

PREFACE

Of Playing Bridge & Writing Bridge Table

In a recent book, *The Friendship Crisis*, Marla Paul evokes nostalgia for her mother's weekly bridge club. No friendship crisis then! 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."

Bridge Table is about the history and pop culture of the kind of bridge played by Marla Paul's mom - sociable bridge - that began around the turn of the century with the ladies-only-at-home-bridge lunch or luncheon. That airy question - *What's Trump Anyway?* - reflects the spirit and the essence of sociable bridge, as opposed to serious 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" (like a bridge deck) of notes, quotes, anecdotes, menus and recipes derived from the paper trail created over decades in women's magazines and cookbooks. Bridge & Me is a sub-theme.

You don't have to play bridge to enjoy this book - but you should learn (see Card 52). My philosophy for a long life, and a happy old age is, "It's better to have played bridge badly than never to have played at all."



The reasons for writing *Bridge Table* and publishing it now are three.

First, *Bridge Table* fills an unfilled niche in women's history and pop culture. There are innumerable books about serious bridge (the silent kind where players compete for master's points) - there's no book, far as I know, that tells about the far bigger world of sociable bridge, and its one-time inevitable companion, ladies lunch.

The epigraph for *Bridge Table* says it all - bridge "never would have been anything but the sport of an esoteric few" without women - primarily sociable bridge-playing women. (Definition? Sociable bridge is a combination of decades-long friendships, food, a stress-free bridge game.)

Second, the time is right. Nostalgia for the 50s reflected in Paul's *Friendship Crisis* is part of the whole Retro 90s trend. The same boomers of the 60s who rejected parents and all their ways (including playing bridge), began taking up those 50s icons of their parents - martinis, steakhouses, bridge - in the Retro 90s.

In Robert Spencer's mystery, *Back Story*, a college student of the 60s recalls the prevalent 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 **third** reason for *Bridge Table* is that a sociable bridge renaissance has become my “cause” - the survival of sociable bridge amongst boomer daughters after this generation of bridge-playing old ladies from the 50s and 60s (like me) die off.

Ladies-only sociable bridge is a century-old tradition that took two major women’s movements of the nineteenth century, plus a classic card game, for women to be able to enjoy. Except for that 60s-generated rejection, the tradition grew steadily from 1900 through 1920, exponentially as a fad in the 20s and 30s, thrived and survived during the 40s and WWII, to become an icon of the 50s and most of the 60s. Sociable bridge is, in my view, a subterranean phenomenon of pop culture. It deserves to last another hundred years.



Historically, sociable bridge is the unwanted offspring of serious bridge parents, the bridge establishment and the ACBL (American Contract Bridge League) - and described by one of them as “kitchen bridge . . . the lowest form of bridge life.”

Fortunately, sociable bridge players have never cared much about what their betters have said about them. The ladies-only bridge club has been put-down by the bridge establishment (for their casual and chatty bridge game), by the culinary establishment (for their gender luncheon menus), and by moral critics who took them to task for wasting time on bridge in the first place.

Today bridge is seen as played by older women, retirees, at senior centers. Until the 70s, however, bridge was at the heart of America’s social life for women of all ages - a middle class icon passed on to next-generation daughters.

Learning to play bridge for daughters 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. Taking up mom’s favorite bridge game at college was no longer politically correct. Their mothers and grandmothers, however never stopped playing.

Because of the connection of ladies lunch with bridge, the paper trail for sociable bridge is primarily in cookbooks and women’s magazines of the 20s through the 60s. Another source has been newspapers - a survey of the *New York Times* back to the turn of the century is illuminating on cultural attitudes toward bridge-playing ladies. David Scott’s doctoral dissertation on bridge makes an enormous contribution, along with books on the history of food, bridge and popular culture. Googling bridge was invaluable for *The Last Hand*, about sociable bridge since the 70s.

As a cookbook, *Bridge Table* is in the “armchair” category - more about old cookbooks than cooking, more about menus than recipes - intended to intrigue newspaper and magazine lifestyle editors, nudge readers to seek out old cookbooks and recipes, throw a Retro bridge party, revive the classic gender menus of ladies lunch. The recipes blend into the text (as in Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn*) and none have been tested.

The structure of *Bridge Table* is a spin-off on a deck of bridge cards - four “Hands” of thirteen “Cards” each - fifty-two chapters in all. They are mostly short, mostly self-contained, roughly chronological.

The Prologue sets the tone and themes for the book. It tells the Back Story of Bridge up to the 1920s - the history of bridge, ladies lunch, and Fannie Farmer and her domestic science movement that decreed the gender menus of ladies lunch.

[It repeats some of points made in this Preface for those who never read book introductions. To encourage doing so page one of the book is the Preface - a deliberate choice.]

The Main Story begins with the 20s and the invention of contract bridge in 1925 by a Vanderbilt - the game we play today, but called simply bridge.



One is supposed to answer three questions in a book's preface - why this book, why now - which I've answered. Why me is the third. And I think I should also address the question - why self-publish?

I chose to self-publish because, one, time's running out and self-publishing is quicker. Two, I successfully did so once before. Years ago, when it was far more difficult to self-publish than it is today, I published *Traveler's Reading Guide: Ready-made Reading Lists for the Armchair Traveler*. A major reference book publisher, Facts on File, picked it up and I then edited two editions of the book for them.

It was 1987, between the two editions, looking for a book project, that I first thought to do a nostalgia cookbook about bridge and lunch from 1920s-1960s. Then I came upon *Sidesaddle on the Golden Calf* at the Miami Public Library. It sidetracked me into popular culture, the history of bridge, food history, etc. No longer a cookbook. I love hanging out in libraries and *Bridge Table* became a kind of dabbling hobby collecting "stuff" year after year - never writing an outline.

In 2005 (by which time I'm 85) I got serious - created the outline, but still I dabbled. In 2007, it was suggested to me that I'd never get *Bridge Table* finished because I perhaps felt as long as I kept working on it I wouldn't die. 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? I felt like Scrooge and his vision of Christmas Future, attending his own funeral. I envisioned my daughter having to put all my "stuff" into big black plastic bags and chucking it into the condo dumpster. That did it. I resolved to finish the book manuscript by end of 2008, publish print-on-demand (POD) in 2009, or chuck all the "stuff" myself. I'm more or less on schedule.



Because *Bridge Table* is a reflection of the paper trail of bridge and ladies lunch - a book based on library research - what's missing are stories of real women. There's a website and blog, <http://bridgetable.net> for readers with bridge club memories to share - yours or others.

The magic of the internet may one day give the ladies bridge clubs of the world a place to connect, a way of being counted, or even lead to *Bridge Table II* if I live long enough.

Maggy Simony