



## POKER ALICE

When she was well into her sixties, Alice Ivers Tubbs proclaimed that she would rather play poker with five or six experts than eat. “And at my age, I probably should be at home knitting, but this is much more fun,” she added.

It’s hard to believe that Alice Ivers, born in Sudbury, England, in 1853, the only daughter of a schoolteacher, would end her life in Sturgis, South Dakota, having lived for at least forty of her seventy-seven years as a tough, cigar-chomping, gun-toting gambler. In Colorado, she became one of the greatest poker players and best faro dealers in the West, despite an upbringing that had offered her the education and polish of a young woman of breeding.

ALICE’S FATHER SENT HER to a women’s seminary in Sudbury and had always instilled moral values in his daughter. When Alice was twelve years old, the family emigrated to America, settling first in Virginia, where she attended a fashionable Southern school offering the best in education. With the Civil War at its height and gold beckoning in the West, the Ivers family moved to Lake City, Colorado.

By then Alice was a beautiful young woman of breeding and class. She attracted the attention of many young men, including Frank Duffield, a mining engineer and gambler, who became her first, and perhaps only, true love. The two were soon married and, because of Frank's work, began to move from one boom mining camp to another, finally settling back in Lake City. The Duffields became the center of social activity wherever they partied, and Alice enjoyed all the attention she received. She also enjoyed joining Frank at the poker tables, preferring that to staying home. Frank taught her all he knew about the game of poker, and she even sat in on games while Frank was at work. She gained some notoriety. Women were not expected to be poker players—and good ones at that.

Alice's education served her well. Her math skills were excellent, and she developed a keen sense for the cards. Before long, she was a far better poker player than her husband and most of his friends.

A FEW YEARS INTO their marriage, Frank was tragically killed in a mine explosion, and Alice realized she would now have to make her own way in the world. This did not daunt her, however. She knew she could easily make a good living as a professional gambler, believing it had always been her calling in life. After a suitable period of mourning, she returned to the tables and quickly became known as "Poker Alice."

Before long, she was working the gambling houses in most of Colorado's towns, from Alamosa and Central City to Georgetown and Leadville. Alice liked to dress fashionably and was always neat in appearance. No one would suspect she carried a .38 calibre revolver on her at all times. At some point in her gambling career, she acquired a taste for cigars and from then on was always seen puffing away on her black stogies—not a particularly endearing habit for a woman. If anyone made a comment about it, she pulled out her revolver, the mere sight of which put a stop to further remarks.

Alice later traveled through Oklahoma, working the gambling

tables there. Gradually her fame spread. Never happier than when she was playing against the great card professionals in other houses, she continued to win large amounts of cash. Her greatest pleasure was to actually break the bank. After a particularly long winning streak in Silver City, New Mexico, she headed for New York City and treated herself to an extravagant spree of nightlife, shopping for clothes and enjoying the shows. Once she had spent most of her money, she headed west once again.

NEWS REACHED HER of a new mining camp in Creede, Colorado, where fortunes were being made and lost overnight, so she decided to move there in 1890 and get a piece of the action for herself. Now almost forty years old, she found a job at Bob Ford's Exchange, working eight-hour shifts at the tables. People loved to come and see her because she was so different from most of the run-of-the-mill women. She spoke in a clipped British accent, enjoyed her whisky neat, never drank while she gambled, and never, under any circumstances, gambled on Sundays. That was the day she devoted to Bible reading and meditation.

Her boss in Creede, Bob Ford, was the man who had killed Jesse James. He had already built a reputation for himself in town, because he liked to tell everyone that he was the James killer. However, because of his boastful ways and the fact that many people still thought of Jesse James as a hero rather than an outlaw, Ford had also made many enemies. When one of them, Ed Kelly finally shot Ford in 1892, Alice was a witness to the shooting.

Shortly after that, she took off for Deadwood, South Dakota, where once again she found work in a saloon. The dealer at the next table was a man named Warren Tubbs, who hailed from Sturgis. Alice and Tubbs soon became friends. Although Tubbs was not a particularly good poker player, it didn't bother him too much. During the daytime, he made his living as a house painter. The money he made from painting supported his gambling habit at night.

One night, an extremely drunk miner came into the saloon and pulled a knife on Tubbs. Alice quickly whisked out her gun and shot the man in the arm, saving Tubbs's life. Tubbs was impressed by Alice's skill and began to see her in a different light. To him, she was not only a good poker player and a smart woman, but also beautiful. He fell in love and proposed marriage. Alice said yes.

