

Richard Canfield's Chips

by Steve Gould



Growing up with four brothers and sisters, we played games, often card games. Somewhere in the house we found a wooden box of poker chips and they were incorporated into the play. We learned after a time that the chips, which my father said were ivory, came from a raid on a casino owned by a man named Canfield and that our great grandfather had participated in the raid. The chips were used, moved from one house to another over the years and mostly neglected. There were almost two hundred chips in all and while most of them were plain white with different colored rings, nearly half were monogrammed. The elaborate three-letter monogram was difficult to interpret. We always guessed that the letters were *MCC* or perhaps *MPC*. The monogram didn't seem to be connected in any way to Canfield. A few years ago I purchased a copy of Dale Seymour's book on chip collecting and found on page 153 an image of the chips that I had. Dale indicated that the letters were *MPC*. The mystery continued, why the letters *MPC* and what was the connection to Canfield?

My mother knew some of the details. Our great grandfather, Charles, was an attorney and for several years worked for the District Attorney of New York City, William Travers Jerome. He took part in a raid on the gambling house of Richard Canfield and kept the box of chips as a souvenir of the event.

Richard Canfield began as a small gambler in Providence R.I. and moved to New York where in 1888 he opened the Madison Square Club in a four story brownstone building on West Twenty-Sixth Street. This gambling house quickly became prosperous and the profits were large. The Madison Square Club was furnished to provide a comfortable and dignified atmosphere, in contrast to the gaudy gaming houses that typified the New York gambling experience. The cost to operate the club ran near \$6000. per month including rent, wages and protection money paid to the police.

During the next several years he expanded, establishing gambling houses in Saratoga and Newport. In 1898 he purchased the property at 5 West Forty-fourth Street close to the famous eatery, Delmonico's, and moved his New York club to the new address. It was renamed the Saratoga Club and soon became the most famous of his houses. At this time he was forty-four years old. His architect and designer spent nearly a half a million dollars transforming the club. The *Times* described it as follows:

"The gambling house of ...Canfield... has lately been established in Forty-Fourth Street...it is the finest place of its kind in the country if not in the world, and the nightly play there is enormous.

The entire big brownstone house is fitted throughout with extreme magnificence. The rarest Eastern carpets are upon its floors, and masterpieces of art adorn its walls. The furniture, consisting mainly of divans and davenports, are marvels of beauty and luxuriousness.

Servants throughout the house attend to the wants of the players and the place is conducted much like one of the most exclusive clubs. Entertainment is free to the guests. The costliest dishes – game, *pâtés*, and the rarest wines – are all included.”

Visitors to the house, distinguished by the huge bronze door at the entrance, enjoyed having their privacy protected. Only the very rich gambled at Canfield’s and he took pride in setting no limits for certain games or particular players. He is said to have kept in excess of half a million dollars in cash on the premises. Vanderbilts and Whitneys were frequent customers here, their privacy vigorously protected, patrons being addressed only by the initials of their last names. Canfield himself never gambled but he did well in the stock market, often on tips from his clientele. The massive bronze front door opened into a vestibule and a second equally impressive door led to the main floor, which held Canfield’s offices and reception rooms. The second floor contained the public casinos. The third level held private rooms for faro and Roulette gambling. Canfield’s living quarters and private library occupied the top floor. Dinner was served each evening at eleven o’clock. If a player wished something other than that which was offered, it was ordered from Delmonico’s and served at cost to him. The best cigars and the finest wines were free for the asking and Canfield’s wine cellar contained some \$75,000 worth of rare vintages. Hundreds of thousands of dollars flowed through this gambling house every month, the atmosphere intoxicating, the profits enormous.

William Travers Jerome campaigned for district attorney in New York with the promise to clean up the city, including the gambling establishments. He won his election and was sworn into office in January of 1902. He was determined to gain the information he needed to prosecute Canfield and was publicly vocal about his intentions. Canfield boasted that the new district attorney couldn’t get into his place and so closed the doors to the famous gaming house on the last night of 1901. He decided to wait and see how things developed; telling his patrons that “for the present” there would be no gambling at the New York club.

Almost a year later, Jerome was given erroneous information regarding the house at 5 West Forty-Fourth Street. An undercover policeman claimed to have lost money gambling in Canfield’s. Jerome obtained a warrant and on the night of December 1, 1902 staged the raid. Police, accompanied by Jerome and his assistants, set up a ladder and smashed the windows, gaining access to the second floor. Canfield, who’d been in Providence, rushed back to New York after hearing of the impending raid. He greeted Jerome and the police and took them on a tour of the empty house. There had been no gambling here for nearly a year. Inside a hidden closet on the fourth floor police discovered all the stored gambling paraphernalia that included faro tables and thousands of ivory chips. My great grandfather had been part of Jerome’s party and had made off with a box full of chips, dice and faro markers. The *MPC* or *MCC* monogram still didn’t make sense until, by simply tracing the lines of each letter it was revealed that the letters were in fact *MSC*, for the **Madison Square Club** not *MCC*, as many had supposed. Dale Seymour’s book on chip collecting has an image of the chip on page 153 of the 1998 edition and the letters are incorrectly identified as being *MPC*. I wrote to Dale, included a copy of the tracing of each letter using different colors to help distinguish them, the historic evidence I’d gathered, and he agreed that the *MSC* identification made perfect sense.

We still have the box and the chips. There are fewer than one hundred of the monogrammed ivories, perhaps fifty plain ivory chips, and a few dozen clay chips with various patterns. The details of the history helped solve the puzzle and the confusion of the monogrammed poker chips.

Canfield was never prosecuted, but two years later paid a small fine. Within a couple of years he closed his last gambling house in Saratoga and sold the building to the town. While he later lost much of his fortune in stocks his estate at the time of his death was estimated at almost a million dollars.