

Nowra Bridge Club

40th Anniversary Speech

By Kath Kean, 15th March 2015

Before I get into the potted history of the Club, I'd like to touch for a moment on a potted history of Bridge in this country.

By the 1930s, Bridge had set itself in stone in Australia with clubs developing around the country, although most Bridge was played socially and also commonly used for raising money for charity.

Newspapers joined the craze and regularly printed stories from the Bridge world, for example this headline: Bridge playing – adverse effect on meat sales – Bridge playing housewives reverting to the tin opener!

Daily featured articles on how to run Bridge afternoons/evenings, what sort of food to prepare, making table cloths, etiquette on how to accept and decline invitations (only accept if you are a good player), stringent rules on behaviour and how to dress - long elegant gowns of satin or velvet and jackets for protecting the sleeves whilst playing. Female scorers wearing aprons to protect themselves against carbon sheets, were seated at each table to watch the bidding, play and defence, and to officially score each hand, and also witness infractions.

Despite all the nonsense, players took this sport seriously. Associations were formed in every state to control the fairness of the game and to enable teams from each state to compete against one another.

The point count of today was yet to be developed, consequently contracts were 'auctioned'. Psych bids were rife and star players used their cunning, guile – craftiness, cleverness, deviousness, duplicity and sneakiness. The following devious example made headlines:

The headline:

– '7 Hearts redoubled win by women in Canberra' – breathtaking bidding took place. Dealer South held a 13 card Heart suit and opened a crafty 2D game force, partner bid 2NT negative, cunningly South made a psych bid of 3S, partner innocently supported with a 4S bid,

Now South made the devious bid of 6 Hearts, knowing partner would revert to Spades which would be doubled by opponents - and was. Then triumphantly South now presented her duplicitous 7 Heart bid, knowing partner would see the psych and opponents would double and of course she would redouble!!! Better than opening 7 Hearts hey! Not recommended for the faint hearted!!

The tyranny of distance to our shores made no matter to the international experts such as the American's Eli Culbertson and R.F. Foster, they arrived after weeks on a ship, toured, presented lectures on strategy and play with major newspapers giving them an extraordinary amount of space with lengthy reports and letters to the editor.

Although invented by Charles Vanderbilt, the original rules for Bridge came from England's famous Portland club. Recognised as the oldest club in the world,

founded before 1815 – and the authority on all card games, they pilloried Culbertson's American style of bidding.

Being on the outside of these two competitive countries, we generally followed the then so called Mother Country, however, if we liked something, we adopted it, consequently we saw sense and successfully used his methods.

Finals of interstate matches were broadcast on the radio where enthusiasts sat around the set at home, making history, as never before in the world was this done, taking it to high levels where top players in Sydney were playing against their arch rivals from Melbourne (Australia's big two) through this medium.

Hands were set up in advance by experts and broadcast to listeners who played the hands before hearing how the experts approached it.

##this is how an Australian champion chose to bid this hand, and once again, not for the faint hearted:

1. North opened 1NT – showing at least 4 honour tricks and no worthless doubletons.
2. South bids 7 Diamonds – he knows what he is doing!
3. West doubles holding the Ace of Spades
4. Ahaaa thinks South - West is holding an Ace! South bids 7NT. This is a brilliant bid, making North the declarer, depriving West of the lead and East having to guess which suit to lead!
5. West doubles and South redoubles.

The result – East being a totally unimaginative but conventional player played the fourth from his longest and strongest – a spade!!!

By the time the 1940s and World War 2 rolled in, Culbertson was the world's foremost Bridge authority, and Bridge was hardly affected. - *we played some of the hardest international matches ever played with players forming teams from Great Britain, India, Holland and Australia* – an inmate in Changi noted!

In Norway the Nazis took over virtually all sports and games without bothering with Bridge. The game boomed as people realised it was one activity at which they could officially compete without being seen as cooperating with the occupying forces!

During these years Charles Goren developed the point count system which swept all other systems away and became standard world wide - later called Standard American. The British also adopted the point count and developed the ACOL system.

These valuation methods proved much easier to learn and gave the game the lift it had not enjoyed since the first boom of the early Culbertson years.

The new scale and rich diversity of post war migration to Australia had its impact in all areas of society and Bridge was no exception. Such is history.

When I joined in 1977 the club was happily playing one night a week upstairs at the Nowra Leagues club, which was a beautiful old mansion called Graham Lodge, later torn down to become the Tourist Centre. Being far too noisy, we began the process of moving for one good reason or another to the following venues over the years:

- The White Ensign Club

- The old CWA rooms (three times actually over the years, thrown out the second time)
- The Bom Bowling Club
- The Bom RSL
- The School of Arts annex – a resting place between venues,
- The Leprechorn Hotel where the barman came in at 10:30 pointing to his watch and thumbing us out, and some of our boards were stolen,
- Park Hire garage – generously donated by our president David Smith while we were searching for yet another venue,
- The meeting room at the Shoalhaven Library, inadequate
- The senior cits rooms in the School of Arts carpark, also inadequate, and
- The Band Hall. Here we rested for quite some time. We began to save money and came up with ideas of building a floor above and sharing the venue. This fell through. However, we had a good relationship with the band people. One evening the person who held the key didn't turn up. Standing around, Dorothy Fry generously 'suggested' her back veranda. By this time we were a bunch of desperados. Who would play anywhere, including a tunnel with Braille cards!
- Finally the CWA until we found the current venue.

