

# BEFORE BAKELITE - THE EARLY HISTORY OF KEM CARDS

BY CLAY BOULWARE, 52+J CLUB MEMBER



THE PRINTING PRESS IN ACTION AT THE KEM FACTORY IN POUGHKEEPSIE, NY, CIRCA 1950S.

In 1929, Siegfried Klausner of Vienna, Austria, filed US Patent #1,811,322 for a washable playing card. In 1933, he and his associates partnered with Ely Culbertson, self-promoter extraordinaire, founder and editor of *The Bridge World* magazine and the force behind the meteoric rise of contract bridge in the late 1920s and 1930s. KEM Playing Cards, Inc. was born.

Mr. Culbertson went to work with Western Playing Card Company on the printing process. He worked with plastics companies such as DuPont to refine material and inks. He used his magazine to run ads extolling the revolutionary KEM cards as germproof and stainproof. He and his equally famous bridge partner and wife, Josephine Culbertson, personally endorsed the cards. The cards finally debuted in 1935 in four designs: Gold Band, Mosaic, Club and Cameo. Selling for \$2.50 a pack (about 5 times the cost of a pack of Bicycle poker cards and \$42.50 in today's dollars), the

new KEM cards were playing card luxury. Notices of the new KEM cards appeared in the bridge notes sections of major newspapers. High-end department stores and jewelry stores ran the first newspaper ads mentioning KEM cards. KEM Playing Cards, Inc. distributed the par sheets for the 1936 World Bridge Olympic and included a full page ad for KEM cards in Club, Cameo, Fawn, and Gamecock designs in "washable Neillite cases."

In 1937, Ely Culbertson sold his interest in KEM Playing Cards, Inc. The company changed hands and took the name KEM Card Sales Corporation. New advertising began to appear in the pages of *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. KEM Card Sales Corporation sponsored an exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair ("The World of Tomorrow") showing off their "Playing Card of Tomorrow" with a display "dominated by an illusion of thousands of Kem Playing Cards floating contrary to gravitation, forming patterns and de-

signs similar to fireworks displays,” (*Official Guide Book of the New York World’s Fair 1939*, p.177). The fair ran from April 1939 to October 1939, continuing in April 1940 to October 1940. The company changed its name in late 1939 to KEM Plastic Playing Cards, Inc, and because of that there are some cards from the fair that show KEM Card Sales, Inc. and some from KEM Plastic Playing Cards, Inc

Late 1939 is also around the time of the introduction of the KEM Bakelite case so many people associate with KEM cards today. The company lasted another 60 years, continually introducing new designs. The company was acquired by US Playing Card Corp. in 2004. USPC bought the name and the rights, but did not acquire any of the records of the company.

All information below regarding the cases, boxes and cards comes from contemporary newspaper and magazine advertisements of the day.

For more on Ely Culbertson, see [his Hall of Fame listing at the American Contract Bridge League website](#). For a fascinating exploration of the late 1920s, the rise of contract bridge, and a wife shooting her husband, read *The Devil’s Tickets: A Vengeful Wife, a Fatal Hand, and a New American Age* by Gary Pomerantz.

## The Boxes



When first introduced, KEM cards came in single or double deck wood-and-gold paper drawer boxes. The double deck drawer box disappeared with the introduction of Neillite cases, but single drawer boxes were still in use. The single drawer boxes eventually gave way to single non-drawer boxes. I have one double deck cardboard box with a wood grain pattern that contains a set of decks with a C87 date, but I don’t know if that is the original box or a later one.

## The Cases

KEM Playing Cards, Inc. introduced what would become its signature card holder in late 1935. They were made of Neillite (a plastic similar to Bakelite) by Watertown Manufacturing Co. in Watertown, Conn. Some of the cases have the Watertown logo imprinted in the inside of the case. The case is black, and the top of the case was

LEFT: THE FIRST KEM BOX DESIGN - A DOUBLE-DECK DRAWER BOX.

BELOW: I. MAGNIN & CO. AD FOR KEM CARDS PRINTED IN THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, MAY 10TH, 1935.

