

In Search of Faro

A few years ago, I saw an antique handbill advertising the opening of a new saloon in the late 1800's. The advertisement boasted of 25 barrels of Rye Whiskey, several ladies of the night and "Five new Faro Tables direct from San Francisco."

The line about the Faro Tables caught my eye. I had not heard of Faro before and I was curious as to what Faro was and what it had to do with the saloon. I surfed the Internet in search of Faro.

In my research, I discovered that there were various rules of the game and descriptions of the equipment used. Basically, I learned Faro (also referred to as Pharo, or Pharaoh in the past) was a card game in which players bet on cards drawn from a deck of cards or a dealing box.

Faro's origin was actually from France and England during the 1700's. Faro eventually made its way to the United States from France prior to the Louisiana Purchase. Faro was the most popular card game ever played in America. Throughout the 1800's and into the early 1900's, it was the primary gambling game. It was played on riverboats on the Mississippi and society houses in the east. Faro came west during the gold and silver strikes. It was not unusual to have one to five Faro tables active in a saloon during an evening. Some of the larger mining towns boasted upwards of 50 Faro tables in operation.

Faro was a banking game, often referred to as a Faro Bank, similar to Roulette or Baccarat. The dealer, or banker, or house fronts all of the money against the players. Rather than playing against each other as in poker, the player bets against the house, as does each of the other players. The house then covers all of the bets placed. Many a player and dealer won and lost fortunes playing the game of Faro. Many of the famous lawmen of the old west were Faro dealers during their careers, either for themselves or for the house banking the game.

Upon discovering the various versions of the rules of the game, I was able to determine how the basic game was played and how it changed over the years. During the 1800's, the game had a straight-forwarded style of betting, keeping the game simple and fast paced. The player simply bet if a card would win or lose and each turn of the cards created a losing card and a winning card. If a player bet on a losing card, the house would collect the bet. If a player bet on a winning card, the house would pay off the bet. If a bet was placed on a card that did not turn up, the bet stayed on the table or could be picked up. It was really that simple. However, there were a few combination bets and reverse betting.

The betting became more complex as the game progressed. At the turn of the century in an effort to keep the game alive, betting became more exotic.

However, this slowed the game down and some say added to the game's eventual demise.

The equipment was fairly simple as well. It consisted of a table. A Faro Layout – Ace through King of one suit, usually Spades on which to place the bet. A dealing box to extract the cards for each turn. A casekeeper – an abacus like device for counting the cards played. Checks, chips or markers with which to play. The dealer, or bank sold chips, or markers of different colors to each player to distinguish the bets. A dealer dealt the cards and a lookout or moneyman, to insure the bets were accurately placed, often supported the dealer. The moneyman usually handled the payouts as well. A loaded six-shooter was often part of the setup to discourage or settle any disagreements. Several companies located in San Francisco, Denver, Chicago and New Jersey offered Faro equipment in their catalogs.

Often times these Faro Banks were portable enabling the owner to move from town to town or saloon to saloon. Some mining towns were nothing more than tents where the dealer or banker would set up for an evening and leave in the morning.

Betting was done with cash, gold dust, watches, jewelry, women and mine or land deeds. In the south, where the game originated, slaves and plantations were bet as well.

It is interesting to note Faro was virtually an even game with the slightest edge going to the house. Every bet basically had a 50/50 chance of winning or losing. The crowd around a Faro table eagerly anticipated the turn of every card.

Of course, as with any game of chance, cheating was prevalent. Cheating included everything from rigged dealing boxes to prepared cards. Cheating would be done by a player, or the dealer and sometimes by both in partnership in order to gain the advantage of another player or two players against the dealer.

Faro was the most popular game of the 1800's. It was played in every mining and boomtown of the west, every riverboat up and down the Mississippi and every gambling house in the east. As the states became civilized, i.e., law and order became the way of the land, saloons and gambling houses began to disappear. Gambling became regulated and in most cases was outlawed from towns, cities or counties altogether.

By the early 1900's, Faro virtually disappeared from the landscape. A few attempts to keep it alive with different betting combinations kept it going for awhile. However, since Faro was basically a 50/50 game, most houses drifted to

other games that were more favorable to the house and these games ultimately led to the death of the Game of Faro.

It is amazing a game as popular as Faro was during the 1800's has disappeared. With as many Faro Banks and Faro Tables as there were throughout the west, and the amount of Faro equipment in existence to support the game, basically none of the equipment can be found today. One can find a piece or two in a museum or through an antique dealer. But, otherwise the old Faro equipment doesn't exist. Even the companies who manufactured the Faro items are gone.

The most popular game in America during the 1800's has virtually disappeared leaving very little knowledge of its existence, little or no equipment remaining and, except for a few mentions or a museum exhibit, no recognition of Faro's impact on the lives of the men who embraced it. Most movies you see depicting the old west always show men playing poker, when in fact they would have been playing Faro.

It has been a few years since I first saw the handbill announcing the Faro Tables. Since then, I have spent numerous hours researching the game. In the hope to further get a feel of the game. I have had Faro equipment created using reproductions of the layout, casekeeper and dealing box. I have also purchased old time cards without indices and colored chips to form my own Faro Bank. In addition, I have Banked a few games with friends to get the feel of the pace and excitement of a Faro Table.

While the game may be gone and lost forever, at least I can say:

"I have found Faro."

(See also: The Game of Faro - A Dissertation)

A final note:

Several years later, one of my novels followed two battles. One fought during the Civil War. One fought during the Vietnam War. As part of my research, I also delved into the day-to-day life of a soldier. Being a Vietnam veteran, I had those memories and the more I uncovered the daily life of a Civil War soldier, I came to realize a soldier is a soldier, is a soldier.

A soldier's life is best described as long hours of boredom, interrupted by moments of pure terror. Simply put, a soldier had a lot of down time on his hands. The time was usually spent writing letters home, cleaning their weapon and chowing down among other things. However, there was an activity most common with any soldier. Pursuing a game of chance.

In Vietnam we played a game called Tonk, a five-card call rummy game similar to knock rummy. With an occasional side trip into stud poker. In the Civil War, the game would have been Faro.

While describing the daily life of a soldier I could not ignore the fact my Civil War soldier would go off to partake in a game of Faro. No more than I could ignore the fact my Vietnam soldier would engage in a game of Tonk.

I had previously researched Faro. Created a paper on the game. Included a reference to the game in another of my books and welcomed the chance to include the reference again. Especially with the knowledge the game was undoubtedly played by my Union soldiers during the Civil War battle I showcased. I would suspect the game was also played by the Confederates.

However, Faro was so much more than a game of chance enjoyed by soldiers. Faro was a game that so captured America during the nineteenth century no other game of chance came close. Faro reigned for 100 hundred years then just disappeared. It cost men fortunes and some even their lives. Everything was bet on a game of Faro, from gold dust, to currency, to homes, plantations and even people including slaves and wives.

Faro so captured America during the 100 hundred years it became so much more than a game of chance, it became a way of life.