But she had one stipulation. Tubbs would concentrate on his house painting business and she would be the gambler in the family. This plan seemed to work well and allowed Alice to become the main breadwinner. The couple had seven children through the coming years, four boys and three girls, and Alice played poker whenever she could. She always said that Tubbs was better at producing children than making a living at gambling, whereas her winnings on any given night could sometimes total as much as \$6,000. That kind of money was too hard to resist.

As a dealer at the tables, she still attracted any man looking for a challenge. Her bland expression while she concentrated on the cards made her the epitome of the poker-face player. Even though Alice was gambling to support her family, poker was definitely her calling in life, and she most probably would have continued playing anyway. However, while her children were still young, Alice would not allow them anywhere near the gambling halls or ever see their mother at work.

AS ALICE GOT OLDER and her children moved away, she and Warren retired to a quieter life on a chicken ranch north of Deadwood, but in 1910, his lungs weak from the many years of working with paint, Warren Tubbs contracted pneumonia. Alice stayed by his side, nursing him through his illness. On one particularly cold and wintery night, he died in Alice's arms.

It had been a severe winter, and a blizzard continued to rage for days, but Alice knew it was Warren's wish to be buried back in Sturgis, some forty-eight miles away. She was determined to carry out

his wishes, so she decided to drive his frozen corpse there herself in a sled as the snow continued to fall. On arrival, she pawned her wedding ring for twenty-five dollars to pay for his burial.

After another suitable period of mourning for husband number two, Alice resumed her old profession, taking a table in a gambling hall in Sturgis. Once more, she was doing what she really enjoyed most in life.

Now she took to wearing less glamorous clothing, adopting a khaki skirt, a man's shirt, and an old frayed hat, which, combined with the ever-present cigar hanging from her lip, was how she was always seen in any photograph taken of her.

While Alice gambled in town, she hired a man named George Huckert to tend to her farm. He took an immediate shine to Alice and kept proposing to her. When his back wages totalled over \$1,000, Alice agreed to marry him. "It was cheaper to marry him than pay him off," she was quoted as saying. Huckert proved to be nothing but a loafer who hung out in bars, so Alice was almost relieved when he died and made her a widow for the third time. She then decided to take back her previous name of Tubbs.

AS THE YEARS ROLLED ON, life became tougher for Alice Ivers Tubbs. Her money had run out, and a wave of reform was hitting the gambling halls of Deadwood and Sturgis. Nonetheless, Alice decided to open her own gambling joint in Sturgis. She was betting on the fact that Sturgis was near Fort Meade, where a number of soldiers were stationed. If she combined gambling with some pretty girls plying their trade for the soldiers from the Fort, she could make a killing.

Alice certainly did well at her new venture. At the same time, she began to bootleg alcohol, but once prohibition took effect and more stringent laws were enforced, this became more difficult. Eventually, her business was limited to catering to the soldiers stationed at Fort Meade.

For this, Alice ran afoul of the law and was hauled into jail to face

charges of running a house of prostitution and a gambling joint, as well as for possessing liquor. People were still sentimental about Poker Alice, however, and many still loved her brashness and determination. Public opinion forced the governor to stay her sentence, and she was set free.

Later, she was charged again, this time with shooting and killing a soldier who was supposedly breaking into her house. She went to jail once more, though she claimed she had shot the man accidentally. As she sat in a cell awaiting a verdict to be brought in by the jury, she read her Bible and prayed. The verdict finally came and she was found not guilty. It was unanimously agreed that the shooting had been in self-defense. When she was well over seventy, she was charged on yet another occasion with running a house of prostitution. Alice never gave up and was determined to make money one way or another.



Poker Alice, pre-1930. Courtesy of the South Dakota Historical Society.

BY FEBRUARY OF 1930, a lifetime of liquor, cigar smoking, and the atmosphere of gambling halls was taking its toll on the once classy lady. Poker Alice began to have gallbladder problems, and her doctors advised an operation. Although it was still a relatively new procedure, Alice decided to take one more gamble and go for the operation. After all, she was only seventy-seven, and a fortune-teller had once told her she would live to be a hundred.

Her last gamble did not pay off. She died on the operating table in a Rapid City Hospital and was buried at St. Aloysius Cemetery in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The history of Poker Alice and her notoriety as a gambler is still

told in the annual Deadwood Days festival. She has become one of the most famous of Western legends. Her house in Sturgis was saved from demolition by an entrepreneur named Ted Walker, who had it moved to its present location on Junction Avenue, where it is now open daily for tourists.

Her days in all the mining camps of early Colorado are also still celebrated historically throughout the state. Some tales about her daring deeds at the gambling tables have been exaggerated through the years, but most are accurate.

Poker Alice was one of a kind.

This story is adapted from *Gamblers, Gunmen, and Good-Time Gals: Living It Up in the Wild West* by Valerie Green (Altitude Publishing, 2005).