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Bridge Table or What's Trump Anyway?

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BRIDGE TABLE
or
What's Trump Anyway?

Maggy Simony

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent book, *The Friendship Crisis*, Marla Paul evokes nostalgia for her mother's weekly bridge club. She remembers getting out of bed to spy on them, recalls the laughter and "gossipy whispers floating upstairs like a promise...a glimpse of my future." That generation "sank roots into neighborhoods like an ancient oak...playing bridge...with the same women for decades." No friendship crisis then.

Bridge Table is about the history and pop culture of the kind of bridge played by Marla Paul's mom—sociable bridge (as opposed to serious bridge). That airy title question—*What's Trump Anyway?*—reflects the spirit and the essence of sociable bridge. In a serious game, the question would be appalling—someone might call the director. During a sociable bridge game? Not a big thing.

This is informal history, told in fifty-two "cards" and four "hands" (like bridge) of notes, quotes, anecdotes, menus, recipes, trivia, opinion. *Bridge & Me* is a sub-theme.

Sociable bridge can be defined as a melding of friendships that last for decades, food, and a stress-free bridge game symbolized by the bridge table around which food is shared and a classic card game played. Its millions of women players are a subterranean sisterhood—uncounted and uncountable.

Bridge Table, far as I know, is the first book to tell the story of sociable bridge. It hopscotches down the paper trail left by the ladies-only bridge club in women's magazines and cookbooks of the 20s through the 60s, the *New York Times*, general magazines, and books on popular culture and bridge history.

As a cookbook, *Bridge Table* is in the "armchair" category—more about old cookbooks and food history than cooking, more about menus than recipes—intended to nudge readers to seek out old cookbooks and recipes, throw a Retro bridge party, and/or revive the classic menus of ladies-only lunch.

You don't have to play bridge to enjoy *Bridge Table*—but women of today ought to learn! Science is telling us these days that for a dementia-free old age, it's better to have played bridge badly than never to have played at all.

The 90s were the Retro decade and the nostalgia for her mom's bridge club reflected in Marla Paul's *Friendship Crisis* is part of that whole Retro trend. By the 90s, those same boomer students of the 60s who rejected their parents' pop culture began taking up, in Retro, icons of the 50s suburban lifestyle—martinis, steak houses, bridge. Can a revival of ladies-only lunch and its gender menus be far behind?

In Robert Parker's mystery, *Back Story*, a college student of the 60s recalls the prevailing attitude on campus back then. "My father was in the Rotary Club, for God's sake. My mother played f----- bridge!" Anything parents did (and they certainly played a lot of bridge in the 50s and 60s) "we couldn't possibly do."

That hostility era is all over now and today there is a spurt of 50-plus newcomers to bridge, both serious and sociable. The time is right for *Bridge Table*.



Historically, sociable bridge is the unwanted offspring of its serious bridge parents—the bridge establishment and the ACBL (American Contract Bridge League). Except for a few golden years in the 30s, there’s always been an unbridgeable chasm between the two kinds of bridge. One bridge player back in the early days described sociable bridge as “kitchen bridge...the lowest form of bridge life.”

That we (sociables) outnumber them (serious players) by the millions is evidence that sociable bridge players have never been concerned about what their “betters” thought of them. The ladies-only bridge club has been despised by the bridge establishment (for its casual, chatty bridge game), by the culinary establishment (for its Jell-O salads and creamy somethings on toast) and by moral critics who took the women to task for wasting time on bridge.

Today bridge is thought of as a game for older women, retirees, senior centers. Until the 70s, however, bridge was at the heart of America’s social life for women of all ages—a middle class tradition passed on from mother to daughter. For college-bound daughters, learning to play bridge was like a rite of passage. If they didn’t learn to play bridge at home, they learned at college. Bridge was rampant in dorms and sororities.

Then came campus turmoil, feminism and Betty Friedan. For young women, taking up mom’s favorite bridge game at college was no longer politically correct. Their mothers, on the other hand, mostly went right on playing bridge with their bridge clubs—unto today. Some were members of three or four women-only clubs.

Sociable bridge is a phenomenon of popular culture and women’s history. Serious bridge, because it has the American Contract Bridge League to see to it, *will* survive. The survival of sociable bridge, on the other hand (along with the ritual gender menus of ladies lunch) depends upon boomer daughters taking up their mom’s favorite game so that it *doesn’t* die off with my generation of ever-older bridge-playing women.

