

Turning Tricks

The rise and fall of contract bridge.

by [David Owen](#) September 17, 2007



In the nineteen-forties, bridge was played in two-fifths of American homes, but its complexity may be a barrier to a modern resurgence.

When I was in ninth grade, back in 1970, we finished our geometry textbook six weeks before the end of the school year and spent the final grading period studying our math teacher's principal extracurricular passion, which was bridge. He gave us quizzes on the Goren bidding system, and we got so hooked that we often dealt quick hands in the halls, between classes. We played on weekends, too, sometimes at tables wreathed in marijuana smoke. Our teacher told us that we would love playing in college, as he (and most of our parents) had, but by the time I got there, in 1973, nobody seemed to know anything about it. I didn't play again until five or six years ago, when, during a

family vacation, I was reintroduced by my brother-in-law, who had begun taking lessons as part of his midlife crisis. Now it's the main thing I think about when I'm not thinking about golf.

A passion for bridge is hard to explain to someone who doesn't share it. One attraction is the sense of endlessly unfolding complexity: the more you learn, the less you feel you know. Computers have been able to beat the world's best chess players for a decade, but—as Edward McPherson writes in a lively, somewhat haphazard new book, “The Backwash Squeeze & Other Improbable Feats: A Newcomer's Journey Into the World of Bridge” (HarperCollins; \$23.95)—they “still stink at bridge.” There are 635,013,559,600 possible bridge hands, and a vast catalogue of approaches and techniques and stratagems for playing them. (A backwash squeeze, by the way, is an obscure offensive tactic whereby a player, facing a certain arrangement of cards, forces an opponent to make a certain kind of self-defeating discard.) The best players are able to visualize their opponents' hands after just a few cards have been played and to imagine strategies that would never occur to the less skillful, yet even they find the game inexhaustible. One player told McPherson, “For people who enjoy puzzles, this is one they will never solve.”

As fascinating as all this is to veterans, it hasn't done much to rev up the young. Recently, I competed in a regional tournament conducted under the auspices of the American Contract Bridge League, the game's governing body in North America. There were separate games open only to players aged fifty-five and older—superfluously, since the vast majority of the tournament's entrants were old enough to play in either division. I'm fifty-two, and I'm almost

certain that in six half-day sessions I never sat at a table with anyone younger, even though I was playing in games intended for relative beginners. Bridge has beneficially expanded my acquaintance with charming, intelligent widows in their seventies and eighties, but I selfishly wonder what I'll do for partners when I'm the age they are now.

People who worry about the future of bridge don't know what to make of the sudden popularity of the poker game Texas hold'em. (McPherson calls poker "the elephant in the bridge club.") Is it good for bridge because it's a card game and young people like it? Or is it bad for bridge because it's simplistic and you can watch it on ESPN? McPherson's teacher, the owner of a bridge club in Manhattan, told him, "You know, it takes thirty minutes to teach Texas hold'em, and in an hour you can be as good as fifty percent of the people playing the game. That would take years of study in bridge." The teacher meant this as a recommendation for bridge; nevertheless, he also told McPherson, "Why don't you do a book about something people actually want to know about, like poker?"



*"You take small bites out of life,
Howard, and chew thoroughly."*

Bridge players haven't always been racked by self-doubt. The game evolved from the British card game whist, which enjoyed tremendous popularity for at least a couple of centuries. (People who stick to the rules in all sorts of pursuits are said to behave "according to Hoyle," because, in 1742, an Englishman named Edmond Hoyle published a popular pamphlet on whist.) Whist, which retains a diehard following today, is a trick-taking game for four people, who play as two partnerships. In its basic form—there are many variants—the entire deck is dealt out, face down except for the last card, whose suit is designated trump. The player to the left of the dealer begins the play by

laying down any card, and the three other players lay down cards in succession, following suit if possible, and otherwise discarding an unpromising card or playing a trump. Each four-card trick is taken by the highest card in the suit led, or else by the highest trump. This sounds easy, but it lends itself to thought-provoking complication. Edgar Allan Poe, the great ratiocinator, viewed a passion for whist as a sign of mental acumen; the opening pages of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" are almost a stand-alone essay on the game's superiority to chess:

Whist has long been known for its influence upon what is termed the calculating power; and men of the highest order of intellect have been known to take an apparently unaccountable delight in it, while eschewing chess as frivolous. . . . The best chess-player in Christendom may be little more than the best player of chess; but proficiency in whist implies a capacity for success in all those more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind.

Bridge began to separate itself from whist in the late nineteenth century. The origin of the name is disputed; it may have been adapted from that of the Russian card game *biritch*, which was also known as Russian whist. Bridge differs from basic whist primarily in that each hand begins with an auction to determine the number of tricks that the highest bidder in the auction must take and which suit, if any, will be trump; also, one of the four hands, called the dummy, is turned face up after the first card has been played. The modern version, contract bridge, was created in 1925 by the railroad heir and master yachtsman Harold Stirling Vanderbilt, who had been annoyed by what he felt were deficiencies in the previous version, auction bridge. Vanderbilt was a passenger on a ship that was travelling from Los Angeles to Havana by way of the Panama Canal, and on the evening of October 31st, while playing with three friends, he introduced several improvements that he'd been mulling over, including a method of scoring that required players to more accurately assess, during the bidding, the number of tricks they would take, a prediction known as a contract. Vanderbilt shared his ideas with a few other friends in Newport and New York, and his game spread across the country and around the world at almost unbelievable speed. "Half a year after Vanderbilt's voyage," McPherson writes, "a notice appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* announcing that a Chicago woman was suing her husband for divorce on the inexcusable grounds that he trumped her ace." Four years later, in Kansas City, another aggrieved bridge-playing wife, Myrtle Bennett, shot her husband to death shortly after he failed in his attempt to make a contract of four spades. At her trial, Myrtle was represented by James A. Reed, a former Kansas City mayor and United States senator. Remarkably, she was acquitted, and is said to have collected on her husband's thirty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy. After reconstructing the final deal, the bridge expert Ely Culbertson concluded that Mr. Bennett could have made the fateful four-spade contract after all.

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