

This one is all Ed Hertel:

Up through the mid-20th century, the Wild West was alive and kicking in the Texas panhandle. Arguments were more apt to be settled with bullets than debate and a man who was willing to get his hands dirty could find plenty of work. Like the previous story from nearby Pampa, today's IOTD starts with gambling but ends with a heavy body count.



Sportsmans Texas1att2

Sent to:

Alex Phillips
112-B East Third
Amarillo, TX – 1946



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Amarillo is the largest of the cities in the Texas panhandle and is a virtual oasis in the expanse of what would seem an endless desert of desolation. Hidden under its parched dust is a surprisingly wet environment that lends its fertility to the cloves of wild flowers whose color gives Amarillo its name for "yellow". Where there is water, you will find people looking to exploit it. A further boon occurred when helium deposits were discovered giving Amarillo the world largest producing field. Amarillo became a city with money, and of course where there is money...

The man who ordered the chips, Alex Phillips, was a typical western gambling man. He believed that poker games were played with a pistol on the table and weren't over until someone had all the money.

His applied his trade at the Sportsman's Bar and Grill, aka Sportsman's Club, at the address on the chip order. More specifically, he worked a small, obscure room in the back of the club, out of sight from prying eyes.

In the early morning hours of September 19, 1947, the police received a call from the club with the voice said, "I have just shot a man. I'll be waiting for you." Officers arrived just in time to see the ambulance pulling away, carrying the bullet riddled body of a dying gambler named Glenn "Cotton" Wilson. Inside the Sportsman's Club, Alex Phillips, 32, directed the police officers to the backroom where they found the remains of an interrupted low-ball poker game.



Bullets flew above these two "low ball" poker hands last Friday morning. Police found them lying on the table in the Sportsman's Club shortly after "Cotton" Wilson was shot to death as he sat in a chair. The "eighty-six" hand was on Wilson's side of the table, the "seventy-six" hand was where Alex Phillips, charged in connection with the shooting, sat.

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The justice system moved quickly in Amarillo (if not fairly) and a couple months later Alex Phillips found himself on trial for murder. With Phillips being the only living witness to the events, the trial testimony was decidedly one sided. He claimed that Cotton became enraged at losing the last poker hand and a fight ensued. He said, "we both got up and squared off. Wilson stepped toward the chair where the

gun was." (Why they played cards with a loaded gun between them wasn't addressed.) In the race for the gun, Phillips was the first to grab it and "fearing for his life," he emptied four shots into Wilson.

The prosecution had very little evidence to the contrary. They called the ambulance driver and one of the arresting police officers who gave their description of the scene, but even they couldn't refute Phillips' story. When both sides rested, it didn't take long (18 minutes in fact) for the jury to come to a consensus:

**Jury Frees Man
In Slaying Case**

AMARILLO, Dec. 6.—(AP)—A jury deliberated only 18 minutes today before acquitting Alex Phillips of a charge of murdering Olen "Cotton" Wilson in the back room of a bar here Sept. 19. Phillips testified he shot Wilson after the latter reached for his pocket and threatened to kill him during an all-night game of "low-ball." Defense witnesses told of Wilson's threats against Phillips and said Wilson had the reputation of being a "dangerous character."

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Alex Phillips had dodged a bullet, but the Sportsman's Club wouldn't be so lucky. Publicity of its notoriety prompted a city wide crackdown on Amarillo gambling and in October 1947, four bars were raided and cited with allowing gambling on the premises. Along with the Sportsman's Club were the Crown Recreation, Mint Bar and Rex Bar.

The Sportsman's Club owners decided to step down from management instead of going to court and the charges were dismissed. The reprieve would be short lived however as one month later gambling was still evident at the Sportsman's Club and it was branded as a "public nuisance." This time, not only was the club's new management included in the indictments, but the building's landlords were also added. This didn't sit well with one of the landlords, who just so happened to be a former district judge, and steps were taken to end the club's illegal activities. The backroom was sealed off from the rest of the club and rented out for storage and the club's owners were forced to sign a contract stating that any violations of the law would lead to an immediate termination of their lease. As 1948 wrapped up, gambling at the club had appeared to end.

Although gambling may have ended at the Sportsman's Club, Alex Phillips was far from finished. He continued plying his skills in Amarillo for the next three decades. In 1962 he was involved in another shootout and once again he was on the right side of both the bullets and the courts. This time, a trucker, with a wad of money intended for investing in property, was sidetracked by Phillips into a poker game. In the end, the truck driver was dead and the money mysterious missing.

He would take a few more hits in the 1960s and early 1970s for gambling and bookmaking. His last bust involved a 1974 citywide crackdown on bookmakers that resulted from fourteen months of undercover work. Phillips was taken from his home, along with all the evidence needed for a proper prosecution. But again, somehow, Phillips beat the wrap and was acquitted of the crime.

Now in his 60s, and no doubt tired from the hustle, Phillips fades from the scene.

The "SC" chips were only used for a few years at the Sportsman's Club, but no doubt they would have many stories to tell about good old Alex Phillips and the gun slinging days in Amarillo, Texas.