

# Confessions of a Utah Gambler

*Russell Burrows*

THE OLD HOMETOWN, Ogden, Utah, has long been an overlooked sports town. That is, if you take the adjective *overlooked* in an underground or an underworld sense, and if you broaden "sporting men" to include gamblers. I don't like to brag about antecedents, but I hail from a town with this to boast: Ogden was not a Mormon town, but a railroad town, and so a hotbed of vice.

This made the town strange and suspect. The rest of the state has been described, with some accuracy, as a voting block of John Birchers, a backwash of religious oligarchy, and, most recently, in debt to the new physics, a black hole of conservatism. Yet from its founding, Ogden has been that place apart, a haven from the general tide of righteousness. If you think I claim rather too much for my home, consider that I once introduced myself as an Ogdenite to a professor of religion at Brigham Young University and was told without the least levity or irony that I had "escaped from Sodom and Gomorrah."

The good professor was entitled to his view, of course, which was not without foundation. Ogden came by its reputation honestly enough. Hell-on-wheels, as the railroad camps were called, closed ranks just north of Ogden, where Chinese and Irish crews helped drive the golden spike that joined the transcontinental rails. That put Ogden on the map and largely made its fortune. The town could claim the biggest railyard west of the Missouri up until about the Second World War. And with the railyard came the Union Pacific Depot, rising at the west end of Twenty-fifth Street, gateway to Utah's cathouses and casinos.

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Though I came along too late for the glory days of Twenty-fifth Street, I am heir to stories of grandfathers who, how shall I say, kept taps on the nightlife? Among my granddad's favorite stories was the one of the reforming sheriff of the thirties. This stalwart would raid the Rose Rooms, the Wilson Rooms, and the Wyoming Rooms. His deputies would climb rickety stairs and come stumbling down again from the darkness, carrying over their shoulders "painted tarts" and "soiled doves." The buildup of the story was always to the woman who, having screeched and kicked a tremendous kick, spilled herself backwards over the deputy. He somehow managed to lose his grip on her, though not on her fur coat, so that she landed on the sidewalk—wearing nothing at all. Granddad, may his soul rest in peace, finally felt rewarded for all the time he had spent hanging around Twenty-fifth Street. He had seen how "the other half lives" and could go home to Grandmother and tend the home fires.

For all of that, my grandfather was not exactly Ogden's bumpkin. He possessed a sort of sophistication, not unlike the French, when they arrange for their sons to be with a woman for the first time. I hazard this assessment because Granddad once sent Dad, when he was an impressionable fifteen-year old, right into a nest of harlots. This took place shortly after Granddad had started contracting and happened to have a job remodeling a building on Twenty-fifth Street. The work required that he measure the pitch of the roof. A ladder would have been the most direct way of going about the job. But there was also a third-story window of the Wilson Rooms overlooking the same roof. Deciding which route must have taken hardly a moment.

My grandfather sent my father into the brothel, shielded only with a ruler, a spirit level, and sketchy instructions about climbing through a window. (Such family humor has on occasion rained down on me.) At the top of some stairs, Dad knocked on a door. A panel slid open to reveal a probing green eye. A woman's voice said, "We're not open yet, kid. Besides, you're too young." My dad summoned his courage and rapped again. After he found a voice and got through the door, he edged his way past women draped in feathers and fur. I am willing to bet that he tried to avert his eyes. I am just as confident that he took in every detail of that room. It couldn't have been lost on him that the women were in nightgowns. Nor that they were painted. Nor that they were on an unmade bed, playing cards. Distractions aplenty, the wonder is that he came back with that measurement as quickly as he did. And yet he didn't need much longer to figure out that he had gone about his errand circuitously, following a demonstrably longer path, but one many times more scenic and instructive.

Would that I had been there. This is a fantasy of mine, to myself climb a flight of stairs to a pleasure dome of old Ogden. Unlike dear old Dad, however, I am older when I set out on my adventures and do not fear talking to the ladies. Indeed, I have discovered during these reveries that I am something of a lady killer. Who would have thought it? Me—a *gentleman*? A creature of the night? Streetwise? I suddenly know not only what I want, but how to get it.