It took two women's movements of the 19th century merged with a classic card game to create the ladies-only bridge club tradition. It deserves to survive another hundred years.



One is supposed to answer three questions in a book's introduction—why this book, why now— which I've answered. Why me is the third, and why so late in life? What took so long?

I first thought to do a bridge cookbook back in 1960, and actually started to write one then, and again in 1987. An anthology of popular culture writing, *Sidesaddle on the Golden Calf*, happened upon at Miami Public Library in 1987, completely sidetracked me into popular culture and the history of bridge. One thing leads to another when you like to hang out at libraries and browse the book stacks! *Bridge Table* was no longer just a cookbook project and I was hooked.

The problem is, hanging out at the library is fun, settling down to put all those notes you gather into a book is hard work. No one was out there waiting for my book manuscript and so it became my dabbling hobby for two decades.

I made several serious efforts over the years to organize my notes into an outline--usually when I came across some new bit of information that galvanized me for a few months. I did so in 1995, 1999, 2001—only to quit in frustration.

Then, around 2003, I came upon *If You Can Talk You Can Write* by Joel Saltzman. His 50-short-chapter format in five sections was a light bulb moment. For my bridge book, 52 short chapters in *four* sections (like a bridge deck) was the answer. I would, however, call them "cards" and "hands." Saltzman believes in adapting other writers' solutions to your own work—so I did. After that, I knew the book was do-able.

I have no excuse for the years after 2004 except procrastination, thinking I'll live forever. Then, in 2007 (by this time I'm 87!), someone suggested to me I'd probably never

finish *Bridge Table* because I subconsciously felt I'd die if I finished it.

Well! That led me to thinking, what *would* happen to all my books and cookbooks and fifty-two files and boxes of 3 x 5's I'd collected over the years if I died before publishing the book? Like Marley forcing Scrooge, to witness his own funeral I envisioned my daughter Maria having to deal with the "stuff" from years of research—putting it all into black plastic bags and depositing in the condo dumpster.

That did it. I resolved to finish the book manuscript by the end of 2008, edit and refine in 2009, and have it in print by the end of that year—or toss it all into the dumpster myself on January 1, 2010. Despite that generous two-year schedule, I just barely made my deadline.



Because *Bridge Table* is entirely based on the paper trail found in libraries, what's missing are stories of real women—recollections of those who lived through the 50s and 60s and hears stories of their mother's bridge club back to the 20s.

Depending upon response from readers and the energy of this author, perhaps with the magic of the internet, *Bridge Table* or *What's Trump Anyway?* can be the catalyst for making the ladies-only bridge lunch part of gender food studies by scholars, and bridge club memories part of women's history.

A way, finally, of being counted.

Maggy Simony, 2009
<http://bridgetable.net>

PROLOGUE

The Back Story of Sociable Bridge

The Spokane Bridge Ladies

On a recent Tuesday, hostess Ruth...set two square tables with pastel flowered linens, teacups and saucers.... The doorbell chimed...soon the North Side home buzzed with the comfortable conversation of longtime friends.... The eight women took their seats, shuffled the cards and began bidding, holding their cards before them like tiny fans.... But this bridge club is not really about cards.... Since they only put in a nickel if they lose a game, it's not about money.... It is more about lasting friendships and a ritual that started 55 years ago this fall....

–Kristen Kromer, “Bridge Through the Years”
The Spokesman-Review (1998)

I magine, at today’s frantic pace, long and leisurely afternoons of good food, good gossip, and a sociable – not necessarily good – game of bridge. Imagine, in light of today’s transient relationships, a friendship of eight women that lasts for over half a century. That was ladies bridge lunch

in its heyday decades from the 20s through the 60s. Today, playing bridge for hours in the afternoon may seem almost decadent to all but older women. Back then the game was pursued by women of all ages without guilt or angst. And daughters took up their mom's favorite card game as a rite of passage to adulthood, going off to college.

Is there a town in America without at least one ladies-only bridge club like that of the Spokane ladies? They first met during World War II when, with their husbands drafted, they were on their own, had small children, were short on funds, and were lonely. That bridge club, then, provided friendships that lasted their whole long lives.

A word should be said here about my use of "ladies" instead of the more politically correct "women." It has to be so in a book about lunch—and ladies-only sociable bridge, from the beginning, was also about eating. Especially lunch.

Lunch as a meal for at-home women is referred to as early as 1835. "Out to lunch" meaning clueless, and "lunchy" meaning eccentric (both no doubt sexist) probably come from identification with frivolous ladies who lunch. The words simply go together, they are a part of the language. Despite efforts of feminists to discourage using the word lady, when used with lunch the alliteration is too irresistible to die away.

