THE NEW YORKER

TURNING TRICKS

The rise and fall of contract bridge.

by David Owen

September 17, 2007

When I was in ninth grade, back in 1970, we finished our geometry textbook six weeks before the end of the school year and spent the final grading period studying our math teacher's principal extracurricular passion, which was bridge. He gave us quizzes on the Goren bidding system, and we got so hooked that we often dealt quick hands in the halls, between classes. We played on weekends, too, sometimes at tables wreathed in marijuana smoke. Our teacher told us that we would love playing in college, as he (and most of our parents) had, but by the time I got there, in 1973, nobody seemed to know anything about it. I didn't play again until five or six years ago, when, during a family vacation, I was reintroduced by my brother-in-law, who had begun taking lessons as part of his midlife crisis. Now it's the main thing I think about when I'm not thinking about golf.

A passion for bridge is hard to explain to someone who doesn't share it. One attraction is the sense of endlessly unfolding complexity: the more you learn, the less you feel you know. Computers have been able to beat the world's best chess players for a decade, but - as Edward McPherson writes in a lively, somewhat haphazard new book, "The Backwash Squeeze & Other Improbable Feats: A Newcomer's Journey Into the World of Bridge" (HarperCollins; $23.95) - they "still stink at bridge." There are 635,013,559,600 possible bridge hands, and a vast catalogue of approaches and techniques and stratagems for playing them. (A backwash squeeze, by the way, is an obscure offensive tactic whereby a player, facing a certain arrangement of cards, forces an opponent to make a certain kind of self-defeating discard.) The best players are able to visualize their opponents' hands after just a few cards have been played and to imagine strategies that would never occur to the less skillful, yet even they find the game inexhaustible. One player told McPherson, "For people who enjoy puzzles, this is one they will never solve."

As fascinating as all this is to veterans, it hasn't done much to rev up the young. Recently, I competed in a regional tournament conducted under the auspices of the American Contract Bridge League, the game's governing body in North America. There were separate games open only to players aged fifty-five and older—superfluously, since the vast majority of the tournament's entrants were old enough to play in either division. I'm fifty-two, and I'm almost certain that in six half-day sessions I never sat at a table with anyone younger, even though I was playing in games intended for relative beginners. Bridge has beneficially expanded my acquaintance with charming, intelligent widows in their seventies and eighties, but I selfishly wonder what I'll do for partners when I'm the age they are now.

People who worry about the future of bridge don't know what to make of the sudden popularity of the poker game Texas hold'em. (McPherson calls poker "the elephant in the bridge club.")

Is it good for bridge because it's a card game and young people like it? Or is it bad for bridge because it's simplistic and you can watch it on ESPN? McPherson's teacher, the owner of a bridge club in Manhattan, told him, "You know, it takes thirty minutes to teach Texas hold'em, and in an hour you can be as good as fifty percent of the people playing the game. That would take years of study in bridge." The teacher meant this as a recommendation for bridge; nevertheless, he also told McPherson, "Why don't you do a book about something people actually want to know about, like poker?"

Bridge players haven't always been racked by self-doubt. The game evolved from the British card game whist, which enjoyed tremendous popularity for at least a couple of centuries. (People who stick to the rules in all sorts of pursuits are said to behave "according to Hoyle," because, in 1742, an Englishman named Edmond Hoyle published a popular pamphlet on whist.) Whist, which retains a diehard following today, is a trick-taking game for four people, who play as two partnerships. In its basic form—there are many variants—the entire deck is dealt out, face down except for the last card, whose suit is designated trump. The player to the left of the dealer begins the play by laying down any card, and the three other players lay down cards in succession, following suit if possible, and otherwise discarding an unpromising card or playing a trump. Each four-card trick is taken by the highest card in the suit led, or else by the highest trump. This sounds easy, but it lends itself to thought-provoking complication. Edgar Allan Poe, the great ratiocinator, viewed a passion for whist as a sign of mental acumen; the opening pages of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" are almost a stand-alone essay on the game's superiority to chess:

> Whist has long been known for its influence upon what is termed the calculating power; and men of the highest order of intellect have been known to take an apparently unaccountable delight in it, while eschewing chess as frivolous . . . . The best chess-player in Christendom may be little more than the best player of chess; but proficiency in whist implies a capacity for success in all those more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind.

