

Bumblepuppy Days I II

The Evolution from Whist to Bridge

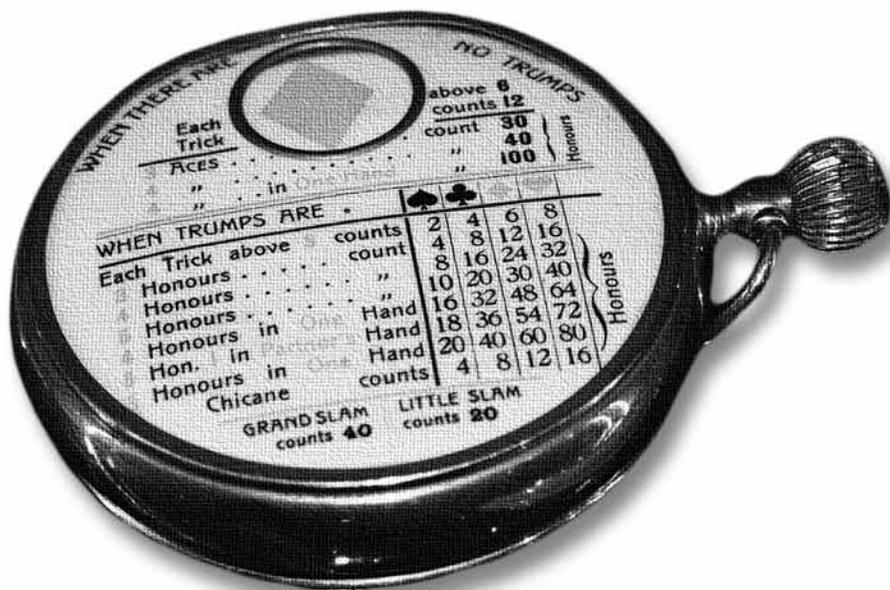


Julian Laderman

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To all the whist and early bridge writers who have left great tales
and a wonderful trail.

Foreword

While unfamiliar today, the word ‘bumblepuppy’ was well-known to whist players and early bridge players. It was used to describe three things: a table composed of poor whist players, a poor play at whist, or a poor whist player. (Some writers felt the proper word when referring to poor players was ‘bumblepuppist’.) The term became very popular after the classic book *Whist; or Bumblepuppy?* appeared in 1880, defining the term as follows: ‘Bumblepuppy is persisting to play whist, either in utter ignorance of all known principles, or in defiance of them, or both.’

Upon entering a private club, as a member or by invitation, one might discreetly ask, ‘Which are the strong tables?’ I can imagine the response, ‘At these three, they are playing whist; at the other two, they are only playing bumblepuppy.’

The word ‘bumblepuppy’ was so popular it generated several spin-offs: ‘bumbledog’ (an elderly, stubborn bumblepuppy), ‘bumbledame’, ‘bp’, and the informal ‘bumblepup’. None of these offshoots of the word were able to approach the popularity of the original. Even though the term ‘bumblepuppy’ was used for decades, its usage diminished once bridge began to dominate whist. I don’t believe the expression ‘bumblepuppy days’ was ever used, but I chose it as the title in order to convey the sixty-year period (1880-1940) that is the central focus of this book. These years take one from the glory days of whist to the mature state of its ultimate successor, contract bridge.

I have tried to write a book on the history of bridge that highlights the aspects of our past that would be of interest to present-day bridge players, like long-forgotten modes of play that appear ‘peculiar’ today. For example, suppose we take you back to 1910. Your opponents bid six spades while you possess a fine heart suit and a spade void. Not willing to allow them to make their likely slam, you leap in with a bid of two hearts. Not a misprint! No one shouts ‘Director!’ or even gives you a strange glance. You did not make an illegal bid. The opponents do look a little frustrated; you sense that they want to bid seven spades but cannot — in 1910, when playing auction bridge, seven spades was an insufficient bid over two hearts! It was simply not high enough. We will see that this seemingly strange situation, which arose from

the scoring system in use at that time, was entirely logical. I cannot resist one more teaser. During the early decades of duplicate, each board was played in the same contract at all tables. This requirement resulted in an excellent comparison of cardplay ability.

