

Gambling in Gold Rush Auburn

All the restrictive influence of fair women is lost and the ungoverned tempers of men run wild.

The Wanderings of Edward Ely - 1852

Gambling, in all forms, was prevalent in the California Gold Rush. In the very early days, thousands of young men found themselves in a mostly "masculine space." Unfettered by clergy, elders, or women and coping with loneliness, homesickness, bad food, illness and the backbreaking work of mining, all led miners to look for any respite. It shouldn't be a surprise that gambling was hugely popular in the camps. Hadn't the men there already gambled on leaving their homes and making the treacherous journey to an unknown land for just the possibility of finding gold? There was also very little else in the form of relaxation or entertainment offered in the early camp days. After the backbreaking work of panning, washing and digging for gold, any diversion was a welcome relief. Gambling accompanied by heavy drinking was the norm. An unknown 49'er offered an explanation of the behavior, when he wrote: "We are thousands of miles from home and comfort ourselves by thinking that knowledge of our indulgence in vice will never reach them.[those left at home]"

American Masculinities, Carroll & Holliday pg. 255

One of the earliest accounts we have of gambling in early day Auburn comes from the recollections of John Boggs (later a county sheriff), who came in 1849 and stayed. In 1908 he wrote several articles for the *Placer Herald* recounting his early days in the camp then called Woods Dry Diggings. Boggs recalled that there was a round tent set up by Post and Ripley that served not only as a gambling establishment but as the courthouse as well. He remembered the time when the Justice of the Peace placed a dollar bet on the "Jack" right in the middle of court proceedings.

1-13-1908 Placer Herald

Samuel Holladay also left a record of his days in early Wood's Dry Diggings, he recalled that there were a number of soldiers who had deserted, and were "camped under some bushes at Soldier's Spring." He wrote, they "took out gold by the quart daily and did not half work, and gambled it all away every night."

Holladay letters

Sam also wrote to his brother in 1851 that he had news about a common friend, Hudson House, who had traveled to California with Holladay. Sam had already noted that the hard work of mining "was not his (House's) strong suit" and House "went into merchandising" in 1849. By 1851 Sam had heard that House was in Sacramento City and "was all broke up in Auburn, and would not go back there. He got to gambling when I was with him and I could not persuade him out of it, and finally every time he went down to the city, he would not only buck at Monte, but would also get pretty drunk, on the whole a poor cuss."

Holladay letters

The professional gambler, however, was generally well thought of and a respected member of the community. The Gold Rush population was fairly egalitarian in the early days, and prostitutes and gamblers were accepted into polite society. The professional gamblers tended to be stable and settled in one place, they needed to cultivate and maintain a reputation for fairness and "running a straight game."

Frontier gambler Wikipedia.com
San Francisco Chronicle 2-20-15

John Boggs recounted the story of the "big dinner" the community gave to send off Dick Goodell, the gambler who was "a very good fellow." That was the occasion in 1849 that the only two ladies in town, Mrs. Elliot and Mrs. McCormick attended.

1-13-1908 Placer Herald

By the time that a more stable government was established and started regulating and more importantly taxing what they could, licenses were granted for selling liquor and for having a gaming table. The county records for 1851 show 45 liquor licenses and 13 licenses for gaming tables operating in Auburn. In the early days, just about anyone selling anything also sold liquor. Of the first stores in the camp, run by William Gwynn had a liquor license as did early merchants George Willment, Walkup and Wyman and even John Boggs. Mrs. Eliza Elliott and Mrs. Nancy McCormick who both ran hotels had liquor licenses.

License records - 1851

In the Gold Rush days, gambling halls were known as gambling "hells." In 1851, John Porter must have had a large establishment with four gaming tables, as did J. B. Green & Co. with three tables. Most saloons and hotels in town only had one table. Of the early saloons, the El Dorado had one gaming table, as did the Louisiana

Belle and the Robinson Crusoe. There are no gaming tables licensed to Chinese in 1851 but they do show up in 1852 with a total of 7 gaming licenses. By 1853, the *Placer Herald* was reporting, "the Chinese have rented several of the largest houses, at the highest rents, to open gambling saloons."

Database & License Records
Gambling – Wikipedia
Placer Herald 6-4-1853

The most popular games of chance were Faro, Monte, Roulette and chuck-a-luck. Faro is a fairly simple game using one deck with a banker and unlimited numbers of players. Winning or losing occurs when the cards turned up by the banker match those already exposed. It came from France and was also called "bucking the tiger." Monte is a Spanish gambling game using forty cards. People bet against the bank. Roulette, French for "little wheel" is still common in casinos today. Chuck-a-luck is a low stakes dice game using three dice. Players bet on a combination of numbers on the dice. Chuck-a-luck used a fancy hourglass shaped cage; a less expensive horn shaped metal device gave us the term "tin horn gambler."

Wikipedia: Frontier gambling and casinotimes.com

By about 1857, following the arrival of women, churches, theaters and other tamer forms of entertainment, an anti-gambling and anti-alcohol movement was forming. The influx of con men into the ranks of gamblers helped push gambling, as well as prostitution, into the back alleys of the fledgling towns.

Sacramento Gold Rush Saloons – Sacramento Public Library