Maureen Dowd, in *Are Men Necessary?* parses the semantics of the female sex like this: "Women demand equality, ladies long to loll about, and girls just want to have fun." In *Bridge Table*—to paraphrase—women play serious bridge, ladies play sociable bridge, and girls? In past decades they too played sociable bridge, were sometimes referred to in print as "gals"—today, they probably play bunco.

This Prologue tells the Back Story of Sociable Bridge. It explains the differences between sociable and serious bridge, and tells a bit about the history of bridge as a card game, as well as the history of ladies lunch, and Fannie Farmer's domestic science movement that, among other things, decreed what ladies should eat at lunch—if they are to be ladies.



...self-definition among bridge players entails a deliberate decision to participate in one sub-world (serious or social) or another. – David Scott

Because social bridge is a standard bridge term and *can* sometimes be quite serious, I have adopted the term sociable for ladies-only bridge, with lunch or other food. Except for contrast, and necessary context, this is not a book about serious bridge, it is about sociable bridge—ladies-only sociable bridge. Of course there are women who never play anything but serious bridge. *Bridge Table* is not about them either.

In serious bridge, that question What's Trump Anyway? would be unacceptable—somebody might call the director. In sociable bridge even to roll one's eyes at the question may be considered unacceptable depending on the culture of that foursome—you might never be invited back if you seriously objected to the question.

Sociable bridge, it can be said, is the unwanted offspring of serious bridge parents—the bridge establishment and the ACBL (American Contract Bridge League).

Not only has sociable bridge been despised by serious players for its casual and conversational bridge game, but food historians looked down upon the feminine foods of the ladies lunch that became part of the sociable bridge ritual. Congealed molded salads; creamed somethings-or-other, spread upon or spooned inside of something else to contain their un-lady-like messiness, tea sandwiches and frosted sandwich loaves, tinted food, color-schemed menus—these are the classic Wasp-ish foods of ladies bridge lunch.

No matter the disapproval! Ladies-only bridge lunch has been an established way of entertaining since the last decade of the nineteenth century. And all along the way, the critics criticized, even moralized, about bridge-playing women. Bridge became a raging fad in the 20s and 30s, thrived and survived World War II to become a pop culture icon of the 50s

and 60s. Pop culture has been defined as, what people do when they're not working. What millions of women have done over these decades is to have lunch with other women and play bridge.

Then, starting in the late 60s, seeds were planted that ended the tradition.

College had been the place, before the 70s, where America's young took up bridge if they hadn't already learned it at home. On campus, bridge clubs for serious players were rampant, as was sociable bridge in the dorms and sororities. Along with the coming of campus unrest and social change in the mid-60s came rejection of the cultural icons of the 50s, including bridge. This was true for both serious and sociable bridge. Competitive bridge clubs became un-cool. Daughters no longer took up bridge—it was no longer considered a desirable social skill, or a plus for acceptance at sororities. Sororities became politically incorrect. Bridge, decreed the students, was appropriate only (as one said) “for blue-haired old ladies.”

It must have been a bitter pill for the Establishment to realize that when the revolution in the 60s relegated bridge to the ash heap of campus history, it made no distinction between the despised sociable bridge of sororities, and the serious bridge of competitive bridge clubs—both were considered an anachronism by the 70s

Remarkably, however, the millions of women who were already part of the web of bridge groups and clubs at the end of the 60s seemed oblivious to—or simply ignored—the message sent to them by their college-aged children. They clung to their anachronistic bridge clubs, and carried on as before, decade after decade, as if that campus revolution had never taken place.

The get-togethers moved to the evening as women went off to work in the 70s, only to move back to the daytime decades later when they could no longer drive at night. Ladies bridge lunch changed to refreshments when they met after dinner,

then diminished to “Bring a sandwich and I’ll get dessert and coffee” when, now much older, they returned to daytime bridge. Members who moved away, or passed away, were replaced. Every sociable bridge club has a genealogical chart. And many live on even after there are no original members alive. The sociable bridge ladies of the 50s—now quite old—are living examples of Somerset Maugham’s endorsement of bridge:

you can play bridge as long as you can sit up at a table and tell one card from another...when all else fails – sport, love, ambition – bridge remains a solace and an entertainment.



One cannot seem to make it through any Jane Austen book without a brush with whist... – Daniel Pool

Present-day bridge begins with whist and England.

