

"Knights of the Green Cloth" Gamblers, card sharks and Sandon's saloons

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In 1892 there was only one hotel in Sandon - the original Sandon Hotel, a rough two-storey log structure. By 1898, with hundreds of transient miners arriving every week, the number had shot up to at least 29, with numerous other buildings also providing lodging facilities. These hotels varied widely in their accommodations and tone, ranging from the Pend O'Rille, which advertised 'the best 25 cent meals in town', to the high-class Hotel Reco, which served chilled French champagne. With the exception of one hotel, however (the Goodenough Hotel) they had one thing in common: they all featured saloons that catered to the thirsty miners.

The rich silver mines not only attracted hundreds of miners, but also a large number of professional gamblers and card sharks, determined to separate the miners from their money as fast as possible. Before long, Sandon had earned a reputation far and wide as 'the Monte Carlo of Canada'. Poker, blackjack, roulette, faro, craps, slot machines - all were popular games of chance offered around the clock in the city's many saloons, and many miners learned the hard way that 'easy money' did not come so easily after all. Nevertheless, there were never any shortage of candidates at the tables, eager to try their luck on the dice or the cards. 'Colonel' R.T. Lowery, editor of the Paystreak, recognized this tendency, writing:

In the West, many young men are in the habit of coming to town every little while and blowing all their money upon yellow liquor, the green cloth and the woman in red. After a few days of hilarity they usually sober up broke, grow repentant, and then hit the hills for another stake, fully determined that they will never again sip the booze, shuffle the cards or trifle with the painted face of commercial love. As time goes along and their pile grows bigger, the memory of past misery fades, and back they come to camp and history repeats itself. Strange lives to lead. Up in the snow, driving steel for months and saving every dollar. Then, a few days amid the wild delights of a mining camp, and then the dark tunnel again with nothing in sight but a brown taste and an upper stope haunted by green snakes and turkeys wearing gum boots.

By all accounts, Lowery was writing with some experience, and was reputed to be a shrewd

poker player himself.

The professional gamblers and con men who flocked to Sandon were a determined lot too, and were not deterred by setbacks, even serious ones. The morning of May 4, 1900, following the devastating fire which burned the entire downtown core, these hardy souls reportedly set up their poker tables and games of chance in the middle of the streets, amid the still-smoldering ruins, and the gambling continued with virtually no interruption.

The end of the line was in sight for the gambling fraternity, however. The 'boom' period was over, and Sandon was becoming less chaotic. The population was becoming more family-oriented as many of the transient miners were lured north by tales of Klondike gold, and the rebuilt community following the fire would reflect that change. Sandon had been incorporated as a city in 1898, and the city council decided to 'clean up' the downtown core at the same time as it was being rebuilt. Six months after the fire, in October of 1900, the council passed a resolution outlawing gambling in the city, and the gamblers were forced to move on to greener pastures. The Paystreak ran the following 'obituary' on October 13:

Gambling shut down and Knights of the Green Cloth are on the hike. Second dealers in Sandon are at a discount now. Their occupation is gone. No more the little stacks of reds and blues pass back and forth at the behest of the fickle goddess of fortune. No more the roulette wheel burr nor the faro king reigns where dead game sports bet 'em to the rafters and lucky ikes double shoot the turn. It's all off now. Chips that pass in the night are valuable only as souvenirs, and the agitation for the free and unlimited coinage of poker checks is only a matter of ancient history. The dealers, boosters, chair-warmers, pluggers, crappers, professional rubber-neckers, markers, rimmers, crimpers, short card men, Montana sleeve artists and other members of the sporting fraternity will have to turn their backs on the classic shades of the Silver City, and with heavy hearts and tear-stained eyes hit the long array of ties to the land of exile.