

**The game of bridge was conceived and formalised by
HAROLD STIRLING (MIKE) VANDERBILT
on 31 October 1925 on board the FINLAND in the PANAMA CANAL**

Vanderbilt was a card game enthusiast who, in 1925, invented contract bridge. 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 SS-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' 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.

Harold Stirling (Mike) Vanderbilt donated the Vanderbilt Trophy to go to the winners of the USA national team-of-four championship. In 1932 and again in 1940, he was part of a team that won his own trophy and he penned several books on the subject. In 1969, the World Bridge Federation made Vanderbilt its first honorary member. When a Bridge Hall Of Fame was inaugurated in 1964, Vanderbilt was one of the first of three persons elected. His trophy remains one of the most prized in the game.



Harold Stirling Vanderbilt

Harold Stirling Vanderbilt (July 6, 1884 - July 4, 1970) of Newport RI, was a bridge authority whose revisions of auction bridge scoring principles created modern contract bridge, also a system-maker and a champion player. He was born at Oakdale NY into the richest and most famous American family of that time. His father, William Kissam Vanderbilt, died in 1920 leaving an estate of some \$54.5 million. Vanderbilt graduated from Harvard Law School in 1910, then entered his family's railroad business, New York Central, founded by his great-grandfather, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. For many years he was a successful business executive. His greatest fame in competitive fields is as a yachtsman. His revision of right-of-way rules are still known as the Vanderbilt Rules. Nevertheless, his lasting fame is more likely to come from his contributions to bridge.

Vanderbilt took up bridge seriously in 1906, and his partnership with J. B. Elwell was considered the strongest in the U.S. from 1910 to 1920. During that period the contract bridge principle - counting only bid tricks toward game - was often proposed and as often rejected, except for the limited success of Plafond. Experimenting with the proposed new game while on a cruise late in 1925, Vanderbilt originated the factors of vulnerability and inflated slam bonuses. He produced a scoring table so balanced as to make nearly every aggressive or sacrifice bid an approximately even bet, allowing just enough differential to permit the exercise of nice judgment.

The rapid spread of contract bridge from 1926 to 1929 is largely attributable to Vanderbilt's espousal of it; his social standing made the game fashionable. Vanderbilt's technical contribution was even greater. He devised the first unified system of bidding, and was solely responsible for the artificial 1♣ bid to show a strong hand, the negative 1♦ response, the strong (16- to 18-point) notrump on balanced hands only, and the weak two-bid opening. These and his other principles were presented in his books. Contract Bridge Bidding and the Club Convention; The New Contract Bridge; Contract by Hand Analysis; and The Club Convention Modernized.

Vanderbilt was a member of the Laws Committee of the Whist Club of New York that made the American laws of contract bridge (1927, 1931) and the first international code (1932). He then became chairman of that committee, and largely drafted the international code of 1935, the American code of 1943, and the international codes of 1948 and 1949. He remained co-chairman of the National Laws Commission of the ACBL for the 1963 laws. In 1928 Vanderbilt presented the Harold S. Vanderbilt Cup for the national team-of-four championship now known as the Vanderbilt. This became, and still is, the most coveted American team trophy, mainly because the replicas were donated personally by Vanderbilt to the winners. In 1960 Vanderbilt supplied the permanent trophy for the World Bridge Federation's Olympiad Team tournaments, again adopting the policy of giving replicas to the winners.

As a player, Vanderbilt always ranked high. In 1932 and 1940 he won his own Vanderbilt Cup. He played by choice only in the strongest money games, and was a consistent winner. His regular partnership with Waldemar von Zedtwitz was among the strongest and most successful in the U.S. In 1941 he retired from tournament bridge, but he continued to play in the most expert rubber bridge games, in clubs and at home.

In 1968, Vanderbilt spent more than \$50,000 to recreate the lost molds for the replicas of the American trophy and to provide a quantity of replicas of both trophies sufficient to last from 20 to 40 years. To perpetuate this practice of awarding individual replicas, Vanderbilt further bequeathed to the ACBL a trust fund of \$100,000, a gift that wisely foresaw the possibility of inflation, but provided that excess funds, if any, can be donated in Vanderbilt's name to a charity of ACBL's choice. When last purchased, replicas of the American trophy cost \$600; of the Olympiad trophy, \$500.

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