If I daydream at any length, I am sure to dwell on a woman who can be described, in a word, as extraordinary. She strongly resembles Miss Kitty of *Gunsmoke*, though she is not Miss Kitty, but a creation all of my own. She is, of course, gorgeous; her eyes fairly sparkle; her figure is full. Her laugh is wonderfully wry. Best of all, she is not the least maternal or dour, as can be Miss Kitty. (Matt Dillon, eat your heart out.) Far from it, this woman of mine has the most engaging manner of tilting her head toward mine and putting a small, gloved hand through my arm. We enjoy walking east from Ogden's Union Station under skies that glow purple over the mountains. Stopping for an *apéritif* in the Broom Hotel (the last word in elegance, though, sadly, no longer a city landmark), I encourage her to tell me more of the river-boat and cowboy gamblers she has known. In exchange, I tempt her with lies of what wicked lovers young Mormons make. We have, I point out, a legacy to live up to: our elders were not only concupiscent, but polygamists, to boot.

The mood thus set, I assume my fullness as a legend. I am a gambler of the Old West. I appear in Ogden's casinos dressed all in black: high-heeled boots, broadcloth suit, and broad-brimmed hat. My shirt is snowy white and ruffled. My vest, garish and flowered. For buttons, I sport gold studs. My "headlight," naturally, is the requisite diamond stickpin. This sartorial splendor I compliment with polished manners, acquired, you understand, from former days on the riverboats. Need I go on about myself? Modesty dictates no, except to add that when I turn a card, it snaps.

What a dream! What smoke! Please don't misunderstand—in life I am no such gambler, but, at best, a piker, a tinhorn. I am merely fascinated with fortune's wheel. Oh, I will make a modest little wager from time to time. But the Ogden in which I grew up afforded little of what is elsewhere termed *action*. By the time I arrived on the scene, Mormonism had idly exercised its influence over Ogden's suburbs. Our railroad heritage with all its color was no more. The neighborhoods were spic and span. It was all very dull and frustrating, take my word on this. When I have wanted to gamble, I have had to do so without the advantage of practice and have gambled poorly.

Still, let me say in my favor, I have never been so naive as to ask, "Why do men gamble?" I believe I know that one, thank you. What I am after is more basic: schooling in toting up odds and point spreads. I need to be rehearsed in what gamblers say to one another. In short, I need to start over and get what I missed as a kid, for poker chips have hardly been more than toys that, once upon a time, I would stack, one-, two-, three-hundred high. Simply shuffling a deck of cards ought not be as daunting as juggling in the circus. Why, it occurs to me that a great holiday gift—hint, hint—would be a book on blackjack or craps. No, I am serious about this. If gambling is, as the philosopher says, figurative of life itself, with odds seven to six against us (am I too optimistic?), then I must confess—I know little of life. There weren't that many gamerooms where I could have heard "deuces and jacks wild."

Am I a chump? (Hard question to ask of oneself.) I have tried to make the most of my chances. In high school, I was an aspiring and diligent gambler. We would gather at the home of my best friend, Bruce Peterson, where we experimented frankly with the Devil's playthings. Mrs. Peterson, alone among our mothers, didn't enforce the neighborhood's prohibition against seven-card stud.

Why, you ask? I have pondered this myself and have a theory: her tolerance was born of finding herself again single in a neighborhood that hadn't the slightest idea what to do with single adults. She was set adrift on the seas of life without benefit of priesthood. In short, she had to make her own way, on her own terms, and she did all right. A lesser woman might have gone down for the count, but Mrs. Peterson was one to rally. We saw this one night when she returned from a square dance, a bit tipsy, we thought, and with a new boyfriend in tow, a man with bowed legs and a pot belly, who urged us to call him "Pink."

Around Mrs. Peterson's kitchen table, we could banter back and forth, "My pair of Queens sees your nickel, Robert, and bump you a quarter." Oh, I admit that there was something pitiful about the Mason jars in which we kept our "bank rolls." But back then, we had an unstated agreement that pennies were too small for such as ourselves, while bills were still too rich. We wanted straightforward action, not great risk, nor the trouble that comes with great loss. We had ideas back then of remaining forever, in the corny phrase, poker buddies.