In Daniel Pool’s book, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*—about the “facts of daily life in 19th-century England”—Pool tells us that whist, and other card games,

Christmas was not kept...it was an established course at Lambeth Palace...to finish the day with a game of whist.

– Archbishop of Canterbury(1785)

played a major part in social life amongst the upper classes by the early 1800s. A bridge-like game was known to exist as early as 1529 under various names – slam, ruff, trump, honours, triumph, whisk – settling on whist by the eighteenth century.

In 1740, Lord Folkestone and a party of gentlemen met at the Crown Coffee House in London to introduce whist to London’s fashionable society. From the beginning, the rules for whist and its descendent, bridge, have been set by the elite card clubs of London, later New York, and today by the ACBL and its counterparts in other countries.

Edmund Hoyle published the first official rule book, *A Short Treatise on Whist*, in 1742. So prestigious was Hoyle, and well known, that he gave the English-speaking world the

phrase “according to Hoyle” to convey certitude of doing something by the rule book. “Troy owes to Homer,” said Lord Byron, “What whist owes to Hoyle.”

A feature of upper class life in Britain for centuries, whist naturally crossed the Atlantic to its American colonies. A passion for playing whist is recorded in Boston as early as 1780. George Washington played whist. There is historic record of Washington’s order for a mahogany card table and two dozen decks of cards, and notes that he had small gambling losses at whist. In 1793, the American Whist League had 9000 members. First Ladies Dolly Madison, Elizabeth Monroe, and Louisa Adams played whist.

Characters in novels of Austen, Dickens and Trollope play whist. Napoleon played whist. The game spread from the aristocracy to the middle class. Poet Betjeman writes in *Dorset* about farmers playing “whist upon whist upon whist drive” with “horny hands” holding cards that earlier “held the plough.”

Edgar Allen Poe praised whist for its ability to improve mental faculties. Duplicate whist (for competitions and tournaments) was played as early as 1857 in England, and in the U.S.A. by the 1880s.

At about the same time came bridge-whist, considered a more challenging game than whist by expert players. But where did that word bridge come from? The exact history is hazy. George Copeland, writing in the *Times* in the 1930s says that bridge is an Anglicanization of the Russian word for whist, *biritch*, first played in Eastern Europe around 1880. The first recorded instance of the word bridge in England occurred in 1886. There are other explanations for the word bridge, but I like the *biritch* story. No matter how the game of bridge first got its name, leading expert players had shifted from playing whist to playing bridge-whist by 1897, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The sociable players of whist took up the new game soon thereafter.



...a special kind of oasis that excluded men. – Jody Shields

In her article “Let’s Do Lunch” in *Details* magazine, Shields considered the emergence of entertaining other women at lunch as a “revolutionary” development in women’s history—an unexpected consequence of the women’s club movement.

The word lunch is a shortened version of luncheon, which originally meant a lump of food, “a thick piece, a hunk” to be eaten out of hand. Dinner was the mid-day meal, not lunch. In

**the 1870s, when the at-home lunch
...became a revolutionary social
event for ladies.**

– Jody Shields

What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew, Daniel Pool describes the subtleties and niceties of how dinner, amongst the

middle and upper classes, moved ever later in England. Lunch graduated from a lump of food to the meal that filled the longer and longer gap between breakfast and dinner. It was an indication of wealth and social status to eat late, showing you could afford candles for one thing. Pool quotes from a Jane Austen letter about visiting her brother who had been adopted by a wealthy relative. Dinner hour at her brother’s new home is later than the family dinner had been at the Austen home, indicating her brother’s rise in the social world.

It is typical of fads and trends, sociologists say, that the upper class initiates them, and the middle class emulates them. At some point, dinner became the evening meal for an ever-growing part of the population, in both England and America, as more and more people no longer worked in or near their homes and ate their mid-day meal at home. Lunch became the new mid-day meal, ever after indelibly connected with at-home women.

The women’s club movement of the mid-nineteenth century, according to Jody Shields, while playing a major

historic role in transforming women's lives, also had the unexpected and delightful consequence of establishing the at-home ladies-only lunch as a way of entertaining.

The club movement began in the 1860s with the aim of enlarging the lives of women beyond the sphere of home. Within their clubs women pursued cultural studies, took up worthy causes, felt the first glimmers of the women's suffrage movement. Clubs, once established, then have to meet. The ladies-only meetings for lunch at one another's homes provided that meeting place at a time when it was unacceptable for women to meet in a public restaurant.