It is pleasurable to celebrate birthdays of important events, and it is common to write history books to commemorate a centennial. Many historians are presently busily writing books on World War I. I am kind of doing things backwards by writing the book and then selecting the event. Since bridge evolved with several small steps, I had many very fine choices. I decided that this book would commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the philosophy of contract bridge. On July 15, 1914 an article appeared in *The Times of India* that was the first written document describing a primitive version of our game with the contract approach. Considering that my book is being released just prior to that date, I fear many readers will be hurt that they missed out on the festivities. Those readers should please focus on June 1915 when a new set of laws for American auction bridge went into effect. This was the first set of laws to describe the exact mechanics of our present-day game of bridge. (I am not counting the scoring as part of the mechanics. The scoring system was heading for major revisions that would completely change the strategy used by players.) England had a different set of laws so they cannot take part in the merriment. Sort of like July 4th — no firework displays in London.

Note that these two major events do not mean that present-day bridge is one hundred years old. The philosophy and the mechanics must first be introduced, and a marriage must result. The exciting courtship lasted a dozen years, most of them being spent in Paris living with the Plafond family, and the marriage was finally formalized in New York. The scoring changes were nothing more than selecting furniture for their new home, for which they hired a very upscale designer: Harold S. Vanderbilt. (I promise that by the end of this book, this silly paragraph will make complete sense.)

A Pre-apology and Money-back Guarantee

I feel this book uses the words 'I' and 'my' far too much. Particularly in the Introduction and Part I. I apologize. Sorry. My excuse is that this is not a traditional bridge book trying to teach a clearly defined topic. I am guessing at what readers will find interesting and entertaining. My bridge partners will recognize the technique I have just used: I first apologize and then give my reasoning (excuses). You will notice that I

use a considerable amount of self-deprecating humor. I just have so much material available to me. (There I go again.)

This book comes with a money-back guarantee from the author. If you're an unhappy reader, you don't even have to return the book or produce a receipt. You do, however, have to find me at a bridge event and answer some basic question about the book to prove you actually have read it. Do not apply by either email or regular mail. The guarantee is only the cost of one book to a customer — if you bought five more as gifts for friends who also did not like it, that does not count. I figure if this guarantee gets too expensive, I can just give up going to bridge tournaments. Oh, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are excluded from this offer.

Julian Laderman
January, 2014

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archives/memorabilia and describing the Association's history and their present activities.

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Introduction

Many whist books and journals published between 1880 and 1900 dealt with the good and bad of whist, and the direction it was taking. Many of the disagreements and discussions among the leading writers during that period are still relevant in today's bridge world. At times, while reading articles and books written in the 1890s on the robust health of whist and the status enjoyed by the game, I was reminded of the several movies about the *Titanic* disaster. The first part of any *Titanic* movie introduces the audience to the individuals on the ship as various characters discuss its invincibility. The audience, possessing the ability to foresee the future, anticipates their loss of smugness when faced with the inevitable reality. Almost all whist writers were no different: they could not imagine the imminent decline of whist. They certainly had no fear of bridge, which they dismissed as being simplistic and amoral, particularly for women. However, a few had misgivings about all the new conventions and partnership agreements that were altering the character of whist. They correctly feared that these developments might sink their game.

The Four Generations of Whist/Bridge

This table illustrates the four major periods of bridge evolution. Please, please read the disclaimer that immediately follows it.

Game	Very Popular
Whist	1670-1905
Bridge (Bridge Whist)	1897-1910
Auction Bridge	1908-1930
Contract Bridge	1927-present

DISCLAIMER: I am very uncomfortable providing the dates in this table. Since games evolve and dissolve, they almost always lack both a date of birth and a date of death. I am therefore providing a more limited range that roughly corresponds to 'very popular'. I can justify, but not truly defend, my choice of dates. If any reader feels strongly that I should have used different dates, I will agree with him without even waiting to know the dates he prefers.