The personalities

Smoking at the table was rife, and non-smokers suffered terribly – well, when one picks up a big hand, one had to reach for the proverbial fag.

During a congress, my partner picked up said hand, not the first one that day, and she did her usual – slowly put her cards down, stretched her arms, lit the cigarette, picked the cards up and opened 1S. After the hand was finished the director came over.... Need I say more! In her defence her body language was not meant to be a signal. But there you go, when smokers get excited.....

During the seventies the club attracted a commander from the Navy and his Bridge cronies who came from the old era. This naval contingent did bring some glamour into our Bridge world. On special events such as the club championship or teams nights, the ladies wore long dresses with corsage, and the gentlemen, not quite tails, but their best suit.

#this esteemed sailor did the directors course, and ran the place like a ship. For example, if you put the wrong date on the scoresheet, or indeed, left it off, you received the penalty of points off your scores, and of course if you put in the wrong score, the penalty was even more points off!#

Staying with the navy, two chiefs, who were top card players and thrashed all on the ship with their crew room Bridge which was based on guess work and no point count, decided to thrash the Bridge club players, hee hee! After 3 weeks of frustration, coming last, they decided to take lessons, and of course, eventually became two of our most challenging players. Mel Mason and Gary Holloway.

Robert Mura, a Frenchman who passionately loved the game, was our mad hatter on special nights with a top hat and a jacket, all of which he designed and sewed himself, pasted with cards. At home his vegetable garden was set out in the shapes of Spades, Hearts, Diamonds and Clubs.

Zola Morgan who, if one dared to smoke at her table, would take out her fan and flutter it right in front of one's face.

Marge Kingston a gracious but forgetful lady, on one of her regular Bridge days at home, took a sleeping pill at 5am and was sound asleep when 7 ladies turned up at her door. – Conversation at the Bridge table –

Bridge player - 'You know I lost my glasses the other day,' Marge – 'I lost my glasses once, now where was it? Hmmmmm, Oh God I never remember these things, one Spade – 2H - somewhere, now where, oh I was in um, 4S.....4NT.. Um I was walking in....um um.. Memory/memory.... Oh yes, pass - Kathmandu!' that so appealed to my sense of humour!

Marge Wood, with a 6 months to live prognosis, came home from the big city to die. Played Bridge every day and walked once a month from the centre of town to Shoalhaven Heads, and lived for 12 years.

Ruth King – the clubs much loved Red Hot Mumma and Sale Of The Century contestant, who loved to hold teams matches at her fascinating home full of antiques and curiosities, where she entertained us all with her cask wine, (empty casks filled the fireplaces, just as good as wood), bad piano skills on an out of tune piano and singing Sophie Tucker songs with the proverbial burning cigarette smoke winding its way up into the ether.

Her dream was to retire to a Pacific Island and live as - and with mind you, a native, paying all for work done with cigarettes. Sadly missed when she passed away.

Gladys Pettifer – how many times did she leave her handbag at the club, go to Woolworths for late night shopping and realise later at the checkout, that she had no purse. In the meantime Maggie and Marg-Ann looking for her at 11pm, handbag in tow....

There were many personalities who graced our club,
Our Olympic gold medallist for boxing, Tony Pastor
Mary Howell, a fading beauty with courtesan paradigms and a very mischievous smile

John Bates, the 13 card pickup and before dealing machines – 52 card pickup - retiree – forever showing his hand and dropping three or four, sometimes five or six cards throughout the game. A lovely old eccentric who flew to England and drove through the new tunnel to France on his own. We were all amazed, no - stunned he survived.

Peter and Caroline Marshall

Chris Ellis

Our own doctors, Sue Britton and Larry Bryant

Peter Moller

Helen Draper who instigated our congresses

The Davids

Grace Bawden, our first president

Lyn O'Brien

John O'Brien

Peter Berzines – our founder

Una Chegwidden –a true lady and greatly loved by all

The Coopers, Renee and Cec
Our gallant David Smith
Angela Davies, and by no means last -
Joan Paton, our South African champion, et al
Each left their mark and gave us moments of laughter and joy.

A last word, quote from Julian Burnside, Human Rights advocate – “Vision without administration can cause difficulties, but administration without vision leads to a cul de sac.

Let’s keep amusing each other, spread the joy and consider that vision towards our future.”

Acknowledgements

Cathy Chua – “The History of Australian Bridge 1930-1990”