**I. MAGNIN & CO.**

*“KEM”*

*the last word  
in new, finer  
bridge cards*

—and the first word,  
in a hundred years  
or so, of positive ad-  
vancement in the  
quality and durabil-  
ity of playing cards

*Endorsed by*  
**The Culbertson’s**

Ely Culbertson worked with  
a Viennese scientist to perfect  
these cards which can not  
be torn, crimped, marked or  
mussed with ordinary usage—  
and will outlast, per deck, fully  
\$10 worth of the best paper  
playing cards

*Mrs. Culbertson says: “All my  
friends agree a smart hostess  
can not be without these  
wonderful Kem cards—after  
months of play they are im-  
maculate and superior to the  
finest new paper decks.”*

**2.50**  
*the deck, in  
three designs,  
giftily boxed.*

*Orders Taken at  
Hollywood Shop Only*



designed with a sticker set in a circle in the middle of an elongated “KEM.” The sticker had the KEM Ace of Spades design and the name of the deck in the case. The second version of the Neillite case, introduced around 1937, had a silver emblem in the circle on the top of the case with an image mirroring the deck design in the case. The next change was to remove the individualized case tops for a top with just a circle with the outline of a spade. That was the last version of the Neillite cases, and around 1940 KEM switched to Bakelite cases with just the elongated KEM on top. KEM also produced an ivory version of the spade in circle Neillite case and regular Bakelite cases around 1939-1940.

LEFT COLUMN, FROM TOP - THE FIRST NEILLITE CASE DESIGN, SEEN FROM THE TOP, THE BOTTOM OF THE FIRST NEILLITE CASE DESIGN, THE SECOND NEILLITE CASE DESIGN.

RIGHT COLUMN, FROM TOP : THE TOP OF THE THIRD NEILLITE CASE DESIGN, THE BOTTOM OF THE THIRD NEILLITE CASE DESIGN, THE CARDBOARD BOX ISSUED DURING WORLD WAR II.

KEM produced a cardboard version of its upright case during WWII. This case included an “IMPORTANT NOTICE” paper insert explaining that “Due to wartime conditions, the supply of Kem Cards is limited.”

## The Clamshells



ABOVE: THE KEM STREAMLINE CLAMSHELL BOXES, CLOSED AND OPEN WITH DECKS.

In 1938, KEM introduced their Streamline cards. These cards were a bit narrower than bridge size, and they were advertised as being “easier to hold, easier to sort and easier to see.” The Streamline cards came in a corrugated plastic clamshell gift box. In the next five or six years, KEM introduced at least six other clamshell box designs: a cardboard and cork model for Streamline cards; moiré lined metal clamshells in black; white; green and black stripes; and red and black stripes; a cardboard brown with white sides KEM Elite box; and a black and gold metal box.

## The Cards

KEM cards are made of cellulose acetate, a kind of plastic. They were advertised as lasting for 600 rubbers of bridge. Because of the material, one can find 70-75 year old decks that you can still put to use in your neighborhood poker game, as long as they don't mind playing with bridge size cards. The cards are standard court cards with the only custom cards being the KEM Ace of Spades and KEM joker.

Some of my earliest cards from KEM Playing Cards, Inc. exhibit ink bleed, where the red ink on the face of the card has soaked through the card and can be seen on the card back. There is mention in the advertising and 1940 KEM booklet of improvements to KEM cards, and I can guess that this was one of the issues they addressed.

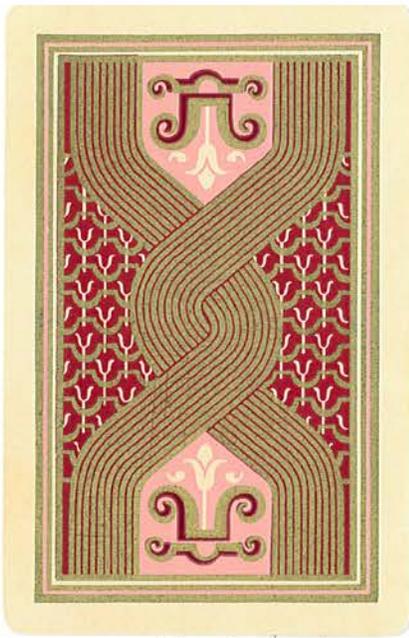
From 1935 - 1942, KEM issued the following card backs, listed in order of introduction as determined by appearance in advertising:

