Things You Didn't Know About Playing Cards

For instance, the tax on cards is probably the oldest amusement levy, and the penalty for avoiding it in the old days was something to make your blood curdle

Above, a sixteenth century print showing German soldiers playing the game of "Lansquenet." Upper left, some of the "rump Parliament" cards left in London coffee houses by cavaliers in Cromwell's time to discredit the Puritans.

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WHAT might be classed as one of our modern nuisance taxes is a small blue revenue stamp, which forms the seal on every deck of cards, showing that Uncle Sam has collected 10 cents. But in reality the tax on cards was probably the first amusement tax, dating back even before the 13 Colonies had won their independence, and with penalties for evasion much more severe than they would be today.

You would hardly believe that only 300 or 400 years ago, if you attempted to avoid payment of the tax on cards, you might be stood in the pillory, have your ears cut off, or your nostrils slit up and seared with a hot iron. Gruesome penalties, yes, but old court records show that all these things happened—that even death was inflicted on those who would "bootleg" playing cards.

As you while away the moments at your favorite solitaire game or struggle through a neighborhood bridge party, you have probably noticed the artistry of modern playing cards, their beautifully designed backs exhibiting bathing beauties, silhouettes, Godey prints, futuristic distortions, nature scenes, even the big, bad wolf and the three little pigs.

But have you ever reflected that the faces of these same cards are of a different time and land, that they have changed but little in nearly 500 years, ever since they came over to Merrie England in the kit bags of her fighting men returning from France?

THE little royalties of the cards still affect the regal costumes of that day when kings wore ermine-bordered robes, and great dames were bedecked with elaborate headgear or long lappets over their ears. Gallant knaves, the king's wardens, are pictured with flat caps "broad on the crown like the battlements of a house," also the court's jester who is perpetuated with his cap and bells, in the design of the joker, in some packs.

Why so little change has occurred is difficult to understand The habit of card players is strong and tradition may play a small part.

And those odd-shaped spots, the pips that designate the suits in this minature pasteboard army. Why are they so, and where did they come from?

French tradition informs us that they symbolize the divisions of society.

Spades represented the lance points of the chivalrous knights. Diamonds, the arrow heads of the bowmen and archers, the yeomanry of the army. Clubs, the clover leaf of husbandry, symbolize the peasantry, and hearts stood for the church.

Cards were not invented by a French courtesan, for the amusement of a sick king, nor by a favorite concubine of the Chinese Emperor Seun-ho in A. D. 1120, as the Encyclopedia Britannica suggests. They were, like most of our well-rooted institutions, a gradual evolution through a complex social process, rather than the invention of an individual.

As early as the sixth century the Chinese began issuing paper money with which certain games of chance were developed, but probably due to their value and the fact they wore out easily, more durable cards were made in imitation of these first bank notes.

The Chinese cards today still bear the money symbols that first adorned their paper money and denoted their value. There were four suits, coins, strings of coins, myriads of coins and tens of myriads, picturing those strange Eastern coins with holes in the center. Some time later honor cards were added to the pack depicting the river folk of Chinese lore.

UPON the authority of Catherine P. Hargrave, who has devoted much study to the history of playing cards, a gathering of card players occurred in the tenth century, when no less a personage than Emperor T'ai Tsu assembled his nobles to play at the game of yu p'u, which was played with cards, "for embroidered rugs and damasks and gauze of sorts."

A pleasant time was evidently enjoyed by all, for later, in the year 969, "K'itan, the Tartar prince, called his lords together for a tournament of leaves." The historian writing the account explains that these "leaves," known as yu p'u, are Sung money—that is, coins or their equivalent, which were the little paper bank notes, such as Marco Polo described 300 years later.

Whether the Polos or some other Eastern traveler brought the game to Venice we cannot say; but at any rate the game of leaves was known throughout Europe before the fourteenth century was ended. In Italy it was at first called by the Latin name, paginae, or pages; in Germany it was "blattern" or leaves, and in France, again, it was "feullets." It was much the same game in any case.

The cards themselves borrowed the Chinese markings, having a suit of coins, a suit of batons, which was copied from the Chinese strings of coins, a suit of swords and a suit of cups, both of which were perversions of the Chinese characters.

The cards and suits underwent various changes in different countries as the games with which they were played multiplied. In Germany, with a people fond of the chase, the suits were dogs and stags, falcons and ducks and birds and beasts of all sorts and kinds. Other playing cards were adorned with hearts, typifying the church, bells, standing for the nobles, and acorns and leaves which stood for the peasantry and husbandmen.