I'm sure some readers are surprised by the existence of a form of bridge from 1897-1910. This period is much less known than the other three periods. Most people think there was a jump from whist to auction bridge. When I gave a talk on that form of our game to the American Bridge Teachers' Association a few years ago, I titled it "The Missing Link in Bridge History". As we shall see, the earliest known written document in English containing the rules for the first form of bridge dates from 1886. Games with very similar features appeared in various countries decades earlier. It is generally believed that these rules, after traveling to many parts of the globe, were introduced to the United States in 1893 and reintroduced to England in 1894.

Labeling the column 'very popular' instead of 'exists' also conveys more useful information. There are still millions of people today who regularly play some form of whist. In effect, the whist players are on a different branch of the family tree than the one taken by bridge players in the 1890s. In his *History of Card Games*, David Parlett reports that in 1981 the Waddingtons Playing Card Company in Great Britain conducted a survey. Surprisingly, it found that whist was played by 28% of those surveyed and bridge by only 8%. Of course, it is hard to measure the popularity of a game like bridge. If someone is asked whether they play bridge, they may give a positive response because they play once a year at a family reunion or because they played for a year or so in college forty years ago. It is much easier to measure the popularity of a game where one must buy equipment. For example, one can measure the popularity of Monopoly by the number of games sold. However, a standard deck of cards can be used for hundreds of games.

Perhaps the best way to measure the popularity of a technically complex game is to look at how many books are being published on its play. That way we can separate the once a year casual player from the player who is interested enough to study the game and strives to raise his level of ability. Between 1880 and 1900, over a hundred whist books were either first published or released in new editions. After 1900 only a few books on whist were published, and most of them were on greatly modified forms of the 1900 game. Between 1900 and 1910, approximately sixty books of 100 pages or more in length were published on the earliest form of bridge. Almost none were written on that form of the game after that decade. The next two decades, 1910-1930, were totally dominated by auction bridge books. Towards the end of the 1920s, contract bridge books started appearing, and new auction bridge books totally disappeared. The same authors kept moving on, surmising that their readers would want to learn the latest form of the

game. Some writers produced major works in all four generations from whist to contract. Cynics even accused writers of creating new forms of the game in order to sell more books.

The result was that whist and early bridge writers left a wonderful trail describing the game they played. In the late 1980s, I was in a used bookstore, just looking around, when an old bridge book caught my eye. It was a book containing the official International Laws of Bridge, published in 1948. Possibly I was drawn to it since I was born in 1948. I thought it might be interesting to compare the rules and terminology at that time to the rules of the game I was playing in the 1980s. I was surprised to discover that not much had changed. It aroused my curiosity about bridge history, and I started collecting old whist and bridge books. I discovered that many modern bridge terms (like ‘finesse’, ‘tenace’, and ‘slam’) had the identical meaning for whist players 250 years ago. I found maxims on etiquette that were followed 150 years ago and are still relevant. Collecting these old books became a surprisingly pleasant hobby.

Presentation

Two recent books related to bridge that enjoyed some success are *The Backwash Squeeze* by Edward McPherson and *The Devil’s Tickets* by Gary Pomerantz. The former describes the author’s personal experience of learning bridge, taking lessons, and getting started at duplicate bridge; it contains not one bridge hand. The latter is a history of the Culbertson period with an excellent description of a famous bridge-related murder. That one only includes one bridge deal. I suddenly realized the winning formula — one should write a bridge book that does not try to teach bridge. It should not include a single hand. I set out to do that in this book, and in the first draft of this Introduction, I guaranteed readers that they would not learn one iota of bridge while reading the book. After the book took shape, I realized that a reader might accidentally learn something about bridge. I swear it was not my intent, but a few whist and bridge hands are included in order to demonstrate how the early books described and illustrated deals. As well, many of the maxims that whist players were taught in the 1700s are still applicable at the bridge table.

I believe that very few non-bridge players would ever want to read about the evolution of bridge. Therefore I shall assume that all readers are familiar with the basic mechanics and general rules of the present-day game: bidding, tricks, trumps, etc. This enables me to compare and contrast the earlier forms of the game with modern bridge. It

makes it much easier to describe the earlier generations. Likewise, when it comes to terminology, I can list terms that already existed in whist without defining them if they have retained the identical meaning in bridge. Sometimes, however, the same terms now have entirely different meanings or have slightly changed their meaning over time. And, of course, the earlier games used terms that would not be heard at a modern bridge table, such as ‘flag-flying’, ‘seesaw’, ‘dumby’ and others. Duplicate bridge evolved from duplicate whist. I believe that most of my readers will be duplicate bridge players and will find that aspect interesting. It will be helpful if a reader has played duplicate bridge, but it is not essential.

