

A Brief History of the World's Greatest Game—Bridge

By Robert Locke

The game of Bridge was not invented overnight. Well, actually it was. Let me explain.

Its name derives from the Russian card game biritch, but the game as we know it today actually developed over many centuries from much simpler trick-taking games such as loo, euchre, ruff, trump, triomphe, quadrille, ombre, ecarte and many others all coming into and going out of fashion in various capitals of the world. If you're familiar with the characters of Jane Austen, for example, you've seen them at dubitable and redoubtable play at these games in their parlors.

The 18th Century saw the advent of whist, whose name perhaps came from the provocative sound—in the silence of the concentration at the table—of whisking up the four cards into the trick. Whist became the direct predecessor of bridge-whist with its cumulative inventions over decades of dummy, declarer, and bidding and finally developed by 1904 into a game called Auction Bridge. (And it seems to me that when a game has grown in complexity enough to require an adjective, even multiple adjectives, it also deserves capitalization.)

Auction Bridge, with its innovations in variant scorings for major and minor suits and no-trump contracts, required a more profound collaboration between partnerships during the bidding section of the game which in turn created fervent new partnerings in parlors worldwide. But it was not until 1925, literally overnight during a cruise through the Panama Canal, that Harold Vanderbilt and his gamy entourage invented the scoring scheme which soon became known far and wide as Contract Bridge. With new emphasis on the concept of vulnerability as well as above-and-below the line scoring for games and bonuses, Contract Bridge took the game a giant leap forward.

Duplicate Bridge, where the four hands are replicated and put into boards to be rotated and played by different partnerships around the room—around the city, county, continent and even around the planet—advanced the ever-growing trend toward skill as opposed to mere luck of the deal. Many Bridge players became increasingly discontent with Rubber Bridge, the simpler version of Contract Bridge played at parties everywhere, and began attending tournaments of Duplicate Bridge. These pairs events with matchpoint scoring broke up into Swiss Team events with IMPs (International Match Points) and Victory Point scales.

In only a few years after Contract Bridge hit the public like a global tidal wave, the first big names in Bridge hit the heights of popularity with Ely Culbertson and his

wife Jo challenging international bridge stars to matches of hundreds of rubbers that were broadcast live on the radio. Oswald Jacoby, Charles Goren, Alfred Scheinwold—only a few of the great names that popularized their systems of playing the new game most advantageously—authored multiple books on the game. The first *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* by the American Contract Bridge League was published in 1964 in a staggeringly thick volume of 691 pages with a bibliography of seven pages. Through the “new revised edition” of 1971, the 3rd edition of 1976, the 4th edition of 1984, the 5th edition of 1994 and the 6th edition of 2002, *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* has steadily grown until it is now more than 1000 pages weighing more than four pounds, its bibliography more than forty pages.

The World Team Championships began as an annual event with the Bermuda Bowl and became a biennial event in 1963, continuing to the present day. The World Bridge Federation has mounted its World Bridge Olympiad every four years since 1960, now superseding it with World Mind Sports Games to include international competitions of Chess, Go, Draughts and Xiangqi.

The development of Bridge is, of course, not stopping here and now. Talk to any Bridge player worth his or her salt, and you’ll quickly hear, “I’ll never get this game right!” With the advent of computers, Bridge is now easily played by millions of strangers online day or night. Also possible now are calculations as to the total number of deals possible of the fifty-two cards of four suits and thirteen denominations, but the figure is so astronomical, with the number 53 followed by nine commas and 27 digits, that there aren’t enough *illions* to say it in words.

Though played as avidly by little kids as centenarians (I’ve known more than one!) bridge extends in an endless span over a bottomless chasm with dizzying heights above and below and beyond. More than thrilling, bridge is temptation itself, every new deal. Sit down. Pick up a hand. Open up your mind. What an adventure lies ahead of you!