

Smoking Out Answers at the Bell Cigar Store

The Mystery of the C & C Chips

by Mark Cotton

Being a relative newcomer to chip collecting (I started in 2001), until recently I had never experienced the thrill of the hunt. What hunt you ask? Do I mean searching eBay day after day for an elusive chip needed to fill a hole in one's collection? No, that's not it. Nor do I mean the often confusing process of navigating an unknown casino floor while looking for the Player's Club booth.

The hunt I'm referring to is the process of taking a poker chip from an unknown location and attempting to track down where it came from and who was involved in its use before it became a collectible. If you haven't experienced the excitement of this kind of sleuthing first-hand, I urge you to try it. It's a little like being one of those private detectives you see on television and in the movies, except nobody gets murdered. Or at least nobody that wasn't going to get murdered anyway.

Unidentified Flying Chip

Although I said this story isn't about eBay, that's actually where it began. About a year ago, I was doing my usual browsing and searching of the casino chip category and came across a group of ten of the same unidentified chip, or UFC as many chip collectors call them. The chips were hub mold, light green in color

and bore the initials "C&C" on one side and a denomination of \$5.00 on the other. I placed a bid on them, figuring that getting ten of the same chip would give me some extras to trade for other UFC's.

I won the auction, and when the chips arrived a week or so later I found that the seller had inadvertently sent me 65 of the chips instead of 10 as listed in the auction. It turns out his wife was handling his auctions while he was out of town and she made an error in packaging the chips I won. After a few e-mails back and forth, we negotiated a price on the additional chips to avoid my having to ship them back to him. Most of the chips were in pretty good shape, although some were dirtier and had more wear to the hot stamp. The wear and the dirt told me these chips had seen some play, although I still hadn't a clue where.



The Search Begins

I had learned during my e-mail correspondence with the seller that he had originally purchased the chips in

Nebraska about ten to twelve years earlier. Before selling any, he had a box of almost 500 of the \$5 chips and another 400 off-white chips in the diamond mold with the initial "P". All of the "C&C" chips had gone to a buyer in Florida, except for the 65 chips I ended up with.

So, now I knew where the chips ended up, but the question still remained: Where did they come from?

My first stop was Greg Susong's Chip Board (www.thechipboard.com), my favorite online haunt. I knew if these chips had been identified in the past, one of the regulars on the board would be able to help me out. I scanned a picture of the chip and posted it on the board with the plea for help in identifying it. Answers with attempts to help started appearing quickly, including some speculation from readers of the board about whether the initials were really "C&C" or perhaps something else, since the top of both "C's" was flat and the two of them weren't exactly identical. The typefaces used to hot-stamp initials on chips have, over the years, often included letters that were open to interpretation. Others have been downright impossible to decipher.

The Chip Board discussion brought a response from Howard Herz who was kind enough to check the records of the Mason Company and tell me that the chips were manufactured February 12, 1953 and delivered to the Bell Cigar Store at 109 S. 15th Street in Omaha, Nebraska. And, Howdy confirmed, the initials ordered to be stamped onto the chips were indeed "C&C".

I was elated to find an answer to my quest! So, the Bell Cigar Store had ordered the chips! But, as I was soon to find out, the mystery was far



After more than 30 years of gambling action, the Bell Cigar Store was closed for good in April 1963

from over. Readers of the board pointed out that cigar stores were often points of purchase for sets of personal poker chips. It could have been that the Bell Cigar Store simply ordered the chips for a customer who wanted to see their initials on them. Chuck & Clara, or Carl & Cynthia, or Cedrick & Candy wanted to impress their Thursday night poker group. Other readers of The Chip Board speculated that the number of chips ordered would certainly be enough for a hot card room operating out of the back of a cigar store. But why not order chips with “Bell Cigar Store” on them? Or, the word “Bell”? Or, maybe a picture of a bell? Why the initials “C&C”? Maybe they were the initials of the owner or owners? One reader suggested the initials stood for “Cigars & Cards”.

Some Basic Research

To try to solve the riddle of the initials, I wrote to the Omaha Public Library and asked if they would be so kind as to check the 1952 city directory for listings for the Bell Cigar Store and for any listings using the initials “C&C”. The library staff checked the early 1950’s directories

and found a listing in the 1954 directory for a “C&C Bar” operated by two gentlemen named Jerry Collins & Joseph Cap. Could this be it? Maybe the owners ran a poker table or two in the backroom of the C&C Bar? But why was there no listing for the bar earlier than 1954, when my chips were made in 1952?