As I stated earlier, I am trying to describe the interesting, surprising and curious aspects of our common bridge history. One problem is selecting what readers will find interesting. The more one knows about something, the more interesting one finds it. After reading over one hundred whist and bridge books, I find *everything* interesting. Indeed, I might have overeducated myself to the point where I have become the worst person to tackle this type of book.

Part I: Forces for Change discusses the forces that keep bridge as well as all forms of competition in continual flux. The next four parts of the book cover the four generations of bridge. At times I will be referring to whist as the first generation of bridge, as I feel we should not lose those 200+ years of whist history. Most early bridge writers actually saw the game simply as another form of whist.

Part V is titled Early Contract Bridge, and it will take us up to the year 1948. Earlier, I mentioned that the first old book I bought was a 1948 book on the International Laws of Bridge. Actually, I only recently have come to realize the full significance of that book. Throughout the 1940s, the newly-formed ACBL in the USA sought to meet with equivalent British and French organizations to codify International Laws for bridge. With a world war raging and a few extra years required for relative normalcy to return, that first set of international rules involving the ACBL was delayed until 1948.

At the end of this book, readers will find a short list of suggested readings. This list only includes a few important books and articles on the history of whist and bridge. The full bibliography of all source documents quoted (more than 200 books) is available on the publisher’s website at www.masterpointpress.com. A table of the pseudonyms of authors also appears online with the bibliography.

Relatively little space will be devoted to the rules of the old games and the techniques required to play them well since I’m sure readers will never play these games. When I discuss a version of a game it is

because I found the form of play particularly interesting, or because it exhibits some features that were seeds for some future generation. My emphasis will be on how whist players viewed and enjoyed their game, what it added to their lives, and its role in society. Actually it was common to refer to it not merely as ‘whist’ but to call it ‘the noble game of whist’ or ‘the royal game of whist’. Both expressions reflect the great affection whist writers felt for their game. However, personal disagreements over the direction of its development were the source of much of their writing. The transition periods between the four generations were often contentious times, and the battles for and against change broke up many a friendship. Certainly the popularity of the game was driven by the whist/bridge writers, and my account of each period includes brief biographies of its two or three ‘greats’. In their day, most of them were referred to as the ‘king’ of the game. I tend to use their well-earned royal titles.

Many ‘firsts’ in our literature will be encountered: the first maxim in the first written lesson, the first illustration of a thirteen-card hand, the first full deal, the first bidding convention, etc. Of course, defining some of these depends on whether one wishes to view the whist period as a form of bridge. If one does, the first full bridge deal appeared in a book in 1742; if one does not, the first full bridge deal appeared in 1897. At times I have found it useful to present history in a reverse chronological order. Even though it may seem backwards, it can be helpful to climb the bridge family tree by first understanding where a target branch is located. I learned this from watching squirrels climb trees — a tree squirrel certainly seems to know which branches must be targets on the path to the nest. (I am really going out on a limb for this analogy.)

I hope you enjoy your journey through the bridge family tree.

Part I

FORCES FOR CHANGE

It seems to be the natural tendency of all card games to... slough off the parts that militate against their popularity, and to take on features that make them attractive to a wider circle of players.

Foster's Pirate Bridge (1917)

CHAPTER 1

Gambling, Ethical Play, and Fairness

Let me first digress into my toddler days. As a three-year-old, the sandbox was my bridge club. My mother would command, ‘Play nicely with your friends!’ I found her admonition quite troubling. I realized that I needed clearly delineated rules of play. Since I found it quite pleasurable to bang my toy dump truck into the forehead of my playmate, I hoped that was an acceptable action in the ‘sandbox game’. Likewise, I needed to understand the punishments for accidentally or purposely violating the rules. I was not going to curtail my enjoyment without serious consideration of the consequences. In time, I learned that the pack of mothers was not only the sanctioning organization with total authority to set the laws but were also the ‘directors’ enforcing their laws. My only appeal option was crying and that never resulted in a reversal of the verdict.