- Gold Band, Mosaic, Cameo and Club
- Gamecock
- Fawn
- Seascape
- Adventure
- Pinochle
- La Paloma
- Duchess
- Streamline
- 1939 World's Fair - Trylon and Perisphere
- Poker, Unicorn (I've never seen an image of these, just one reference)
- Starlight, Yacht Club, Plumes, Stratosphere, Nite and Day
- The Dance (or Dance)
- Regency, Carnation
- Kent
- Clipper

## The Dating

Dating a deck of KEM cards is pretty straightforward. The earliest decks of KEM cards are distinctive in that the only writing on the Ace of Spades is “KEM PLAYING CARDS” - no copyright date, no name of the company. The next sets of decks added “KEM PLAYING CARDS INC.” and a 1935 copyright date on the Ace of Spades. Starting sometime in 1937, KEM began to place a date code on the Ace of Spades showing the month and year of manufacture. After the change of company ownership in the same year, the cards showed “KEM CARD SALES CORP” and continued the same month/year date code. In late 1939, the company name was changed to “KEM PLASTIC PLAYING CARDS, INC.” and continued the same date code system. Some of the codes contain a letter before the numbers, but I haven't been able to determine if there is any significance given to the letter. A few decks from this era have a letter with no number. That complicates exact dating, but I've only seen this on late KEM Playing Cards Inc. and KEM Card Sales Corp. decks, so that narrows the dating down to a two year window from 1937 to 1939.

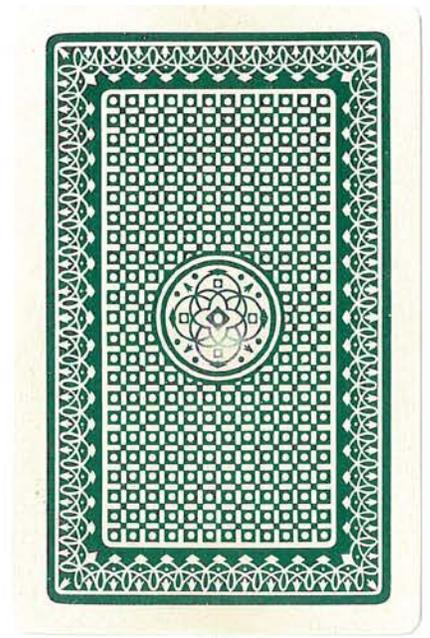
*Special Thanks to American Contract Bridge League, especially Tracey Yarbo at The Albert Morehead Memorial Library - the largest non-private bridge library in the world dedicated to bridge. For more information, please visit [the official ACBL website](#).*