The city directory listings for the Bell Cigar Store during the same period showed the owner to be Fred Weyerman. I noted with dismay the lack of the letter “C” in his name, shooting down my short-lived theory that the chips might bear the cigar store owner’s initials. While it was certainly not a slam-dunk, and not everyone on The Chip Board was convinced of the attribution, for a while I held onto the belief that the C&C Bar had been where my “C&C” chips had become worn and dirty.

The Mystery Resurfaces

Several months later, I pulled the chips out again and posted a trade offer on The Chip Board, relating what I knew so far. This rekindled the debate about whether they had been used in the Bell Cigar Store or the C&C Bar. I decided to delve a lit-

tle further into the question and went back to the internet, this time contacting the Historical Society of Douglas County (Nebraska) through their website. I told them everything I knew about the chips and asked if they could help. Almost immediately I learned that Fred “Snorts” Weyerman, the store owner, had been arrested several times on gambling charges and the Bell Cigar Store itself had been the site of a number of gambling and bookmaking raids by the police over the years. The store was on the ground floor of the Bell Hotel, widely known to be a brothel, where numerous prostitution raids had taken place. The researchers at the Historical Society of Douglas County could find no record of any such newsworthy events taking place at the C&C Bar, or any news clippings listing Mr. Collins or Mr. Cap, owners of the bar.

So, I finally had the answer! The Bell Cigar Store was it! Right? Maybe? But what about the initials? “Cigars & Cards”? “Crime & Corruption”? “Consternation and Confusion?”

I asked the Historical Society of Douglas County to send me copies of news clippings containing the stories on Fred Weyerman and the Bell Cigar Store and waited eagerly for their arrival.

More Digging

While I waited, still having no definitive answer as to where the chips were used, I began to look into organized crime in and around Omaha. I learned that the city and its neighbor across the river, Council Bluffs, Iowa had rich histories of gambling and corruption from their early beginnings. Stories of political corruption and gambling in the area describe other combination cigar stores and bookmaking fronts with names like Baseball Headquarters,

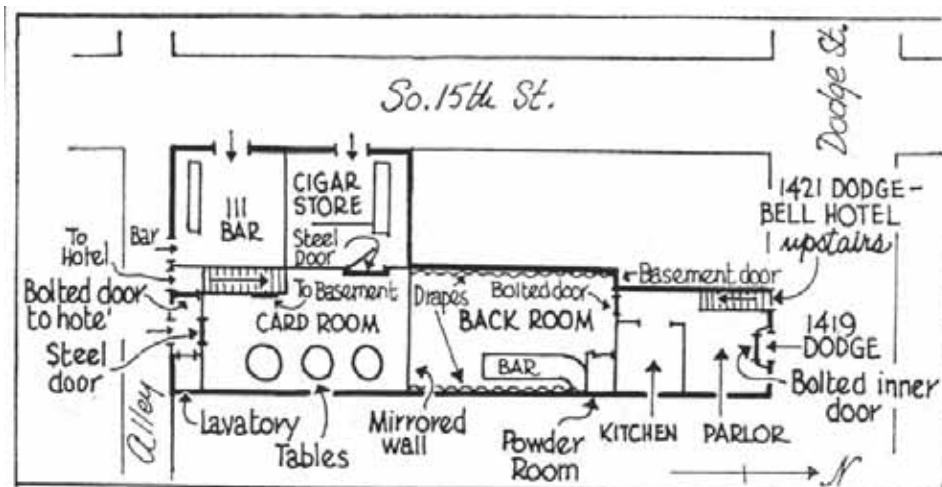
Turf Cigar Store and Owl Smoke Shop. Much of the bookmaking action took place the area of downtown Omaha on 16th Street between Dodge and Leavenworth. Coincidentally, the Bell Cigar Store was located at the intersection of 15th Street and Dodge.

An interesting side note is the fact that mafia mastermind Meyer Lansky ran a dog racing track in Council Bluffs in the early 1940's. Many well-known gamblers got their start in the area before moving west to Las Vegas.

As I learned more about the history of illegal gambling in and around Omaha, I became more and more convinced that my "C&C" chips had their own illicit history. Finally, the news clippings from the Omaha World-Herald arrived, containing a treasure-trove of information about Fred Weyerman, his brother Paul Weyerman and the Bell Cigar Store.