Now, I am certain that many of you are rising up to declare in a moral tone that we were not cementing friendships so much as falling into the bad habit of wagering our scant earnings from sweeping floors, sacking groceries, and pumping gas. There would be some truth in

that charge. Gambling does bring some to ruin, though I still say that Ogden's neighborhoods didn't furnish many compelling examples.

If all this sounds a little repressed, it's just because it is. A lively conception of sin went with the territory. And no sin, so far as I have seen, quite keeps up with gambling's propensity for breaking out at unexpected times and places. Sex and drunkenness, to name two other favorite pitfalls, are pretty much what they always have been, clear back, in fact, to Sodom and Gomorrah. But gambling has its inventive and dynamic dimension. Who, after all, has mastered all the games, which is also to ask, who has ever gone down all the paths of running amuck?

This hits me hard each time I recall the misadventures of an acquaintance, whose name I shall withhold. He was entrusted with money belonging to the Church when he happened on a little game. He paused and, yes, you guessed it—shot the wad. It's basic in Mormonism that there are only two ways of getting oneself thrown out of the Church. One is having indiscriminate sex. The other is making off with Church money. For all the Saints who have gotten themselves cut off for sins of the flesh, about an equal number have been thrown out for, might we say, sins of finance? Unfortunately, my acquaintance could not pay back the money. Fortunately, he knew a loan shark on, as it happened, Twenty-fifth Street. He showed up smiling on the next Sunday morning in the office of the bishop with the money in hand. The ward clerk, no wiser for what had gone on downtown, asked no questions. Although I believe I did hear of the shark having to flex some muscle to encourage my acquaintance finally to pay up.

Why did he gamble with Church money? Considering where he worked, he could not have avoided a game. He was an employee of the Union Pacific Railroad, an enclave that to this day tries to carry forth the spirit of old Ogden. He must have come from the railyard one afternoon feeling frisky. He was capable of that. A voice in him would have said, "Ah, what the hell." He laid the money on the line, and its loss nearly landed him in hell. I have always imagined that he did this some time mid-week, so he would have had a few days at least before Sunday to reflect on the enormity of his mistake. For my part, I have always been glad that I got the story after the fact and did not have occasion to blunder into a perfunctory: "How have things been going?"

This acquaintance eventually stopped attending church altogether, whether because of further gambling difficulties or a more general crisis of faith, I can't say. I followed him up until he entered a different sort of gamble: he married a very pretty and much younger woman. When he at last fell entirely out of sight, he had begun vacationing in Nevada's casinos. In this, he confirmed a theory of a former professor

of mine, Levi Peterson, who maintains that wide-open Nevada serves as a safety valve for Utah. Whenever we in Utah can't stand it any longer, well, there is Nevada just next door, where, in Levi's words, we can treat ourselves to "a moral holiday."

Quite a concept, isn't it? It expresses perfectly what many do yet are quite unaware of. It also clarifies a larger question: why are we astonished at one who bets a lousy hundred bucks of Church money in a poker game and yet wonder so very little at others who wager their days and talents and, yes, their money, serving that same Church for the big payoff—heaven?

My own views of gambling—and I speak now as one who lacks both the impetuosity to wager Church money and the faith to work for rewards in the hereafter—come from that contracting business my grandfather started. We have kept it in the family all these years, even though we often wonder whether we work it or if it works us. Mainly, it has gotten us by, though my father actually made the business thrive sporadically through the seventies. Whatever his fortunes, however, he genuinely loved running his own show; he felt himself captain of his fate, and so, more than many men, was happy.