Gold Band



Cameo



Club



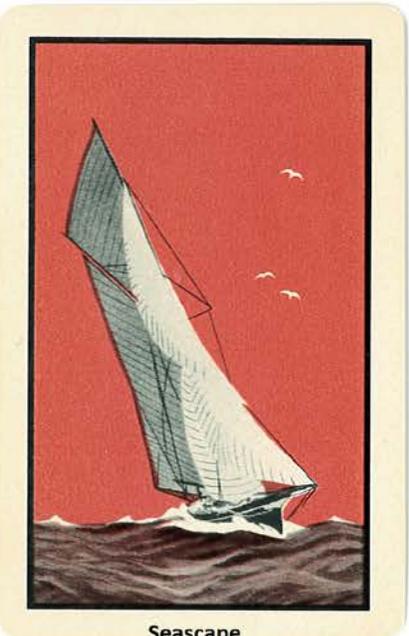
Gamecock



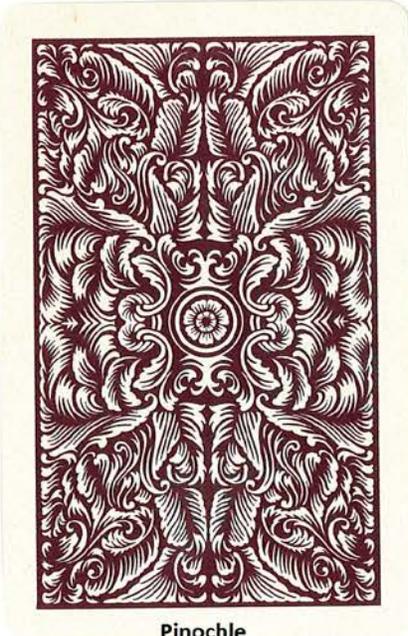
Gamecock



Fawn



Seascape



Pinochle



Duchess



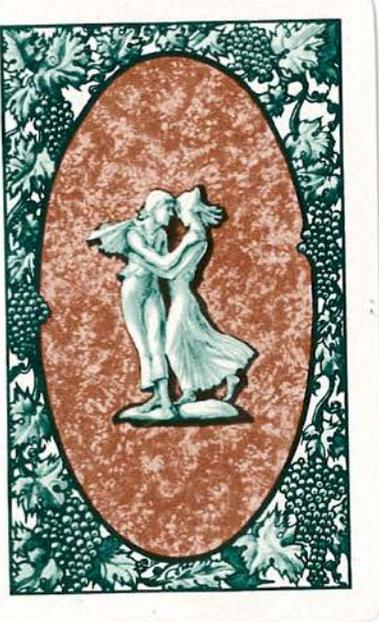
Streamline



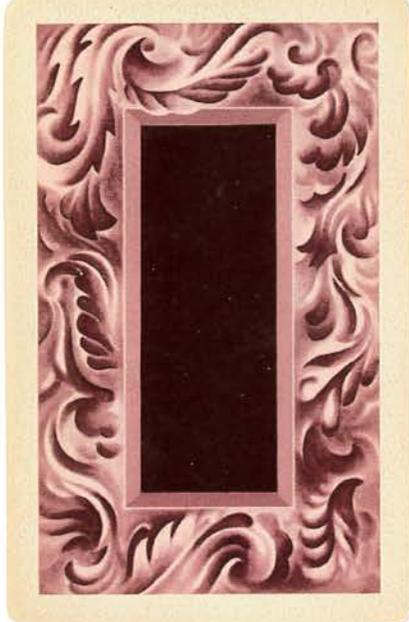
Starlight



Stratosphere



The Dance



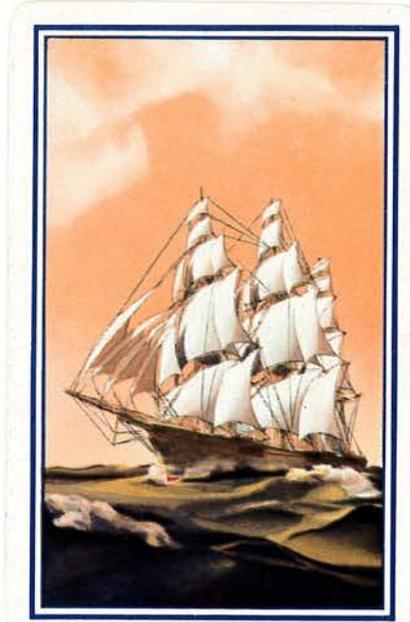
Regency



Carnation



Kent

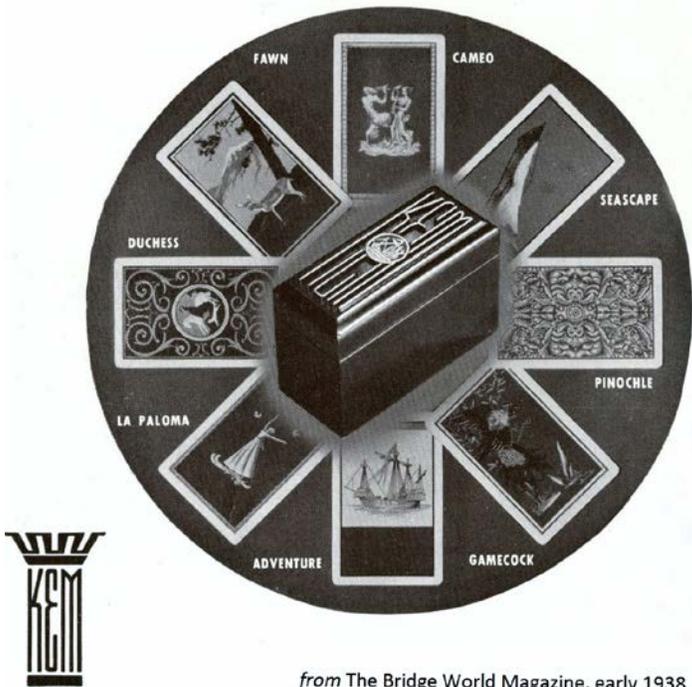
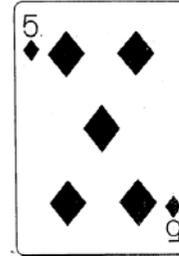


Clilpper

TWO-PAGE SPREAD:  
A VARIETY OF THE  
EARLIEST KEM BACKS,  
CIRCA 1935-1942.



