

This morning's mini-IOTD is in celebration of America's great showing in the 2016 Summer Olympics and the reason I chose this one should be self-explanatory.

I've had this chip for a while now, and my efforts into what the monogram meant had stumped me until recently. More of that later, let's set it up.



Obverse

Reverse

Ordered by:

Albert Phelps

Ekalaka, MT

Four colors of 100 each spanning two ordered in 1953 and 1955

Never heard of great town of Ekalaka? I have no doubt.

Located on Montana's most southeastern corner, Ekalaka today is what you would call a small one-horse town. You could distribute one of the 400 chips ordered to each man, woman and child in town and still have a box left over for yourself.



As you may have guessed, the name Ekalaka comes from Native American origins. A young 16 year old Sioux girl named Ijkalaka (meaning “restless”) caught the eye of a wandering frontiersman and their marital union gave him good reason to settle down and found the town he would name after her.

Ekalaka got a good start in 1885 when a traveler on his way west to open a saloon got bogged down in the mud within the city limits. Frustrated with his slow progress, he is reported as saying, “Anyplace in Montana is a good place to open a saloon” and did just that. The town of Ekalaka was officially open for business.

Unfortunately, if you thought this would now take off into a story of vice and corruption (as so many of these IOTD do), you would be wrong. As with many chips, the true story of their history will probably forever live in the shadows.

My initial research into Albert Phelps in Ekalaka came up with a big nothing. I assumed it was a busted dead end and put the chip away. However, the chip’s history was resurrected again recently, ironically as a result of a death.

In June 2015, the passing of a 98 year old Idaho woman named Roberta Flasted gave the key of unlocking the initials on the chips. The name “Flasted” was from her second marriage, later in life. What interested me was her first marriage.

From Roberta Flasted’s obituary, “On Feb 26, 1935, she married Albert Phelps. The couple operated the CY Saddle Shop in Ekalaka.” With those two sentences we are able to tie both the name “Phelps” and “CY” from the chip.

It just goes to prove that even if you come up empty with a research project, it is always good to come back now and again to see if anything new is available.

Now what to make of these chips? At first you’d think they were personals made for home use. After all, what would a saddle shop owner be doing with an illegal gambling operation? But if they are personals, why the “CY” on the reverse? I then thought maybe they were promotional chips for his business. But that really doesn’t make much sense either. In such a small town, where surely everyone knows everyone else, why would there be a need of such marketing? And why would a poker chip be used for that advertising? No, that doesn’t make sense to me.

I have to believe these were used for gambling. Perhaps they were Phelps’ personal chips used in a friendly game, or maybe, just maybe, he pulled these out for something a little more notorious. I imagine a group of cowboys, fresh off being paid their weekly wages, finding a game in the back of the CY Saddle Shop. “Check your pistols at the door boys and grab a whiskey. It’s time to play poker!”

Is this reality? Who knows – and we probably never will know for sure. And maybe it's better that way. I'd much rather "believe" that they were used by rip-roaring carousing cowboys than "know" they were used in a boring home game with a saddle shop owner and his neighbors.

Sometimes a little mystery is a good thing.

Congratulation to the United States for their incredible showing in this year's Olympics and a special kudos to America's number one decorated athlete to whom this IOTD is dedicated to.

*** Phelps animation ***