Much the same can be said of the other men of the solidly middle-class neighborhood of my youth. Nearby lived a school teacher, a janitor, an accountant, a cabinetmaker, a machinist, and a plumber. All worked hard for their money. The only gambling they allowed themselves (besides hoarding up rewards in heaven) were baseball and basketball pools. And at that, their wagers were always for small—I mean very small—stakes. To fix the relative size of one of their pots, the winnings would barely have afforded them one of those \$59.95 Weekend Fun Packages in Wendover or Elko. And that, only if they would have wanted more gambling. Which they wouldn't have. Enough would have been enough. The fun would have been over until next season's play-offs. They would have pocketed the money and gone home, for they were family men, whose joy was to treat the kids to ice cream.

Little wonder that I came out such a cautious fellow. For all of gambling's insistence on *action*, I have guts only for games that are excruciatingly safe and slow. On fishing trips, we have along a deck of cards to play while tent-bound during rain. That is boredom stacked alongside boredom. The stakes rise no higher than steak dinners to be settled up on the road for home.

I mention this gambling because I realize that most of my games haven't been for money, but for one or another kind of favor. I am a great one, for instance, to flip for cokes. I was also a very avid gambler when it came to a former girlfriend. She loved to bet. I loved that she loved to bet. For we would settle scores between us with little inter-

ludes of intimacy. (Would it help my case to observe that it was her idea as often as it was mine?) Oh well, no matter now—the point is that for once, if never again, I couldn't lose. There was no way to lose. The gentle blurring of winner and loser will perhaps prove to be the most rewarding gambling I will ever know.

What a difference between those light-hearted games and the grim contests where cash has been on the line. When some high roller has joined the game, it has been to teach me that my nerve doesn't extend very far. In gambling, as in life, I have wanted to see the future before committing myself. I have wanted to know the odds and, still when in my favor, I have found them small comfort against a run of bad luck.

That is why my college days have begun to loom as such opportunity lost. There was a constant game at the fraternity house. (Painful now to admit I ever belonged.) The boys had their own crap table, which, according to lore, had come from a Nevada casino. The table was the centerpiece of the annual Casino Royal Party and lent a certain authenticity to what was otherwise an embarrassingly jejune gathering. Indeed, that table was a little too authentic in the sheriff's opinion. A few of the boys (myself included) got to think that over when we were slapped with a court appearance.

I hope a sense of irony is coming across in that charge laid against me. I did not know the first thing about shooting craps and had never worked up the nerve to ask. I had stood by at the party but was nonetheless named in the county's suit. While dressing in my own Sunday-go-to-meeting suit for my trip downtown, I railed against the unfairness of it all. Wasn't I the boy too bashful to court dame fortune? I could neither walk her home nor hold her hand, but there I was—hauled up before an amused judge.

In the end, Ogden did right by me. I now abide the law more or less, while still keeping an interest in gambling, or at least in its metaphysics. I will never be another Cincinnati Kid. Never will hit it big; nor slide over the brink of ruin. I stand safely on middle ground. Oh, I gamble—but not so intent on sudden, fabulous riches, as on improving the general tenor of my life. I never supposed that I would live as deliberately as I do now. Political gambits, puny as can be at a Wyoming college, are the gravest risks I run. I look for gambling to break up the unrelieved quietude. Moreover, I look for it to prepare me for the unfathomable loss that may yet lie ahead. If gambling helps to put a brave face on loss, can it be all bad?

Brooding thus, I found myself last week in Wendover and decided to get back in the *action*. In the surreal casino, I faced a line of slots. So, okay, they don't afford the briskest action. But I felt up to them. I got coins, good Nevada silver, dug no doubt right there in the Silver

State. I kissed an orb goodbye. Then a second. And a third. You know the pattern. Nothing much happened. Then, delightfully, the machine spit back a coin or two. I got a few bucks ahead; I fell a little down. But it didn't matter, I was back at it—Lady Luck, oh, be mine.

The lady who did visit me was sweet and withered and doddering. She had come across the desert on a bus from the Senior Citizens Center. She stepped up to my machine (I was away but a moment), slipped in two coins, and—wham!—jackpot. She had watched me load the machine and figured—rightly—it was ready to spill itself. Away she tottered with money that should have been mine. She looked like some Cassandra of a Wendover casino. And yet when she vanished, I knew her for herself: my guardian angel. Despite myself, Ogden and heaven watch over me yet.