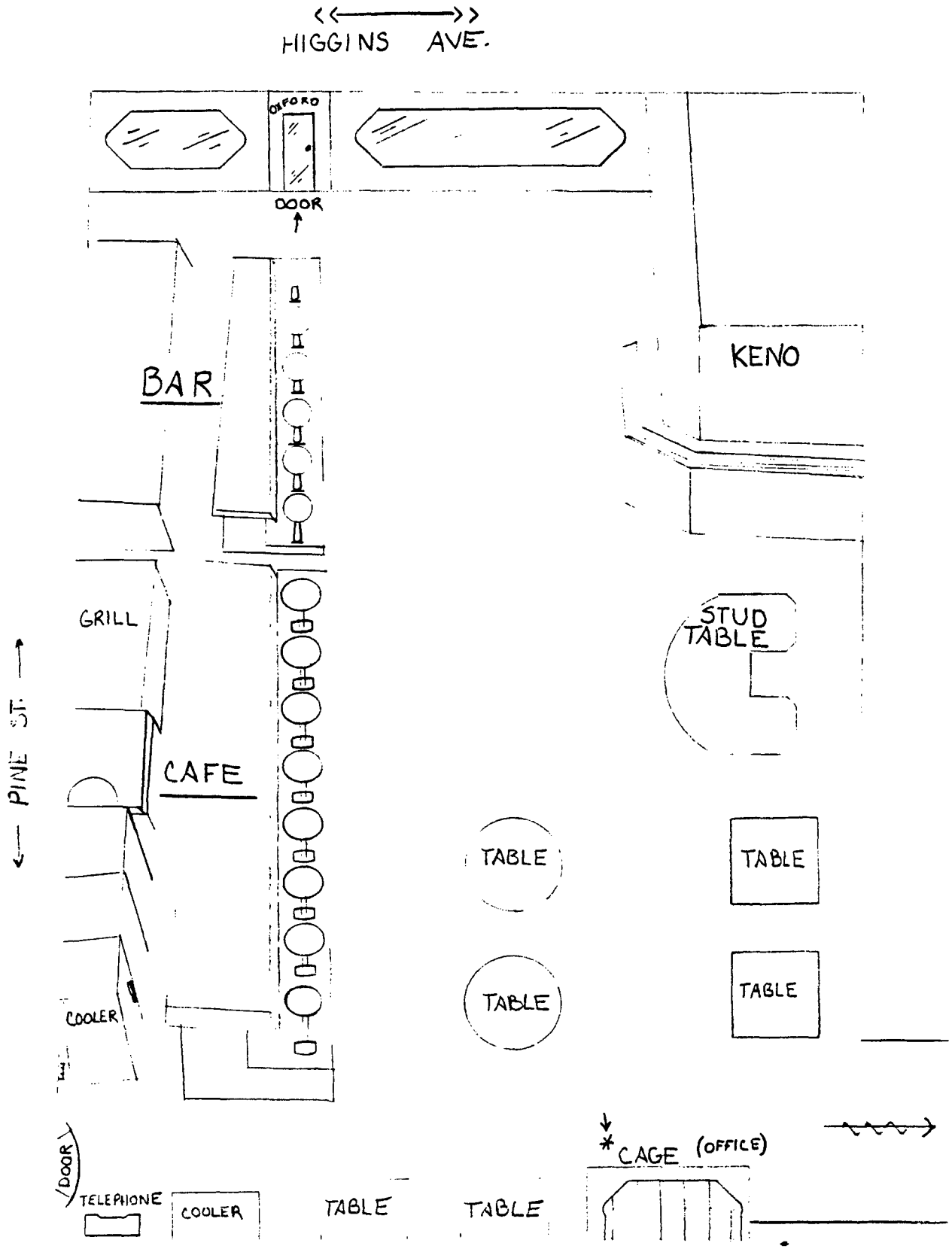


KENO MACH.

KENO MACH.

POKER MACH.







**OXFORD OPEN TOURNAMENT**

STARTS JULY 1ST

Qualifying for the top 30 point accumulators will begin July 1st through July 31st. A freeze-out tournament will be held Saturday, August 1st, at 8:00 p.m. You will be playing for the following prizes:

CASH

\$2,000 1st  
 1,000 2nd  
 750 3rd  
 500 4th  
 250 5th  
 100 6th-10th

HIGH POINTS

1st - 100 chips  
 1st & 3rd week of  
 rack night  
 2nd - 100 chips  
 2nd week of  
 rack night  
 3rd - 50 chips  
 Sat., ½ rack night

3-6 POINTS

5  
 10  
 20  
 10  
 5  
 10  
 -0-  
 -0-  
 -0-

Points also for pot size

Starting game  
 Last 4 when game breaks  
 Royal flush  
 4 of a kind  
 1-2-3-4-5 wheel in high  
 Blizzard in lo  
 Full house  
 Straight  
 3 of a kind

STUD POINTS

5  
 10  
 40  
 20  
 -0-  
 -0-  
 10  
 5  
 3

This is our way of saying thanks to all of you for your patronage. Tell a friend and bring a friend. Hope to see all of you.

Management reserves the right to change any or all rules at any time.

Good Luck  
 from

*The Oxford*

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AN ALLEGORY IN HONOR OF THE POKER GOD

Without Whose Intervention This Thesis Could  
Not Have Been Completed

Dean Spence was no ordinary fish. He was the Kingpin, and she was just a flinger.

She was kind of shy, but he knew she was a live one. It was going to be a heads-up game. She was tight and liked soft, slow play, but he was looking for heavy action.

"What's a girl like you," he sneered, "doing in a place like this?"

Spence had the gonads and knew it. He had the big slick in his hand and it was a real powerhouse. He kept bumping until he was all in. She was stuck and bet on the come, but she went tits up anyway.

She was a hot sucker after that, really down to the felt. She knew she had to make a move on the pot or she'd be eighty-sixed forever.

So in the next hand she back-doored Spence with a Montana Banana. "I love your action!" she cried, and the Kingpin was forced to pull in his horns. He called it an ugly suck-out, but everyone knew it was the nuts. "It's a dirty job," she said, "but someone had to do it."