

Origins and history of Bridge

Adapted from an article in ACBL publication

Bridge can trace its ancestry at least to the early 16th century in England (first reference 1529 in a published sermon by Bishop Latimer) and through succeeding centuries when prototype forms of whist were played under such names as triumph, trump, ruff, slam, ruff and honors, whisk and swabbers, whisk, and whist. Whist may have referred to the rapid action of sweeping up the cards after winning a trick, or whist to a call for silence. The game was popular under its modern name of whist by the middle of the 17th century, but it was not until 1742 that the first book devoted to whist appeared: Edmond Hoyle's famous *Short Treatise on Whist*. This rapidly became a best seller, and many pirated editions appeared immediately afterwards.

Whist maintained its popularity as a fashionable amusement, and in 1834 Lord Henry Bentinck invented the first signal. This was the forerunner of much research and writing by authorities on the game such as James Clay, Cavendish, Deschappelles and many others.

The first game of duplicate whist was apparently played in London in 1857 under Cavendish¹'s direction. It was intended to demonstrate the advantage accruing to skilful play, and a team of supposedly good players was deliberately pitted against supposedly poor opposition (there having been no previous criterion for judging them). The good players won easily. Cavendish observed that this procedure all but eliminated the luck of the deal, but his pioneering effort was not followed for nearly a quarter of a century.

The United States was slightly ahead of England in extending the duplicate method. A duplicate whist game was played privately in Chicago in 1880 and in a club in New Orleans in 1882. The first interclub match was played in Philadelphia in 1883. The first duplicate match in the Old World was probably in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1888.

Duplicate offered the possibility of replacing private play by public contest. Major steps forward in 1891 were: the foundation of the American Whist League; the invention of the Kalamazoo tray (first duplicate board); and the first book on tournament organization, written by John T. Mitchell who devised the first movement for pair play and described the method of match pointing which has been used ever since.

Although the American Whist League was to flourish for some 40 years, bridge, the game that eventually led to its decline and fall, had come on the American scene early in the 1890s, at about the

time it was also introduced in England. As chronicled by J. B. Elwell and R. F. Foster, the game reached New York in 1893, thanks to Henry Barbey, whose privately printed *Laws of Bridge* are dated 1892. In London, members of the Portland Club began to play bridge in 1894 at the instance of Lord Brougham who had learned it in India from some army officers. (W. Dalton in *Auction Bridge Magazine* of September 1927 states that Lord Brougham brought the game from Cairo.) But, according to a letter published in *Bridge Magazine* in 1932, Frank J. Nathan had played in the first English game in 1892 at St. George's Club, Hanover Square. It was introduced by a Colonel Studdy who said it was of Levantine origin and that he had learned it in the trenches at Plevna during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. (This was probably Col. T.C.J.A. Studdy of the Royal Artillery, who was a Captain in the Crimean War period.)

This earlier dating of the game and the probability that it was of Turkish or Russian origin is strongly supported by evidence uncovered in 1974-1975 by Robert H. True, who quotes from a 1904 issue of *Notes and Queries*, a letter from A. M. Keiley (nationality unknown): I was in 1886 a member of the Khedival Club in Cairo, and bridge was the principal card game played there at my entry and, as members told me, had long so been. One of the names by which bridge was first known on the Riviera was Khedive, presumably because players had met it in Cairo. Turkey held Egypt almost without interruption from the early 16th century until World War I and Khedive was the official title held by the Turkish viceroy.

Further new evidence confirming Levantine origin and earlier dating of the game was presented by Bob van de Velde of The Netherlands in *IBPA Bulletin* No:222. Sources for this evidence are *Daily Telegraph* (England, November 1932), *La revue du bridge* (France, December 1932) and *Bridge* (The Netherlands, February 1933). The primary source, *Daily Telegraph*, carried an article by a Mr. O. H. van Millingen who lived in Constantinople in 1879 or 1880 and remembered a very interesting game called Britch, a game that became very popular in all clubs and dethroned the game of whist. He included a letter, dated January 7, 1922, of his friend Edouard Graziani who at that time worked for the Italian Embassy as a translator and was one of the best Bridge players of the Cercle d'1Orient. In August 1873 Graziani played the game of bridge for the first time at the home of Mr. Georges Coronio, manager of the Bank of Constantinople. Also present at that game in Buyukdere along the bank of the Upper Bosphorus were Mr. Eustache Eugenidi and a Mr. Serghiadi, a Rumanian financier who taught the principles of bridge to the foursome. After Constantinople, Graziani wrote, bridge came first to Cairo, from where it conquered the Riviera, Paris, London and then New York.