Bell Cigar Store & Fred Weyerman

The Bell was the site of frequent raids for card games and bookmaking. The research I received documented trouble as early as 1938 and continuing until it was closed in 1963. Fred Weyerman was listed as co-owner throughout this time period. The store was also the site of at least two bombings, which police speculated were related to an attempt to start a new bookmaking wire service. Weyerman coincidentally was running Council Bluff's Stork Club when it had been bombed a few years earlier. Weyerman was also said to be best friends with Jackie Gaughan who left Omaha for Las Vegas in the 1940's and went on to be associated with a string of casinos there, including the Boulder Club, Flamingo, Union Plaza, Las Vegas Club, Western Hotel and Golden Spike.



A layout of the Bell Cigar Store drawn after a 1955 raid.

The gambling raids seemed to be routine around the Bell Cigar Store. Paul Weyerman, Fred's brother was arrested in one raid in 1944. Paul was part owner of the Chez Paree in nearby Carter Lake, Iowa, and eventually left Omaha for Las Vegas. He was granted a gaming license there in 1956 as a 4.5% owner of the Fremont Hotel. In 1967, Paul Weyerman was charged with skimming at the Fremont and Riviera, along with six other men.

As the years progressed, the names of those arrested in raids on the Bell Cigar Store changed. Fred Weyerman himself was rarely caught holding cards or chips, but some of the card dealers got their names in print numerous times. In later years, Charles "Snooks" Hutter, Jr. was named as a co-owner of the store in news reports.

A variety of activity took place at the Bell Cigar Store. In 1940 the police Morals Squad was standing in front of the store when they saw a cab driver stop and carry a roll of papers inside. They followed him and confiscated a bundle of overnight race sheets. An article from 1948 details the arrest of a patron of the Bell for betting on baseball games. Another from 1950 describes a raid

on the Bell where the Morals Squad interrupted a game of pan, finding what the article described as "trade chips" on the men. The news stories described how chips were confiscated in several different raids over the years, but none are ever described sufficiently to provide an answer to my personal mystery.

Police busted in and took the chips at the Bell so often that one would imagine orders from chip manufacturers to replace what had been taken would be a regular occurrence. But, the layout of the Bell often made it difficult for the Morals Squad to catch gamblers in the act. A diagram of the store published in the newspaper after one raid shows multiple doors and reveals a card room as well as another back room hidden behind a mirrored wall where only "elite patrons" were welcome. The inter-connecting doors and stairways leading to the basement below and the hotel above made for quick getaways when the vice cops came calling.

Organized crime was never far from the fringes of the Bell Cigar Store. In 1953, a gambler named Eddie McDermott, co-owner of the Riviera Club in Council Bluffs was shot to death gangland style in a garage a block away from the Bell

Cigar Store. He was living at the Bell Hotel and police questioned a group of his friends who had spent the evening playing cards together at the Bell Cigar Store. Fred Weyerman was one member of the group. The murder was never solved, but the police had a theory that McDermott's operation of a "floating craps game" may have been related to the motive for the shooting.

More Theories Emerge

One connection to organized crime piqued my interest and provided still another possible home for the "C&C" chips. Many of the raids on the Bell were for bookmaking, and the reports of one bust in 1953 mentions the confiscation of racing forms and six telephones. But, it was in an online story about the history of Omaha gambling by Brian James Beerman that I learned that the person who controlled the local outlet for the national race wire service for a time was Frank Calamia. Bookmakers relied on the wire services to provide results of horse races and sporting events that their patrons were betting on. Frank Calamia and his stepson Waldon Calamia operated the Omaha branch of the national wire service under the name "C&C Publishing Co".

According to Beerman, the wire service apparently changed hands several times from 1938 to 1951, with C&C Publishing being identified as the operator in 1948 by a Western Union spokesman. The address for C&C Publishing was an empty garage at 2312 Q. Street. The wire results for horse races were received in Omaha from Kansas City and then redistributed throughout the Omaha and Council Bluffs area. Presumably, the Bell Cigar Store would have been one of the wire services customers since many of the raids on the Bell were for bookmaking operations.

Was this the answer? Did the "C&C" on my chips stand for "Calamia & Calamia"? With no hard evidence to connect the Calamias to the Bell Cigar Store or to Fred Weyerman, this knowledge just seems to muddy the waters even more. And, especially after Brian Beerman pulled yet another possibility out of his hat.

Yes, We Have No Cigars

Beerman related that there once had been a billiard hall operating in Omaha at 15th and Howard Streets, about four blocks from the Bell Cigar Store, called "C&C Recreation". Up until 1950 it was operated by Max Abramson and Fred "Tiny" Barnes. Both were well-known gamblers and associates of Fred Weyerman, according to Beerman. During the 1940's the three men had been partners in the Stork Club, an illegal casino near Council Bluffs. Abramson was a frequent visitor to the Bell, and his name turned up as one of the card players at the Bell on the night of Eddie McDermott's murder. And, Weyerman was no stranger to pool halls. Operating a pool hall without a license would get Weyerman's name in the paper a few years later.

