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Bridge

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Two men who were born a month apart both had claims to fame in totally distinct fields: bridge and insurance. One was Oswald Jacoby, who was born in Brooklyn in 1902. At the age of 21, he became the youngest person ever to qualify as an actuary and worked for four years for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. His remarkable bridge career ended with a major national victory in 1983 when he was dying of cancer.

The other was Easley Blackwood of Indianapolis, who died on March 27 at the age of 89. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1903, and later moved north. At the age of 26, in Decatur, Ill., he was the youngest manager ever appointed by Metropolitan Life and served the company for 45 years. He became fascinated by the new game of contract bridge, which had been codified by Harold Vanderbilt in 1925 and soon spread to the Midwest.

After he moved to Indianapolis, he invented a highly artificial bridge system but suffered the fate of many such inventors: the local bridge club barred him and his partner from playing it. He had much better luck with his next invention, a simple procedure to ask about aces with a four no-trump inquiry and answers by steps at the five-level.

That was to make him famous all over the world, but he had some difficulty in publicizing it. When he wrote an article about it in 1933 and sent it to Ely Culbertson's Bridge World magazine, he received a polite rejection letter. The readers, he was told, would have no interest in the Blackwood Convention, and would continue to use the more complex Culbertson Four-Five No-Trump Convention.

This judgment was perhaps comparable to that of I.B.M., which when offered the first prototype of a photocopying machine, determined that there would be no demand for it. By the middle 40's, almost everyone was playing Blackwood, and the Culbertson variety disappeared into the dustbin of history.

The convention has had many offspring: Baby Blackwood, Byzantine Blackwood, Culwood, Key-Card Blackwood, Lackwood, Redwood, Roman Blackwood, and Roman Key-Card

Blackwood. The last of these is now standard in serious tournament play. It has been estimated that Blackwood would been a billionaire twice over if he could have collected a one-cent royalty each time his convention was used.

Blackwood, like Jacoby, was an energetic writer on the game, with six major books in addition to a syndicated column. But unlike Jacoby, he served in many administrative posts. By far the most important of these took him away from Indianapolis: In 1968, at the age of 65, after he had retired from the insurance business, he became executive secretary of the American Contract Bridge League, in Greenwich, Connecticut.

When he retired again three years later, he had greatly improved the organization's management practices, finances and master-point system.

Honors poured in: honorary membership in the American Bridge Teachers Association and the American Contract Bridge League; Personality of the Year of the International Bridge Press Association. And the Mayor of Indianapolis declared Oct. 27, 1977, as Easley Blackwood Day.

Although Blackwood had neither the time nor the inclination to become a serious tournament player, he won some titles and continued to play at his local club until six months before his death.

Note: The diagrammed deal appearing in the New York Times bridge column has been omitted since the cards were not archived with the bridge column.

On the diagramed deal, played there about a decade ago, he maneuvered skillfully to make a contract in which most would fail.

His opponents would have done badly in two spades, but he persevered to three clubs opposite a silent partner. He won the opening lead of the heart king with the ace and made the key play of a low spade. He was preparing for the possibility, by no means unlikely, that West was void in trumps.

West put up the spade king and shifted to the diamond queen. South won with the king, led to the spade queen and played a trump. East played low, and the ten won in the closed hand.

When West's discard revealed the trump division, it became vital to lead a second trump from the dummy. So the spade ace was ruffed, the last trump was led, and the contract was safe: East had no way to make more than two trump tricks.

Consider what would have happened if a trump honor had been led from the closed hand at the second trick. East would have won, and played, perhaps, a diamond. South would have won and led a spade, but there would then be no way to lead trumps twice from the dummy, and the contract would fail.

As a young man, Blackwood thought of making music his career. Luckily for the world of bridge, he gave up the idea, but the urge stayed in the family: Easley Blackwood Jr. is a composer and professor of music.