

Poker Night



When the chips were down, Helen Levitt and James Agee played cards. The story of a poker game that has lasted almost fifty years.

Text by Thomas Roma

*Photographs by
Helen Levitt and
Joan Liftin*



If you've never played low-stakes poker, it might be hard to understand the attraction, let alone the devotion, people have to a regular game. We meet every two weeks. High card deals first. The dealer antes for the table. We play mostly five- and seven-card high-low, some stud and draw, but it's dealer's choice. The white chips are worth a nickel, the red a dime, and the blue a quarter. The bet is a nickel till a pair is showing, a dime thereafter until the penultimate and last cards where it's a quarter, except in stud and draw, where it's fifty cents at any time. Three raises max. Oh, and we check and raise—I learned that the hard way. Chitchat is frowned upon until the break, which lasts until those anxious to get out of a hole remind the rest of us that we are there to play poker. A big

THIS PAGE: (top) Mia and John Agee.
(bottom) James Agee and Willy Poster.

OPPOSITE: (top) Willy Poster and Mia Agee.
(bottom) Connie Poster and James Agee.
Photographs by Helen Levitt, circa 1954.

winner might go home ten or twelve dollars ahead, a loser could be seven or eight lighter. I always sit in the same place, not quite the head of the table but slightly to the right where my legs have to straddle a table leg. From there I can see everything without turning my head at all—in my mind a small tactical advantage.

The writer James Agee started our game in the early 1950s with a group that included his wife, Mia, who was a researcher at *Time* magazine, Connie and Willy Poster, who were writers, the photographer and filmmaker Helen Levitt, and her friend Charlie King, a social worker whom she met while filming *The Quiet One*. Other people would sit in from time to time, mostly writers and editors, but they were the core.

According to Helen and Connie, the original players were all pretty good—except Agee. Connie said that he was “not interested in percentages, he played emotionally, and would chase a bad hand.” Helen more bluntly called him a gambler. Then she said, “He took chances all the time, and he’d usually lose. If he got a good hand, he’d bet it up

high, and when he lost he’d say, ‘There goes my Guggenheim’”—something that he twice applied for and never got. They both called him “a believer in luck.”

I have my wife, Anna, to thank for getting me into the game. Helen Levitt has always been a hero of mine, and about ten years ago Anna thought to surprise me by buying one of her prints for my birthday. Somehow, the subject of poker came up during their meeting, and *Anna mentioned that I played* (and probably exaggerated how well). A few weeks later, Helen called and invited me to the game.

By that time it had become (and still is) Helen’s game, even though we play mostly at Connie Poster’s apartment. I was fortunate to win the first couple of times and kept getting invited back. Not because I was such a good player, but because everyone hates to have money leave the game. Winning is a kind of ransom. That, and because I fit in. Only the people who take the game seriously are invited to play again. You can always tell in advance that

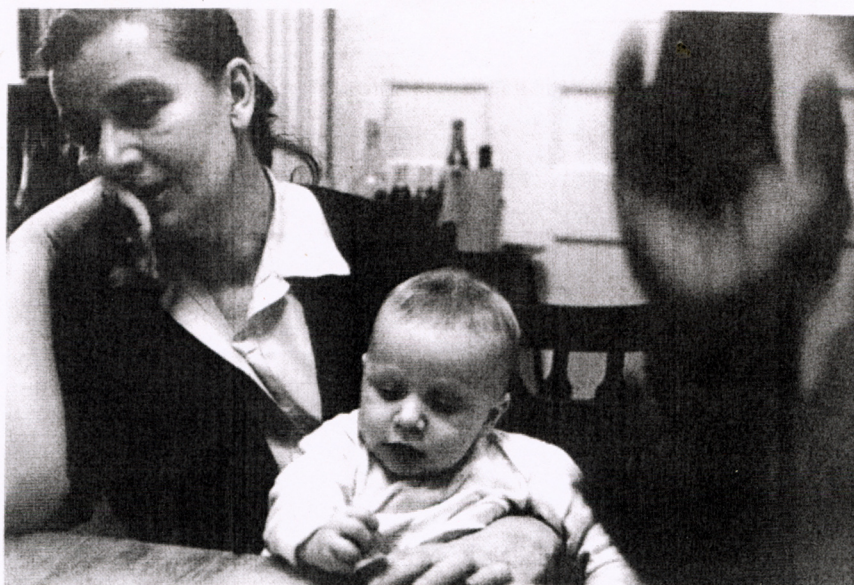
someone isn’t going to work out if they say that they like a low-stakes game because it’s a cheap night out.

We have our regulars (who nowadays are mostly photographers), but once in a while a spot opens because someone is out of town or something like that. Connie makes the calls to put the game together now, so it’s up to her to find the right person to fill in. Although it’s

a friendly game, some of us can be pretty critical, and we can be hard on each other. For instance, if someone folds when they should have stayed in, allowing a pot to be stolen, the disapproval can be felt, if not heard. I’m often reminded of the *Honeymooners* episode where, having misspent his allowance, Ralph is begging Alice for the money to pay his lodge dues—“You don’t understand Alice, those guys

are my friends, my pals, my buddies—they’ll throw me out if I don’t pay my dues.” It would be far easier for me to lose real money in front of strangers than to make a mistake that would cost me a three-dollar pot in front of Helen Levitt or Connie Poster.

When I first came to the game Charlie King was still in it. Playing with Charlie was like being taken to ►



RIGHT: Thomas Roma, 1997. Photograph by Joan Liftin.



TOP: (from left) Mike Dilisio, Thomas Roma, Phil Perkis, and Charles Harbutt, 1996.

BOTTOM: (from left) Charles Harbutt, Patricia Scully, and Phil Perkis, 1997. Photographs by Joan Liftin.

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school. He played like an athlete or a chess player who never wasted a move. Now Helen and Connie are the remaining link to the game's beginnings and they're the best players. If one of them is still in the hand after the last bet, chances are one of them will win. Connie plays very aggressively. If she has a chance to win she'll bet the maximum on every card trying to push you out. There's no free ride with her in the game. And Helen's feel for the game can drive you crazy. She knows all the odds and plays the table straight, until—right when you are depending on logic to make her fold—she'll look you in the eye, see your raise, and ruin your whole night.

I sometimes think that we play just to have another way of being reminded of the existence of luck. I remember something that John Szarkowski (who also happens to be a poker player) said to a reporter who was suggesting that luck played an overly important role in a certain photographer's work. He said of course luck plays a role in any photographer's work, but only after they've worked hard enough for luck to be a factor. Considering the odds, that's an idea I find comforting. You make your own luck. ■