Beerman goes on: "In 1950 Abramson claimed to have sold his interest in the C&C (Recreation) to Mose "Cappy" Rubin, an older and somewhat lesser-known local gambling figure. The previous month a report by a Kansas City grand jury had named Abramson and disclosed his connection to various bookmaking establishments in Omaha, including the C&C (Recreation). I would not be surprised, though, if he continued on as a silent partner after the supposed sale."

This theory dovetails into another that arrived with another batch of news clippings from the Historical Society of Douglas County. They

revealed that there was a place called variously "C and C Smoke Shop", "C&C Cigar Store" and "C-C Cigar Store" operating at 422 South 15th Street in much the same way the Bell Cigar Store was in the late 40's and early 50's. The news stories describe mostly bookmaking action as the target of attention by the Morals Squad. On their visits to the C&C the police were always finding racing forms, betting slips and scratch sheets, but strangely the cigar counter never had any smokes available for sale.

The owner of the C&C Cigar Store is listed as the same Mose Rubin, mostly known as a local fight figure, that Beerman told me bought C&C Recreation in 1950. And the location makes it appear that the pool hall and cigar store were one and the same. None of my information links Mose Rubin to Fred Weyerman; however I did come across one name that appears both in articles about the Bell and the C&C Cigar Store. Charles LaFerla (also sometimes listed as Charles La Feria) was arrested at raids at the C&C Cigar Store in the late 40's and at the Bell Cigar Store during the 50's, each time charged as being a "keeper of a disorderly house". LaFerla's name also turns up in a news story about charges filed against Fred Weyerman in 1963 for failure to have a Federal gambling stamp. These were the charges that would finally shut the Bell's doors after over 25 years of illegal activity. It seems LaFerla was Weyerman's bookkeeper and filed his last gambling excise tax report for the Bell Cigar Store in 1961 before leaving. So, perhaps there was a link between the Bell and the C&C after all.

Still another theory on the origins of the light green hub mold "C&C" \$5 chips. I had started with nothing to go on, and now had a handful of theories to choose from. Too many, in fact:

1. The chips were ordered by the Bell Cigar Store for use as a home poker set by an individual or individuals partial to the initials "C&C".
2. The chips were ordered by the Bell Cigar Store for the owners of the C&C Bar, who kept their nose clean and their names out of the newspaper.
3. The chips were ordered by and used at the Bell Cigar Store for the backroom games that required a never-ending supply of chips to replace the ones the police Morals Squad kept confiscating.
4. The chips were ordered by the Bell Cigar Store for Frank and Weldon Calamia, who provided the Bell with its race wire service through their company C&C Publishing.
5. The chips were ordered by the Bell Cigar Store for Fred Weyerman's buddy Max Abramson to use in his C&C Recreation, also known as the C&C Cigar Store, where presumably table games may have taken place along with the book making. And, Weyerman may have even been involved in the operation since some of the personnel were the same.

At this point, I'm a little disappointed that I don't have a definitive answer when I offer one of the "C&C" chips for trade to a fellow chipper and hear the inevitable question: "Do you know where these were used?"

The Search Continues...

But, one thing I've discovered is that the search has been even more fun than actually finding a solution to the mystery would be. I've learned a lot about how illegal gaming operated (in Omaha, anyway) and reading the newspaper articles about the raids on the Bell Cigar Store and C&C Smoke Shop has been richly entertaining.

So, you have some UFC's that are just begging to be identified? What are you waiting for? Put on your Sherlock Holmes cap and get to work! Sometimes a single clue can lead to another, with can lead to another, and so on. Once you try it you'll be hooked!

I'm not giving up my own search, and as I write this I'm waiting for another package in the mail. You see,

I recently contacted that buyer in Florida who bought the rest of the "C&C" chips. He also got the 400 off-white diamond mold chips with the initial "P" that were with the "C&C" chips, and I negotiated a trade for one.

Let's see now... What could "P" stand for... Paul Weyerman? Poolhall? Perpetual Perplexity?

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The author would like to thank Howard Herz, the members of The Chip Board online community, The Omaha Public Library, The Historical Society of Douglas County, Gary Rosenberg, Orville Menard, Bryan James Beerman and Steve Fischer. Mark may be contacted at cottonchipper@gmail.com.