A claim of even earlier existence of the game appears in the introduction to *Modern Bridge* by Slam published in London in 1901: Bridge, known in Turkey as CE Britch, has been played in South-Eastern Europe ever since the early sixties. Now we have, perhaps, a quantum leap backward to the period 1854-56. An Istanbul resident, Metin Demirsar, reports the following: As part of a course on Ottoman

history and architecture my guide mentioned that British soldiers invented the game bridge while serving in the Crimean War. The card game got its name from the Galata Bridge, a bridge spanning the Golden Horn and linking the old and new parts of European Istanbul, where they apparently crossed every day to go to a coffeehouse to play cards.

This does suggest a more plausible derivation for the name of the game than any previously offered. It is somewhat puzzling to comprehend why the game did not appear in England earlier than it did. Perhaps its creators were killed at Balaklava or Inkerman but their brainchild continued in action at the Bridge club. Mrs. Marion Harding of the National Army Museum in London confirms that there was a considerable British presence (some 14,000 troops) concentrated around Constantinople in 1854, and a number of officers were there for considerable periods. There is an even earlier date. Sir James Paget, an English doctor, referred to playing Bridge in an 1843 letter, but that is a very faint clue. It is not even clear that he was playing a card game.

The modern authority in this area is Thierry Depaulis of Paris, France. In his comprehensive *Histoire du Bridge* he concluded that bridge developed in the diplomatic community in Istanbul. He connected it with a Serbo-Croatian word *Cebrc*, meaning large quantity, maximum. He subsequently modified his views, connecting the game to Russia where it was called *sibirskii ieralash*, or Siberian mixture. He believes it belonged, like Vint, to the wide family of whist-preference games. It came to Istanbul about 1860-65 and changed its name to something that sounded like british, britch or biritch. The British Museum has an 1886 pamphlet entitled *Biritch or Russian Whist*. The word itself may be Serbo-Croatian or Ukrainian. The game is likely to have been spread by wealthy Greeks who travelled to Russia and Turkey and helped introduce it to Western Europe. An important change from whist was the exposure of one hand (dealer's partner) as the dummy, following the precedent of Dummy Whist, originated as a game for three players. According to one popular theory, this idea evolved from a game played first in India by three British officers so isolated they were unable to find a fourth.

Another innovation was the introduction of the double and redouble. There was no limit to the number of redoubles, and this gambling feature of the new game, soon to be eliminated by the change to Auction Bridge, was one of the strong arguments against bridge adduced by whist devotees. The prototypical game of bridge, or bridge whist, had a short life. A great step forward was taken in 1904, when the auction principle was introduced, traditionally in India, possibly in England. Auction bridge grew steadily in popularity until 1927, though only toward the end of this period were auction bridge tournaments organized. For some reason it was believed that the duplicate principle, long popular among whist players, was not suitable for bridge.

The next major change may have been developed in France, where the game of *Plafond* was played in 1918 and perhaps earlier. A similar game, *S.A.C.C.*, was described by Sir Hugh Clayton as having been invented in India in 1912 and similar games had been tried in the United States before 1915. In all

such games each side had to bid to its plafond or ceiling: only tricks bid and made counted toward game. This variation rapidly became the standard French game, but did not succeed elsewhere in spite of occasional experiments. In his slightly fictionalized memoirs of World War I entitled *Ashenden*, Somerset Maugham, who took bridge very seriously, reported a game in Switzerland: The game was contract, with which I was not very familiar. In the early Twenties, two booklets entitled *Contract Bridge* were published, and an unsuccessful application was made to the Knickerbocker Club to prepare a code of contract rules.

Up to this point whist, bridge, auction, and plafond had simply grown, which is generally the way with card games. No individual can be given credit for inventing the dummy, the idea of bidding, the auction principle, or the ceiling principle of plafond. But in 1925 Harold S. Vanderbilt perfected a new form of the game, embodying the Plafond principle but including the element of vulnerability and producing a scoring table that corrected the major faults in plafond. He succeeded so well that his game of contract bridge became the staple diet of card players everywhere.

Afterward, he wrote:

"Many years of experience playing games of the Whist family were, I think, a necessary prelude to acquiring the background and knowledge needed to evolve the game of Contract Bridge. Starting as a young boy about 70 years ago, I have played successively over the years Whist, Bridge, Auction Bridge, and Plafond."