Intelligent, honest, decent law-abiding players will have widely differing opinions on what is the best way for a game to be played. However, any serious game requires laws that describe how to play and how to rectify the situation when an infraction occurs. Whist/bridge has had a written code of laws since the mid-1700s. Some of those laws have changed relatively little in almost 300 years; for example, in the 1740s the somewhat official laws of whist already stated, ‘No revoke to be claimed, till the trick is turned, or the party who revoked, or his partner, have played again.’ This short law was already concerned with the issue of when a revoke was established. Punishment was dished out in the next law, which was sophisticated enough to provide the non-revoking side with a choice of penalties.

Most law changes in the last three centuries have been generated in attempts to address issues of fairness, gambling, and ethical play. These forces have not only altered bridge, but in fact have actually altered all games, contests, and sports.

Deciding on the ‘Appropriate’ Level of Gambling

Games and gambling have a complicated relationship. There are always some players who want to modify a game in order to make it better for gambling while others want to do the opposite. Actually, all governments try to control gambling. They have two incompatible

objectives: to limit the amount of gambling and at the same time to obtain a sizeable piece of the action. An enormous amount of revenue can be generated by taxing gambling. Thus non-players can alter the development of games.

In 1910, bridge players in Reno, Nevada, could be arrested. Playing any card game, even if no gambling was taking place, was illegal at that time. In Reno of all places! As recently as the 1960s, a rubber bridge club in Toronto was raided and the proprietor charged with running a gaming house. World-class bridge player Eric Murray, a prominent lawyer, appeared for the defense, and was able to get the charges dismissed on the grounds that bridge is a game of skill.

The present-day version of bowling is the result of non-players' aversion to gambling. Ninepins (also called Dutch skittles) is a traditional old Dutch game. It received great fame from Washington Irving's classic, *Rip Van Winkle*. In one scene, Rip meets a group of men wearing traditional Dutch dress (Henry Hudson's crew). They are playing ninepins, and the sound of the ball hitting the pins echoes through the Catskill Mountains like thunder. In reality, the Hudson Valley was originally settled by the Dutch, among whom ninepins was a popular game. In several cities and states, various factions objected to the amount of gambling that took place on ninepins, and laws were passed making the game of ninepins illegal. Players found a simple solution: they added one pin and named this new (legal) game 'tenpins'. Eventually it became the standard form of bowling. This was not the first time that a form of bowling was outlawed: in 1365, King Edward III of England outlawed an early version of the game, so that his troops would spend more time practicing their archery.

The relationship between games and gambling is a complicated one. Ruling bodies have had a hard time legislating gambling, the fundamental question being: what is legal and what is illegal? The answer is usually illogical and often based on location. For example, the government of New York State spent a good part of the eighteenth century kicking the natives off their land. Now New York State wants them to return to their old reservations and open casinos. These casinos would be outside the jurisdiction of New York State's anti-gambling laws, and they would nicely provide a great source of income for the state tax collectors. Most cruise ships profit by offering a casino for gambling. Some ship captains offer a one-day cruise just to get far enough from a dock to make gambling legal. On some rivers a casino can be placed on a barge: gambling would be illegal on land but is perfectly legal on the permanently-docked barge. This location issue has become much more complicated with the rise of internet gambling.

The morality of gambling, and even the image of a gambler, is also very dependent on society and culture. Some greatly respect the gambler as a risk taker — someone analogous to an entrepreneur in business. Some see gambling as the hobby of the rich — horseracing is often called ‘the sport of kings’. Others view gamblers as being one step away from Skid Row. Not only do different nations view gambling differently but the legal issue in any nation is often greatly in flux. During my childhood in New York, state lotteries and off-track betting did not exist. Illegal number running was a thriving industry.

I am extremely happy that I have received great pleasure from bridge without playing for money, and, indeed, the idea of winning masterpoints adds greatly to the pleasure of bridge for many. Of course, masterpoints are not a great gauge of true ability; they simply keep a running record of lifetime successes. Since masterpoints are not really a tangible reward system that can be displayed on a mantel, it is difficult for non-players to see any value in them. A few decades back, when club masterpoint slips were handed out, some players tried to make them tangible by proudly displaying to their guests a shoebox full of their slips.