CARDS later became known as cartes in France, and karten in Germany, while in Spain they were called "naipes" and in Italy "naiba," which is supposed to have come from the Arabic word meaning darkness or secrecy, suggesting their Eastern origin, and their use from the earliest times for fortune telling—a use which persists.

A court card from a comparatively recent Russian deck.

Penalties for avoiding the tax on cards. This tax evader is getting the usual punishment—nostrils slit and seared with a red-hot iron.

There were games of skill, such as tarot, and games of chance, like Lansquenet, which took its name from Landsknecht or foot soldier. Trapola, originally a Venetian game, was a favorite said to be played by the Saracen soldiers, fighting as mercenaries of the Pope at the siege of Viterbo in 1379.

By this time cards were well established. Brother Johannes, writing in the monastery at Brefeld in 1377, describes a pack of 52 cards of four suits with three court cards and 10 numerals each, and tells how men played with them in one way and another. He says that this game is of advantage to noblemen and to others if they play it courteously and without money, and ends by saying "In this game the state of the world and our own times and modern ways are described and symbolized perfectly."

The possibilities of cards as a means of mental training probably first occurred to Thomas Murner, a harassed monk, teaching logic in the University of Cracow as long ago as 1507.

The textbook used at the time was written by a Spanish friar and the classes of the good brother did not make the desired progress. And so he devised a pack of cards, whereby the German youths learned their lessons with such dispatch and exactness that the master was accused of witchcraft and brought before the tribunal. It was not until he had shown the curious cards and explained his plan that he was exonerated.

Much of the tradition with cards is of French origin, not only the old symbolism of the suits, but many of the pretty stories that have come down to us associating characters of history with individual cards; such as the four kings of the deck representing David, Alexander, Caesar and Charles the Great, the monarchies of the Hebrews, Greeks, Romans and the Franks under Charlemagne. The four queens represented Argine, Esther, Judith and Pallas, which were the types of good birth, piety, fortitude and wisdom. Also the knaves had one or more sobriquets.

OVER 30 of the cards of the deck have names, one of the best known and most interesting of which is the "Curse of Scotland."

Some old whist players have explained that Queen Elizabeth of England was playing cards when she determined upon the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and wrote the death warrant of Queen Mary on the nine of diamonds, and ever since then these nine red pips have been known as the "Curse of Scotland." This is undoubtedly a pure myth not substantiated by fact.

Another explanation of this lugubrious designation harks back to the battle of Culloden, 1746, which sealed the fate of the Stuart cause. On the eve of the battle the Duke of Cumberland, who, for his extraordinary cruelty, became known as "the Butcher Duke," wrote "No Quarter" across the face of the nine of diamonds, thereby dooming 2,000 Scotsmen to death in the Scotch moors.

In Ireland the six of hearts has been known as "Grace's Card." It is alleged that the Irish soldier, Richard Grace, governor of Athlone, received an offer from the Duke of Schomberg, on behalf of William III, conditional on Grace's deserting the cause of James II, and espousing that of the Protestants. Grace is said to have written his reply, indignantly rejecting the proposal, on the back of the six of hearts.

The four of spades has been called "Ned Stokes," and the four of clubs is known as the "Devil's Bedposts."

"Old Frizzle" was the derisive name applied to the ace of spades by early English card players. It was the duty or tax card of the deck; so you see that the present tax of 10 cents per deck, which Uncle Sam collects, antedates our various modern amusement and "nuisance" taxes.

For more than 300 years card players have, most of the time, been paying some form of excise.

Both France and England collected taxes on the manufacture, sale or importation of cards. In W. Gurney Benham's interesting history on playing cards he tells of court records of forging and counterfeiting, with several examples of punishment.

We read of a case where Firmin St. Paul, a master cardmaker of Paris, who had become bankrupt in 1771, was some years later detected as having established a secret factory. He was put in the pillory, branded with a red-hot iron on the right shoulder with the letters G and L, and chained in the galleys.

The last execution for forgery in England was in 1829. Son afterward the law substituted penal servitude for a term of years, or even for life. Other forms of punishment for forgery existed, such as "standing in the pillory, having both ears cut of and his nostrils slit up and seared with a hot iron."

During the time of Oliver Cromwell, coffee houses and playing cards were more plentiful than newspapers, and so the royalists hit upon the happy plan of poking fun at the roundheads by caricaturing their activities on a pack of cards. A few of these have been preserved in museums and are known as Rump Parliament cards.

By leaving them at a tavern or coffee house, to be used instead of the usual pack, their fame was spread by all sorts and conditions of players. They were the cartons and funnies of the seventeenth century, and an excellent means of passing on political propaganda.

Steady Occupation

First Tramp—Here's a story about a guy who done no work for 30 years.

Second Tramp (wearily)—Oh, don't talk shop.