An internet website, <http://Everything2.com>, suggests under Lunch with the Girls that one reason women weren't welcome in restaurants then is that many of them were the "haunts of men" who would bring "women of dubious integrity." Until the 1890s and the arrival of department stores with in-store restaurants, women relied on bakeries to find a snack to eat.

At some point, more than a few women must have asked themselves "Why do we need a worthy cause to meet and eat and chat? How about playing cards?" Whist (and later bridge) with its lineage and status as the Wasp-ish card game of the upper classes, was the perfect choice to combine with lunch in a socially acceptable way. Bridge has always enjoyed status as somehow more respectable than other card games.

This may well be the reason why, to this day, women often refer to their decades-lasting get-togethers for bridge and lunch as "my bridge club" – without any of the formalities of a true club. Perhaps calling it a club was a way to legitimize what was essentially a frivolous activity, providing a better excuse for getting out of the house. Ladies-only-at-home-bridge-and-lunch-clubs typically have no rules, no president, no minutes, only a pattern of rituals acquired over the years.

In the world of sociable bridge, as in *Bridge Table*, bridge lunch refers to the ritual weekly or bi-weekly get-togethers of a bridge club. A bridge luncheon, on the other hand, is a party, a

way of entertaining in which the menu is likely to be more formal, more elaborate than the lunch offered one's regular bridge group. Luncheons were more likely served at clubs that met less often. Cookbooks of the era and women's magazines use the two phrases—bridge lunch and bridge luncheon—to differentiate menus according to the meal's status. [There's also bridge tea, and bridge dinner for couples.]



...eating food was a great deal less feminine than preparing it
—Laura Shapiro

That was taken for granted by domestic scientists, said Laura Shapiro in *Perfection Salad*. This second women's movement of the nineteenth century—the domestic science movement—also decreed the appropriate food ladies like to eat when they get together for lunch, or should like if they are to be ladies.

One of the concepts to come out of the domestic science movement is that of gender food—the concept that certain foods were good for one sex or the other, and that certain foods were enjoyed (or ought to be enjoyed) by just one sex or the other. In turn, the domestic science movement had inherited these beliefs from Victorian Britain—women were not supposed to display an appetite for food or anything else—it was considered unladylike, unseemly.

Sweet, ethereal foods...ornamental salads and desserts were abundant.

—Laura Shapiro

In her book, *Perfection Salad*, Laura Shapiro describes how this credo played out in two food lectures presented by the Boston Cooking School under Fannie Farmer's direction. For the feminine palate, lecturers suggested fish and egg entrees, a salad of fruit and marshmallows, ice cream for dessert, along with fudge and caramels. A menu to please husbands? Pâté with chili peppers, fried rabbit, eggplant, and a potato

casserole. Along with this hearty menu it was suggested that a green salad be served and that a ham be passed with that salad.

It wasn't only that women should prefer dainty, appropriately-feminine foods; men also needed to prove they were men by preferring food perceived as manly. Shapiro describes a telling incident from *Five Little Peppers*, a series of books for children written in the late 1800s. In it, the father expresses concern for his young son's manhood because he skips the rare roast beef and potato that boys and men *should* want, opting instead for the pudding dessert. Real men, Father Pepper is saying, must yearn for meat—preferably rare beef—or else risk appearing unmanly.

Food masked in sauces; tinted and decorated food; creamy foods and salads carefully contained in order to avoid a distastefully messy plate: all of these were hallmarks of Fannie Farmer's influence. Fannie believed that by calling upon the creativity of housewives, all drudgery was thereby removed, despite the extra work involved in peeling grapes and other such refinements: "That which has seemed such endless drudgery can...be changed into a beautiful harmony of law and order.... metamorphosing like a butterfly."

In an era when the only labor-saving device was having a maid, all such "creativity" accomplished was add more work for the already overworked housewife.

Containment was achieved in several ways. Creamy dishes and salads could be enclosed in cream puffs, or éclairs or patty shells, or in breadboxes made out of a hunk of bread and toasted. Toast points and asparagus stalks could be arranged to contain food, as a kind of fence. Hollowed-out oranges, apples, and banana skins formed bowl-like containers.

And then there was gelatin, which embalmed chopped vegetables and fruits in clear or tinted aspic to achieve ultimate plate control. Laura Shapiro took the name of one such salad as emblematic of the domestic science movement for her book—the eponymous *Perfection Salad*.