June 23, 1931. S. KLAUSNER ET AL 1,811,322  
 OPAQUE WASHABLE PLAYING CARD AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURING SAME  
 Filed Jan. 11, 1929



from The Bridge World Magazine, early 1938

*Inventors*  
 Siegfried Klausner, Arthur E. Langford, Robert K. Kuhn  
 by Spence, W. Middleton, Donaldson & Helms  
 Attys.



TOP LEFT: A VINTAGE KEM LA PALOMA DECK OFFERED ON EBAY.

CENTER LEFT: KEM AD FROM THE BRIDGE WORLD MAGAZINE, 1938.

BOTTOM LEFT: AN EARLY KEM AD CARD, A KEM AD CARD FROM A 1939 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR DECK.

BOTTOM RIGHT: SIDE-BY-SIDE SCALE COMPARISON OF THE FIRST KEM ACE OF SPADES WITH THE STREAMLINE KEM ACE OF SPADES.

**KEM**

This Is a  
**KEM**  
Card

The Most Economical  
"The Finest Playing Card  
in the World"

They are made of a scientific  
plastic material — which makes  
them durable — flexible and easy  
to handle.

They stay clean and fresh even  
after hundreds of games. If they  
become soiled, they can be easily  
cleaned.

One deck of Kem Cards will out-  
wear ten dollars worth of ordinary  
paper cards.

Kem Cards are not expensive  
but are a real economy.

For sale at all stores, or  
**KEM CARD**  
**SALES CORPORATION**  
330 West 42nd St.  
NEW YORK

New York World's Fair  
1939

This Is a **KEM** Card  
THE PLAYING CARD  
OF TOMORROW

"The Finest and Most Economical  
Playing Card in the World"

Kems are not made of paper,  
but of a plastic material. They  
are durable, flexible, and water-  
proof.

Kems stay clean and fresh  
through hundreds of games. If  
they become soiled — they are  
washable. They are germ-proof  
and therefore highly sanitary.

One set of Kem Cards will out-  
last \$30 worth of ordinary paper  
cards.

**KEM PLASTIC**  
**PLAYING CARDS, Inc.**  
330 W. 42nd St.  
NEW YORK

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE

SIEGFRIED KLAUSNER, OF VIENNA, AUSTRIA, AND ARTHUR EICHENGRÜN, OF CHARLOTTENBURG, AND RICHARD RÖHM, OF TROISDORF, NEAR COLOGNE, GERMANY

OPAQUE WASHABLE PLAYING CARD AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURING SAME

Application filed January 11, 1929, Serial No. 331,946, and in Germany January 16, 1928.

This invention relates to opaque washable playing cards and to methods of manufacturing same.

A great variety of proposals have already been made to replace the white or light colored cardboard from which playing cards are usually manufactured by an unsoilable or washable material. However, no one has yet succeeded in producing a practicable substitute for this purpose, because the requisite materials such for example, as thin metal sheets, impregnated or varnished papers, dressed fabrics or the like differ too much in character from the usual cardboard playing cards. The best results have hitherto been obtained by using thin sheets of celluloid or analogous materials containing a large proportion of white or light-coloured mineral powders, and closely resembling cardboard playing cards in their external appearance. In spite of numerous attempts, however, these celluloid playing cards have not been commercially successful because they did not fulfill the most important requirement, namely preventing the markings on the cards from showing through. It has hitherto been impossible to make any card of celluloid or similar artificial substances, without such card being highly permeable to light rays, and revealing the markings on the card immediately, or at least in the event of a source of light being present in the vicinity of the player, that is to say, when striking a match or when switching-on a table lamp. This was due to the fact that the celluloid-like compositions were incapable of taking up more than a certain amount of filling ingredients and that any excess involved the loss of strength, the material becoming brittle or easily tearable. On the other hand, the usual pigments, such as zinc white, lithopone, calcspar, talc, magnesium carbonate and the like, do not possess sufficient covering power. Whereas there is no difficulty in rendering plates of a thickness of one or more millimetres completely opaque it is impossible, with the usual filling materials, to impart opacity to sheets of a thickness of a quarter of a millimetre, such as required for the manufacture of playing cards. Even

sheets which contain 50% or more of their weight of zinc white are permeable to light when they are held up against a source of illumination, and thus render the markings on a card recognizable.