Bridge began to separate itself from whist in the late nineteenth century. The origin of the name is disputed; it may have been adapted from that of the Russian card game *biritch*, which was also known as Russian whist. Bridge differs from basic whist primarily in that each hand begins with an auction to determine the number of tricks that the highest bidder in the auction must take and which suit, if any, will be trump; also, one of the four hands, called the dummy, is turned face up after the first card has been played. The modern version, contract bridge, was created in 1925 by the railroad heir and master yachtsman Harold Stirling Vanderbilt, who had been annoyed by what he felt were deficiencies in the previous version, auction bridge. Vanderbilt was a passenger on a ship that was travelling from Los Angeles to Havana by way of the Panama Canal, and on the evening of October 31st, while playing with three friends, he introduced several improvements that he'd been mulling over, including a method of scoring that required players to more accurately assess, during the bidding, the number of tricks they would take, a prediction known as a contract. Vanderbilt shared his ideas with a few other friends in Newport and New York, and his game spread across the country and around the world at almost unbelievable speed. "Half a year after Vanderbilt's voyage," McPherson writes, "a notice appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* announcing that a Chicago woman was suing her husband for divorce on the inexcusable grounds that he trumped her ace." Four years later, in Kansas City, another aggrieved bridge-playing wife, Myrtle Bennett, shot her husband to death shortly after he failed in his attempt to make a contract of four spades. At her trial, Myrtle was represented by James A. Reed, a former Kansas City mayor and United States senator. Remarkably, she was acquitted, and is said to have collected on her husband's thirty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy. After reconstructing the final deal, the bridge expert Ely Culbertson concluded that Mr. Bennett could have made the fateful four-spade contract after all.

Culbertson, McPherson writes, was "the P. T. Barnum of bridge." He was born in Romania in 1891 and was described by Bertrand Russell as "the most remarkable, or at any rate psychologically interesting, man it has ever been my good fortune to know." He published two bridge-instruction books in 1931, and both became national best-sellers. Later that same year, he arranged a contract-bridge "Battle of the Century" in New York City, pitting himself and his wife against a pair of competing experts, first in a salon at the Hotel Chatham and then in a wing of the brand-new Waldorf-Astoria. "During the next six weeks," McPherson writes, "as many as thirty stenographers at a time would work in the suite. Six Western Union telegraph operators stood on call twenty-four hours a day. A new pack of cards was used for each deal. The *Times* covered the match hand by hand, often supplying trick-by-trick analysis and keeping a running tally of the number of aces and kings held by each side. Results were cabled daily to papers across the Atlantic." Chico Marx was among the many spectators, more than a few of whom wore evening clothes. The Culbertsons won, and the Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company later paid them ten thousand dollars for the right to include a miniature bridge-instruction booklet in packs of Chesterfield cigarettes.

Bridge, despite its rarefied pedigree, was an ideal populist pastime for the Depression and the war years. It was sociable and challenging, yet the only cost was the price of a deck of cards. Couples took it up by the millions, and in the nineteen-forties, according to the Association of American Playing Card Manufacturers, the game was played in forty-four per cent of American homes. During this period, Charles H. Goren, a Philadelphia lawyer who had applied himself to bridge in college after a young woman laughed at his poor play, displaced Culbertson as the nation's preëminent authority. He published numerous best-selling instruction books, a monthly column for *McCall's*, a weekly column for *Sports Illustrated*, and a syndicated daily column that ran in nearly two hundred newspapers. His photograph appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1958, and he was the host of the television show "Championship Bridge with Charles Goren," which aired on ABC from 1959 to 1964. Among Goren's readers was Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose bridge-playing friends visited the White House four at a time so that the game could continue when the President had to excuse himself to conduct the nation's business.

And then, in the late sixties or early seventies, something—television? Vietnam? birth-control pills?—killed off bridge among people who were approximately hippie age or younger. Brent Manley, who is the editor of *The Bridge Bulletin*, the monthly magazine of the A.C.B.L., told me that when he went to college, in 1967, the student union was filled with bridge players, but that interest among young people dropped precipitously at some point after that. "We feel as though we've lost a generation," he said. My recent tournament partner, who graduated from Yale in 1969, thinks the culprit was coed dormitories—a plausible hypothesis, since finding ways not to think about sex would have become less important as soon as having sex became easier. Chess seems not to have suffered a comparable drop-off, and, indeed, Bobby Fischer's defeat of the Russian world champion Boris Spassky, in 1972, inspired a broad chess boom.

Meanwhile, bridge was, in subtle ways, becoming more daunting. Good card play has changed little since the time of the Truman Administration—the two best bridge books ever written, according to a group of expert players recently surveyed in *The Bridge Bulletin*, were published in 1945 and 1958—but bidding by experts has grown so complex that even they often find it difficult to follow. Although only fifteen words are available for bidding in bridge (the numbers one through seven, the names of the four suits, "no-trump," "double," "redouble," and "pass"), most players employ bidding systems in which at least some calls are given highly specialized artificial meanings. All bids are required to be transparent—opponents can even ask for explanations—but the complexity can be intimidating, especially for beginners. Chess pieces, by contrast, always move the same way.