Comparing Fannie Farmer's original *Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, published in 1896, with those that came later (by which time her reformer zeal, it was said, had been corrupted by corporate America), and those edited by others after she had died, restores her reputation somewhat. Her original 1896 book has almost none of the kind of salads food critics would make fun of years later. There is just one congealed salad—tomato jelly made of canned drained tomatoes with a bit of sugar and salt, molded in individual cups, turned out and garnished with a dab of mayonnaise.

The oddest recipe in the 1896 edition, judged by today's standards, is probably Banana Salad, for which just a section of the skin is removed, sufficient to scrape out the fruit itself in pieces as large as possible. Half of the fruit is sliced, half cubed, then marinated in French dressing (two parts vinegar to four parts oil). Instructions are to refill the skins with the marinated salad, garnish with a slice of banana and arrange around lettuce leaves.

There are those food scholars who question the whole idea of gender food, or that it even exists. *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking* is a scholarly study by Jessamyn Neuhaus on the influence of cookbooks in creating the concept of gender food. She professes doubts about whether old cookbooks reflect what people actually ate, and raises the question—do cookbooks deliberately create and influence tastes so that, over time, the myth of gender food has become fact?

According to Neuhaus, Joseph Conrad was naïve when he said cookbooks have no object “other than to increase the happiness of mankind.” Cookbooks, intentionally or not, are life lessons and cultural history. They are “prescriptive literature” like etiquette books, women's magazines, parenting and sex manuals. They advocate behaviors. Why, asks Neuhaus, if the differences in male and female appetites are innate, as Fannie Farmer and others seemed to believe, do they need to be constantly defined and explained in cookbooks?

Anecdotally, however, the speed with which the phrase, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*—the title of a book written by a man who was apparently served quiche once too often—became part of everyday language, suggests gender food still lives. A nighttime Boston talk show a couple of years ago posed the question: “Are there gender cookies—cookies preferred by women and other cookies preferred by men?” An elderly male caller ended the discussion with the flat assertion that, based on years of helping out at church socials, *all* cookies are female food. Men eat pie.

The domestic science movement was a progressive movement on behalf of women, at least at its outset. It began with the best of intentions and idealistic goals in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the end, however, the domestic science movement and Fannie Farmer, as head of the Boston Cooking School where the movement was centered, were blamed by food critics for creating what they saw as the worst aspects of American culinary history.

The movement created home economics as a profession, added HomeEc to the school curriculum. Their goal was to teach homemaking as a science, teach nutrition, and give dignity and status to homemaking. Writer Barbara Ehrenreich, in her review of *Perfection Salad*, noted that reading it explained “one of the more peculiar mysteries of my adolescence...eggs a la goldenrod.” She recalls wondering why she had to make this dish in Home Ec—something she’d never eat herself and had never seen anybody else eat—while the boys got to go outside and play football. It was those domestic scientists creating Home Economics as a profession.



The Married Woman's Card Club...was founded in 1893 by sixteen ladies in search of amusement.... – John Berendt

Described in Berendt’s true crime story, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, set in Savannah, this club offers a nice literary marker for the start of ladies-only bridge clubs. They no doubt existed earlier, but the 1890s was the decade when

membership in clubs and fraternal organizations of all kinds skyrocketed, and by then women entertaining other women at lunch was commonplace.

In 1893 the card game the ladies would have played was still whist, which would evolve into bridge-whist by the end of the decade, auction bridge a few years later and contract bridge in the 1920s. [Berendt says that the club changed their game from whist to auction to contract like the rest of the country over the decades, “but for many years there was always one table of whist because Mrs. J. J. Rauers refused to learn how to play anything else.”]

The Married Women’s Card Club, founded in 1893, was still going strong a century later, when Berendt described its eccentric rituals, its status in Savannah, and its role in his book’s story line.

Being the hostess at one of these affairs was a serious matter... viewed as reason enough to paint the house or redecorate the parlor. — John Berendt

It is far more elegant than most bridge clubs, and does seem to have official rules, rather than the more common rituals of most bridge clubs. Whether they were written down is not clear. The original rule for meeting once a month on Tuesdays with just sixteen members—never more—still stood. Each member invited two guests for the monthly meetings for a total of forty-eight, or twelve tables of bridge. Understandably this is a club for the social elite of Savannah, those with homes that can accommodate twelve tables of bridge, and with a “cadre of maids” to execute the precisely choreographed drinks and food.