"I compiled in the autumn of 1925 a scoring table for my new game. I called it Contract Bridge and incorporated in it, not only the best features of Auction and Plafond, but also a number of new and exciting features; premiums for slams bid and made, vulnerability, and the decimal system of scoring which by increasing both trick and game values and all premiums and penalties was destined to add enormously to the popularity of Contract Bridge.

An ideal opportunity to try out my new game presented itself while I was voyaging shortly after completing my scoring table with three Auction Bridge playing friends on board the steamship *Finland* from Los Angeles to Havana via the Panama Canal, a nine-day trip. At first, we were at a loss for a term, other than game in, to describe the status of being subject to higher penalties because of having won a game. Fortunately for us, a young lady on board the *Finland* solved that problem by suggesting the word vulnerable."

"We enjoyed playing my new game on board the *Finland* so much that, on my return to New York, I gave typed copies of my scoring table to several of my Auction Bridge playing friends. I made no other effort to popularize or publicize Contract Bridge. Thanks apparently to its excellence, it popularized itself and spread like wildfire."

No world-popular game in history certainly none in the Whist family can so accurately pinpoint its conception and the first time it was ever played. Recent research has established that the Finland reached Balboa on October 31, 1925, too late to proceed through the Canal or for passengers to go ashore. Francis Bacon III, in 1975 the then sole surviving member of Vanderbilt's foursome, recalled that on that night the lady who suggested 'vulnerable' was allowed to join their game of *plafond* and attempted to suggest some exotic and impractical changes based on a game she said she had played in China. This so irritated Vanderbilt that the next day, while the Finland passed through the Canal, he worked out the scoring table for contract which, except for notrump tricks then being valued at 35 points each, remained virtually unchanged half a century later. On that night, November 1, the game became Contract Bridge, scored under Vanderbilt's new rules.

Within two years, three codes of laws had been produced for the new game. Those of Robert F. Foster and the Knickerbocker Whist Club (both 1927) were withdrawn in favor of the more authoritative code issued by the Whist Club of New York. In 1928 the game was adopted in the major New York clubs, and late that year the first National Championship was held, with the Vanderbilt Cup as the prize.

In 1929 the American Auction Bridge League dropped the word Auction from its title and it became clear that contract had supplanted auction. The established auction authorities struggled to achieve expertise in the field of contract, but for the most part unsuccessfully. Leadership in the new game went to Ely Culbertson, who founded the first contract magazine in 1929. The first issue of *The Bridge World* magazine advocated the promulgation of an international Code of Laws for Contract Bridge. Subsequently, committees representing the United States, England and France were appointed, and the first International Code became effective Nov. 1, 1932.

In September 1930, Culbertson published his *Contract Bridge Blue Book*, which became a best seller and which appeared in annual revisions for four years. This revolutionary work set out the principles of approach-forcing bidding that became the nucleus of all modern standard systems. It was Culbertson, through his writings, his personality, his lectures and his organization, who was most responsible for the wide vogue the game quickly attained. The international publicity resulting from the famous Culbertson-Lenz match in 1931 and the Anglo-American Matches in 1930, 1933, and 1934 made the new game of Contract Bridge a household word. Thanks to a thriving organization that exploited every phase of bridge activity and to his natural flair for publicity exhibited notably in the Culbertson-Lenz Match, Culbertson retained his leadership throughout the Thirties, untroubled by the tournament successes of the Four Aces.

Although Culbertson's was the first widely accepted system of bidding in Contract Bridge, it became outmoded, and numerous other systems of bidding have come to the fore since his day. The GOREN methods, based on point-count valuation, which became standard in the United States after 1950, are based firmly on the foundations laid by Culbertson. The growth of Tournament Bridge was hampered

in the Thirties by the simultaneous activity of three separate organizing bodies, the American Bridge League, the American Whist League, and the United States Bridge Association. But from 1937 onward the American Contract Bridge League had the field to itself, and there followed a period of steady growth stimulated by the masterpoint plan. 1935 became the year of the first recognized World Championship, although several semi-official international matches had been played earlier. Later landmarks on the international scene were the first of the post-war World Championship series in 1950, the foundation of the World Bridge Federation in 1958, and the first Team Olympiad in 1960.

The only major innovation in contract bridge during its first 40 years of existence was the development of Chicago, the four-deal game that displaced traditional rubber bridge in many clubs during the early Sixties. But this, like contract bridge itself, was a change in scoring rather than in structure.

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