By 1991, bridge had fallen so low that Manhattan's Cavendish Club—which had been a hangout for many of the world's best players since 1925—was driven to extinction by rising rents and dying members. Thomas M. Smith, the club's final president, told John Tierney, of the *Times*, "There's too many other interests today. People watch television or play video games or play with computers. And if you want my opinion, people don't want to think." In 2005, the A.C.B.L. estimated that there were twenty-five million players in the United States. That sounds like a lot, but it's down dramatically from Goren's era, and the average age of players is climbing. As McPherson points out, it's not a good sign that so many regulars today are older than the game itself, which will turn eighty-two on Halloween.

Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, who play avidly, sometimes as partners, have created a program to support bridge in junior high schools but have had trouble giving their money away. (Buffett is deeply addicted. He once said, "Bridge is such a sensational game that I wouldn't mind being in jail if I had three cellmates who were decent players and who were willing to keep the game going twenty-four hours a day.") The A.C.B.L. has made various youth-oriented efforts of its own —for instance bridgeiscool.com, a Web site for juniors, which McPherson describes as follows: "There is a blog, pictures of girls and boys in sunglasses and on cell phones, and a sixty-second animated video with a hip-hop soundtrack that flashes pictures and graphics that say 'Hit it!' and 'It was cold as ice until she took the hook!' " Teens can also download bridge-themed Instant Messenger icons. Some bridge buffs have mixed feelings about such efforts even when they're successful. One of McPherson's teachers told him that he finds young bridge players "weird," adding, "What does it say about them that they like to spend the bulk of their time with people three times their age?"

It may be that bridge isn't truly dying but has merely morphed from a nearly universal adult pastime into one primarily for seniors, and that younger people nowadays are too busy with other compelling activities. McPherson, who is in his early thirties, does much of his playing with a fellow-beginner named Tina, who is eighty-three when the book begins. Some recent studies have suggested that mentally taxing activities like bridge are good for the brain and can delay the onset of dementia. I know several non-playing contemporaries who say that bridge is beginning to strike them as mildly attractive and age-appropriate, partly for that reason. And although the average age of tournament players has risen, attendance at the A.C.B.L.'s big

national tournaments has remained above thirty-thousand tables in all but two years since 1972, and was nearly forty-three thousand tables in 2004. By comparison, in 1952 the national tournaments attracted just fifty-one hundred tables.

It's also possible that bridge will be rejuvenated by one of the putative instruments of its destruction, the Internet. I do most of my playing online, often when I'm supposed to be doing something else, such as working. This is more companionable than it may sound, because most bridge sites enable players to "chat" while they play. (Nonscientific observations based on several years' experience: the rudest players are men from countries where women who commit adultery face imprisonment or worse; Canadians are more likely than others to ask where everyone is from.) Computer bridge is a boon to beginners, because it enables them to play lots of hands in a hurry and to commit instructive errors behind the cloak of an online pseudonym. It's also, in my view, a fragment to shore against one's ruins, since it can be played from a bed in a hospital or a nursing home. But I hope that Internet bridge doesn't entirely displace the old-fashioned kind. One of the social benefits of bridge playing during ts heyday was that it regularly caused people to interact, face to face, for hours at a time, something we tend not to do much anymore, now that so many popular amusements are both solitary and passive. No matter how old you are, it's good to get out of your house every once in a while and coöperate with a partner in a mentally challenging activity—even if the result, on rare occasions, could be murder.

Biography of Mr. David Owen - 2007

David Owen has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1991. He covers sports and popular culture for the magazine.

Before joining The New Yorker, Owen was a contributing editor at The Atlantic Monthly. He has been a regular contributor to numerous magazines, including Harper's, where he was a senior writer, and Esquire. He is also a contributing editor at Golf Digest.

Owen is the author of several books about golf, including "My Usual Game", "The Chosen One", "The Making of the Masters", and "Hit & Hope". He is also the author of "High School," about the four months he spent pretending to be a high-school student; None of the Above," an exposé of the standardized-testing industry; "The Man Who Invented Saturday Morning," a collection of his pieces from Harper's and The Atlantic Monthly; "The Walls Around Us,"; "Around the House," a collection of essays about domestic life; "The First National Bank of Dad: The Best Way to Teach Kinds About Money,"; and "Copies in Seconds," about the invention of the Xerox machine. In addition, he co-edited a collection of golf stories entitled "Lure of the Links."

His most recent book, "Sheetrock & Shellac: A Thinking Person's Guide to the Art and Science of Home Improvement," a sequel to "The Walls Around Us," was published in 2006.

Owen lives in Washington, Connecticut.