

GAMBLING BANKNOTE

By Colin Narbeth

Believe it or not! Some gambling counters were so scarce at the tables that special "banknotes" were printed to supplement them. It happened in the Boer War soon after March 16, 1900 at a Prisoner of War camp at Daspoort. In the early stages of the war the Boers were quite successful and opened a POW camp to accommodate captured British Officers. This was established at the Model School in Pretoria. Security was good and only one British Officer ever escaped from that camp – his name was Winston Churchill. Then on March 16 the prisoners were removed to another camp at Daspoort – nicknamed "The Birdcage".

There were nearly 150 prisoners and a notable one among them was the Earl of Rosslyn who had been reporting on the war for the Daily Mail. He recorded the gambling activities of the prisoners in his book "Twice Captured". Once the mess dinner was finished the tables would be cleared and out came all sorts of games. A large red cloth with a covered bottle in the centre caught his eye.

He wrote: "I found the most cleverly and ingeniously devised roulette table I had ever seen. In place of a disc, a ball and little numbered cavities, was a circle of cards composed of an ordinary whist pack without court cards, but with a "joker" as "zero"! The bottle I had noticed was used as a pivot in the centre for turning an indicator, while on either side of the centreboard were similar whist packs arranged in four columns, with "Pair" and "Impair", "Manque" and "Passe" and "Rouge et Noir" marked out in squares like those at Monte Carlo. You could back clubs, hearts, diamonds or spades, or any of the columns and numbers, and the bank, generally made up of playing shareholders, paid the correct odds to the punters when they won. Of course the game was in counters, and was kept within the meaning of amusement and not a "gamble" and according as you won or lost the account was entered in the mess bill, which was settled every month. But the counters, from Johannesburg, were very limited, and the game was so popular that at a later date it was decided to issue five pound notes."

A hectograph machine was used to produce the notes in the style of the famous "white fivers" of the Bank of England. Headed "Bank of the Red Cloth" the signature, instead of 'Chief Cashier' was 'Chief Croupier'. The "Five" was written in an almost identical style to that used on the Bank of England notes. They measured 142 x 203 mm. A total of 27 notes were printed and at least one of these has been preserved as it can be seen in the collection of the Africana Museum in Johannesburg.

The idea of using playing cards for roulette can be traced back a long way – to the famous and oldest surviving European casino, Germany's Baden-Baden Casino. There the game of Roulca (or card-roulette) was invented and first played. The wheel is modelled on the Roulette wheel and has 25 compartments each marked with a card symbol. Players bet on individual cards, on suits, and on high, low, even and odd numbers.