Savannah’s Married Women’s Card Club is obviously not a bridge luncheon, since it meets at four in the afternoon. The ladies arrive dressed formally in long dresses, long gloves and hats. But no one rings the doorbell. Instead they wait outside until, promptly at 4:00, when the designated hostess lets them enter all at once. Bridge starts immediately. A glass of water is served at 4:15, and then three cocktails punctuate the second

hour of this two-hour ritual, at 5:00, 5:15 and 5:30. The cocktail rituals must have been added after World War I with the loosening of social mores and the increase in freedom for women that came in the 1920s.

The last bridge hand is played at 5:35. Food is served at 5:40. The ladies eat, award prizes and leave promptly by 6:00. They must be home before their husbands arrive, presumably chauffeur-driven with today's laws on drinking and driving.

What did they eat at these monthly bridge meetings? Berendt doesn't say, and I tried but failed to find out. Can't be all that much, given that there's only twenty minutes after the last hand to eat, award prizes and depart.

"No other city had anything like" the Married Women's, according to Berendt. Certainly its exclusivity, its eccentric rules, its longevity, may be hard to match. Divorcing required resignation. "More than one marriage had been held together by that rule alone," comments Berendt.

In the same year the Married Women's Card Club began, 1893, the Hamilton Club in Philadelphia passed a resolution permitting card-playing women (wives, sisters, daughters and friends of members) to avail themselves of the privileges and courtesies of the clubhouse—on any day except Sunday, that is, and only from nine to three.

In that same year, members of the New York Whist Club left the Club to protest the introduction of bridge-whist because the new game encouraged high stakes gambling. In the new club they formed, announced the *New York Times*, there's no bridge-whist, "and stakes will be very small."



Bridge, an American Mania... has spread to the four corners of our continent. —New York Times

This was the headline of a 1904 article in the *Times*, reflecting the intensity of the fad for bridge-whist despite, continued the sub-headline, "the anathemas of the pulpit and the reproaches of the uninitiated."

Bridge-whist had the “stamp of approval of English royalty.” A 1902 *Times* article reported both King Edward and Queen Alexandra played bridge—and they gambled when they did. Queen Alexandra paid for her losses out of a “little gold purse hung to her waist.” Church fairs and bazaars in Britain routinely set up a bridge room where cards could be played, for a fee, to raise money for the church. At country houses in England, “the craze for the game was epidemic.”

Reaching New York at the turn of the century, bridge-whist, said the *Times* in its 1904 article, was taking the city by storm. In New York, bridge instructors and classes were everywhere and hugely popular amongst the smart set. A room for bridge was set aside at balls and debutante cotillions, and the young ladies were often found playing bridge instead of dancing. Nor was bridge a fad of just the smart set. The

**Unless one talked personal
gossip or bridge one might as
well be in Kamchatka.**

—*New York Times* (1904)

artistic, musical and literary sets were taking it up as well.

The article writes of specific society leaders and their bridge-playing circles.

Mrs. Gouverneur Kortwright, for instance, took along six dozen decks of cards for a two-week stay at Hot Springs. “Bridge devotees...never use the same pack twice.”

Bridge-whist was quickly becoming “more or less a woman’s game” with thousands of ladies playing in the afternoon, rushing home at six for a hasty dinner, and then out again for more bridge or playing in their own homes.

In 1905 the *Times* ran an article begging readers to play bridge “for the game’s sake” instead of money. The article cites hostesses who reported cheating by some ladies. Hostesses felt “compelled to change the position of mirrors” when money stakes were high. A beautiful matron’s luck at bridge became suspect. One hostess admitted inviting eight guests for bridge so that she and her daughter could sit out and fill in later when “one or more of the ladies will leave in a temper or...hysteria.”

Bridge needs no gambling, said one expert player who never played for money. “Let us play bridge...without other reward than the pleasure of the contest...”

Gambling was a factor in the bridge-whist era, but eventually, said the *Times*, the majority of the women played for prizes or small amounts of cash, not more than a dollar. The article concluded that despite the evils the fad for bridge is alleged to cause, it keeps the leisure class from drinking too much: “you cannot play bridge with your brains fuddled.”

A *Times* story, with a Georgia deadline, in 1906—“Women mustn’t play bridge” —quotes the outspoken views of a Judge Fite. He severely disapproved of social gambling and criticized grand juries for making bridge-playing women an exception. “You indict every Negro you hear of who shoots craps or plays seven up, but these society women who play bridge and euchre for costly prices are never molested.” They should be treated the same said Judge Fite—an astonishing statement considering the dateline and the era.