It has now been ascertained that this permeability to light can be obviated by employing as pigments, mineral powders of low specific gravity, which are very voluminous and therefore have a high covering power in association with powders of higher specific gravity which, in general, do not have sufficient covering power or which cannot be incorporated with the celluloid-like materials in sufficient amounts. Such mineral powders comprise for example, bismuth oxychloride, bismuth sub-nitrate, antimony oxide, mercurous chloride, titanium oxide, zinc sulphide, and the like. Certain quantities of such pigments can be added to the usual filling ingredients without altering the properties of these latter in other respects and particularly without increasing their brittleness; and in this manner, an astonishingly high covering power is obtained. Thus for example, sheets 0.25 to 0.3 mm. thick can be made by known methods, from nitro-cellulose, cellulose acetate, alkyl cellulose, alkyl-cellulose acetate and similar paste compositions, by the addition of a mixture of 4 parts of zinc white and 1 part of titanium white; and such sheets will no longer allow light to pass through even from a strong source of illumination.

By adding other mineral pigments, or also soluble colouring matters, these card blanks can be coloured as desired, in lighter or darker tones; they can be easily printed without any need for fixing the impression by subsequent varnishing, and the resulting cards are very difficult to distinguish from those printed on cardboard. They are as opaque as the latter, but are superior in respect of strength (especially resistance to creasing); moreover they are impervious to water and dirt and have the advantage of being less easily torn or buckled.

The surface of the card blanks produced in this manner is preferably rendered matt

2

1,811,322

before printing, whereby it takes the printing inks far better, and readily enables multi-colour impressions to be obtained by the offset process, in power presses.

After printing, the matt surface may, if desired, be made semi-glossy or highly glazed by calendering, or with the aid of a surfacing press, or in any other way.

The accompanying drawing illustrates a playing card made from a blank prepared in accordance with the present invention.

We claim:-

1. An opaque washable playing card blank consisting of a sheet of cellulose derivative composition of a thickness of below about 0.35 mm. with which has been incorporated a mixture of powdered mineral filler of low specific gravity and high covering power and a powdered mineral filler of high specific gravity and low covering power.

2. An opaque washable playing card blank consisting of a sheet of cellulose derivative composition of a thickness of below about 0.35 mm. with which has been incorporated a mixture of powdered zinc white and a less quantity of powdered titanium white.

3. An opaque washable playing card blank consisting of a sheet of cellulose derivative composition of a thickness of below about 0.35 mm. with which has been incorporated a mixture of the order of 4 parts of powdered zinc white and 1 part of powdered titanium white.

4. An opaque washable playing card blank consisting of a sheet of cellulose derivative composition of a thickness of below about 0.35 mm. with which has been incorporated a mixture of powdered mineral filler of low specific gravity and high covering power and a less quantity of a powdered mineral filler of high specific gravity and low covering power.

In testimony whereof we affix our signatures.

SIEGFRIED KLAUSNER. ARTHUR EICHENGRÜN. RICHARD RÖHM.

50

LEFT (INCLUDING PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP RIGHT): THE THREE-PAGE APPLICATION TO THE U.S. PATENT OFFICE FOR THE INVENTION OF KEM PLAYING CARDS, FILED JAN. 11, 1929, PATENT #1,811,322 GRANTED JUNE 23, 1931.

BOTTOM LEFT: AD CARD FEATURING JOSEPHINE CULBERTSON

BOTTOM RIGHT: EVOLUTION OF THE EARLY KEM ACE OF SPADES DESIGN, IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP ROW TO BOTTOM ROW.

Advertisement for Kem playing cards featuring a portrait of Josephine Culbertson and a testimonial. The testimonial reads: "All my friends agree enthusiastically that a smart hostess can not be without these wonderful Kem cards. Even after months of play they are immaculate and are in all respects superior to the finest new paper decks. By using the Kem cards I have already saved seventy-five per cent. of my playing card expenditures." The signature "Josephine Culbertson" is written in cursive at the bottom.