As a professor of applied mathematics, I often had my classes study the mathematics of actual games and sports: roulette, craps, poker, etc. My students invariably enjoyed the games much more than the underlying mathematics required to study them. No great surprise. One of my favorite courses was a general liberal arts seminar where students would write and present papers related to gambling in the domain of their major. (As gambling is such a rich broad subject, it worked for any major.) Here is a listing of majors with some potential topics.

<i>Politics/Law</i>	Pros and cons of legalizing different forms of gambling
<i>Economics</i>	The revenue generated by gambling
<i>Psychology</i>	Addiction to gambling
<i>Sociology</i>	The role of gambling in society
<i>History</i>	How gambling games have changed and reflect society
<i>Literature</i>	Gambling as a key plot element
<i>Music/Opera</i>	Many operas create drama through gambling
<i>Science/Biology/Medicine</i>	Brain chemistry changes while gambling
<i>Art</i>	Paintings of card players and gamblers
<i>Philosophy</i>	The morality of gambling

Some faculty members would question the importance of studying gambling. I would point out that we are all gamblers. Investing in the stock market is gambling. Buying fire insurance on your home is gambling. Since you only get any return when your home goes up in flames, it is clear that you have placed a bet on having a fire. Of course, not having fire insurance is a much greater gamble. Bookmakers (sorry, I meant to type 'actuaries') work out the insurance company's odds. I don't have life insurance: that is one bet I never want to win.

Games and Gamesters of the Restoration (1930) is composed of two books: *The Compleat Gamester* (1674) by Charles Cotton and *Lives of the Gamesters* (1714) by Theophilus Lucas. In his Introduction to the 1930 publication, Cyril Hughes Hartmann states:

Unless one gambled freely it was quite impossible to be accounted a gentleman, or, for that matter, a lady of fashion at the Court of Charles II. Gambling, dancing, and the theatre were almost the only occupations of the Court when it was at Whitehall, so that to show an interest in all three was actually considered an indispensable part of good breeding.

This is a far cry from the more common religious and governmental attempts to ban gambling. Many famous people took a more moderate, liberal view on gambling: their view was that gambling was fine for them but not for others! We will see that whist/bridge history and gambling are intertwined. One entertaining book on gambling is *The Only Game in Town: An illustrated History of Gambling* by Hank Messick and Burt Goldblatt. The title is based on a common story of one person warning another that he should not play in a particular game since it was crooked, only to receive the response, 'I know, but it is the only game in town.' This book contains an interesting quote from the July 29, 1713 issue of *The Guardian*:

All Play debts must be paid in Specie, or by an Equivalent. The Man who plays beyond his income, pawns his Estate; the Woman must find something else to Mortgage when her Pin Money is gone. The Husband has his Lands to dispose of, the Wife her Person.

This theme will often appear in the days of both whist and bridge. Its goal was to scare women away from the gambling tables and to warn their husbands about the potential for wild behavior.

GENERAL INTEREST

It is to be regretted that bridge has found its way also to America, and that many of our whist-players have yielded to its temptations.

William Mill Butler, 1899

It is to be hoped that a satisfactory method of playing bridge in duplicate will be found, and when it is... we shall have a perfect game of cards.

R. F. Foster, 1900

The nineteenth century belonged to whist, the twentieth century to bridge — but where did bridge come from, and why did it take over? Follow the trail as, with many detours, it winds through duplicate whist, Boston, Swedish whist, Russian whist or ‘biritch’, bridge whist, auction bridge and *plafond* to contract bridge, and finally (thanks to Harold Vanderbilt) becomes essentially the game we play today.

Along the way, you’ll meet the fascinating and colorful characters who popularized each game, played it, taught it, and wrote about it — Hoyle, Cavendish, Elwell, Foster, Work, Culbertson, Goren, and many, many others — and see how these writers facilitated each transition from one game to the next. You’ll discover, too, how society was impacted, as attitudes changed towards gambling, leisure time and the role of women, and how traces of these early games can still be found in our everyday language.



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