*A Book of Bridge Rules underneath the Bough,
A Score Card, Two New Packs of Cards, and Thou
With Two Good Players sitting opposite,
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*

– Carolyn Wells
The Rubaiyat of Bridge (1909)

***Auction bridge...became, from 1907 to 1928, the most
universally popular card game theretofore known...***

Like bridge-whist, the origin of auction bridge is not altogether clear. British civil servants at a remote outpost in India generally get the credit—“the brilliant idea of a few Brits in India” says the *New York Times Bridge Book*. The new game of auction bridge somehow reached Europe, England and America. As its name indicates, bidding was added to the

game, an auction amongst the four players to establish trump. By 1904 auction had replaced bridge-whist as the game of choice for tournaments.

The bridge-whist fans, following the lead of the expert players, also gradually moved on to auction bridge, which then became even more popular than bridge-whist—“the most universally popular card game theretofore known” said the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The critics, however, were not impressed with this new, more difficult version, of whist and bridge-whist as a contribution to mental development.

When bridge-playing Wellesley students, in 1908, were rebuked by Miss Howard, professor of rhetoric, for playing bridge, the story actually reached the *New York Times*. It was, said Miss Howard, “that last infirmity of empty minds.” Even as the *Times* covered the story, they felt it was a pity it got so much publicity—it should only have been the concern of the girls and their “parents and guardians, pastors and masters.”

Nevertheless, the newspaper agreed in general with the Professor’s viewpoint, pointing out that there was not much useful training from playing bridge for students preparing for a professional life. As to students hoping to marry said the *Times*, young men—even if they’ve led a gay life themselves—are not “looking for a wife whose chief accomplishment is skillful card playing.”

And a Methodist preacher in Philadelphia, in 1909, expressed the same views as Judge Fite down in Alabama when he took the mayor and his wife to task after seeing a social note that “the wife of our Executive was entertaining at bridge.”

“What is it but gambling? Not a bit better than the men or boys playing craps in some back alley.”



Auction bridge continued to reign, a way of social life through most of the 20s, diffusing to middle class America

after WWI. The invention of contract bridge in 1925 by Harold Vanderbilt ended that reign.

The Main Story of *Bridge Table* follows. It tells the sociable bridge story during the decades when auction bridge was deposed and contract bridge took its place. It is told in Four Hands: The 20s and 30s; the War years; the 50s and 60s; and, finally, Bridge Since the 70s.

A "Post Mortem, in bridge, is a term for afterthoughts players may have on a bridge hand just played. *The Bridge Table* includes Post Mortems too, which appear in text boxes here and there or sometimes at the end of a Bridge Table Card or Hand – like the glossary of bridge terms that follows.

An Informal Glossary of Terms In *Bridge Table*

ACBL or American Contract Bridge League. This is the governing body for bridge and in charge of the official rule book. If one is a serious, competitive bridge player, this organization sets the rules, enforces them, and keeps track of the Master Points that players earn at official tournaments and games.

Auction Bridge is the game people played just before contract bridge came along. As the name indicates, players bid for the right to declare trump, and partner of the player who gets the bid is “dummy” and lays down her hand for all to see.

Bridge-Whist had a relatively brief popularity between whist and auction bridge.

Contract Bridge is the game people play today. The chief difference between it and auction bridge is in the scoring. Nobody says contract bridge anymore—they say simply bridge because today contract bridge *is* the bridge game played.

Duplicate Bridge is serious bridge--the kind of bridge played at tournaments where skills prevail and one's score doesn't depend upon the luck of the hand dealt. Competitors get to play the same exact hands.

Rubber Bridge is standard bridge, the kind of bridge played except at tournaments, and it can be sociable or serious. It can be a high stakes gambling game as well.

Sociable Bridge is *Bridge Table's* term for the kind of stress-free bridge played amongst friends, with food—ladies-only bridge lunch is quintessential sociable bridge. [Variant forms, however, have emerged since the 60s.]

Social Bridge is ACBL-ese for rubber bridge.

Trump is a bridge term that's entered the language, and it always means to out-rank something or somebody—to be one up. A trump card in bridge, even a low one, outranks any card of a suit.

Whist is the early ancestor of bridge. Unlike bridge-whist and auction bridge it is still widely played. [Bid Whist is part of Black History, still widely played today—it deserves a book as well.]

Play bridge and join a subterranean sisterhood that never dies.

Bridge Table or What's Trump Anyway?

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