

Bridge In Early El Paso

No one can set a precise day when people began to play duplicate bridge in El Paso. Many had learned bridge by reading Elwell and Culbertson. At the Toltec club men gathered to play rubber bridge for high stakes, but the first duplicate game was probably the 1929 benefit for the Community Chest, organized by Hal Foster and Travis White. There were more than twenty-five tables in play, and while the game was ostensibly a charity game, its organizers hoped to generate interest in duplicate bridge. Indeed they succeeded. What they began in 1929—the fruits of their efforts—appears this April in the International City Regional Tournament.

1929 was a big year for bridge in El Paso, and an amazingly fine assortment of players joined in the efforts to build bridge here. Richard O'Leary had studied Elwell's book as a young man in Mexico. Travis White had studied the Culbertson book and the writings of Sidney Lentz and wrote articles for *THE BRIDGE WORLD*, the very voice of Ely Culbertson. Hal Foster examined the Culbertson Four-Five No Trump Convention and thought of a modification, which Culbertson liked so much that he credited one of his staff members with inventing it in his second edition of the *Gold Book*. Travis White wrote "Homer Nods" for the Culbertson magazine and later collected hands which he analyzed in his book *Odd Tricks*.

Players became more and more excited about the new game. Many played at Hal Foster's Bridge Studio at the Hilton Hotel. On Wednesdays there were duplicate games and, according to Liz Goodman, he gave cash prizes for first, second, and third place since there were no fractional slips then. He taught contract bridge to those who respected his criticism. As someone said, "We learned to play bridge with tears streaming down our faces."

Mrs. Carrie Fant, another bridge builder like Hal Foster, helped organize Ely Culbertson's World Bridge Olympics in 1932. In this game, which was a forerunner of the Continentwide Charity Game, players played par hands based on Culbertson's books. Two El Paso ladies, Miss Esther R. Brown and Mrs. Edith Pridgen, memorized the Culbertson book, entered the contest, and won the Texas state championship, East-West. They modestly remind us that they had weak opponents, but their near-perfect score brought them newspaper publicity and a tall trophy, and bridge in early El Paso took another step forward.

People began to think in terms of the big brother organization for bridge in New York—the American Contract Bridge League. But some asked, why join? The games at the Del Norte were elegant social functions which meant much to players during the great depression. Men dressed in tuxedos, ladies in evening gowns. The price for dinner was only \$1.00. If it was the evening for the Calcutta, what a great time players knew they would have. Dr. Jamieson once bid his wife up to \$100, and she won the event. At the weekly games players participated in pools; they might win part of the pool or they might lose their quarter, but they had a grand time regardless. Mrs. Alves Dixon and Mrs. G. L. Moreland directed the games. Why, many asked, should we in El Paso—an isolated, inaccessible city—pay someone in New York to put on our tournaments?

In 1940, Mr. and Mrs. Moreland, Margaret Wilder, Alves Dixon, Bert Semple, and Miriam Mottelson went to San Antonio for a tournament. Going away to a tournament was a big trip, then; there were no jets or interstate highways. The San Antonio unit detected the interest in bridge of these El Pasoans. How could they interest El Paso in joining ACBL?

In 1941, the San Antonio unit sponsored a regional championship tournament at the Del Norte for El Paso. Bert Semple was then President of the Texas Regional Conference and, along with Mrs. Moreland, helped generate interest in the tournament. Clara Carter remembers being the dark horse winner of the Calcutta, which netted her \$186.00, and Jackie Epstein remembers being on the winning team. It was Shirlee Fairchild's first regional championship in the Open Pairs, and there were other celebrities here from throughout the state.

George Beynon came from New York to direct. He made, according to Bernice Burnett, "a magnificent and impassioned speech—then called for speeches from the members to express their ideas. Many responded both **pro** and **con**. When the vote was counted, out of that ballroom full of people only five voted to join the ACBL!"

In 1947, John and Elaine King moved to El Paso and encouraged the growth of duplicate bridge. Mrs. Locker ran a club for a short time, but bridge enthusiasts played more frequently at the Del Norte Club and at Ft. Bliss. The Kings were bridge builders who almost singlehandedly encouraged the clubs of El Paso to try again to affiliate with ACBL. They had some from St. Louis and recognized the advantages of affiliation.

In May, 1949, President Max Moye presented to Mrs. W. E. Thompson what was to be the last traveling trophy for the highest total bridge score for the season at the Del Norte Club, for on May 17, 1949 the El Paso Bridge Club, the King's Bridge Studio, and the Ft. Bliss Officers' Club organized as Unit 159, American Contract Bridge League. Corinne Berry and Mildred Evans recall the excited players in the game that evening when they won their first master point. Points, points, points—the whispers around the room reflected the excitement of the players. The first Board of Directors included R. A. Densmore, Frank Harriss, John and Elaine King, Mrs. G. L. Moreland, Max Moye, Mrs. R. S. Parker, T. R. Sullivent, and H. P. Robinson. Mrs. Elaine King was elected president, Frank Harriss, the unit's first treasurer, established a bank account at the El Paso National Bank. Clara Carter, Rose Hill, and Bernice Burnett wrote the unit's first code of by-laws and Constitution.

Eventually the Kings left El Paso in the midst of one of several unfortunate incidents that have attempted to undermine the strength of our unit.

Players became excited about the possibility of a sectional tournament in El Paso. Mrs. King knew Charles Goren and invited him to come. In May, 1950, the EL PASO HERALD POST records the winners of several events in the first Southwest Sunland sectional tournament. Mr. Goren won the Roland Parker trophy in the Individual. Mrs. T. R. Burnett and Mrs. M. Hanks won the Women's and Dr. Vincent Ravel and Elmer Berkenfield, two veritable "unknowns" in the duplicate circle, won the Open Pairs. The Goren column became a regular feature in the EL PASO TIMES shortly after this tournament.

It was not until 1953, when Frank Harriss was President of the Texas Regional Conference, that El Paso had its first Regional tournament. Mrs. H. A. Woods, President of Unit 159, recalls that the tournament site was the Women's Club. The traditional Sunday banquet was at the Hilton. Eventually the unit had to move to larger quarters for its tournaments. Sheraton Motor Hotel hosted one, but our big regionals have been held in 1956, 1959 and 1962 at the Hotel Cortez.

With its growing membership Unit 159 added many fine players. In 1957, Mrs. H. A. Woods became El Paso's first "homemade" Life Master when she won the Mexican Nationals. Effie had come to El Paso from California and quickly established herself as being one of the finest players in the state. She became a regular bidding judge in the Master Solver's club of TEXAS BRIDGE. With her son Al she defended twice her statewide bidding championship for Mr. Hathorn's publication. Hands that she and Miss Maybelle Long played in their national championship win eventually reappeared in the bridge books as examples of fine play. With her long list of regional championships, she became one of El Paso's several representatives in the OFFICIAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BRIDGE.

In 1959, Bernice Burnett, playing with her close friend Jack Ehrlenbach in the Los Angeles Bridge Week, amassed a 78% game in the 2nd session of the Open Pairs. A hand that she played Lew Mathe credited Mr. Ehrlenbach for playing in the **Los Angeles Examiner**.

El Paso has also had its share of fine bridge teachers. Hal Foster was the first, but today Mrs. Woods, Mack Carroll, and Steve and Frances Lawrence conduct regular classes throughout the city. Special classes are also conducted

at Ft. Bliss, the YWCA, and the YMCA. Also, community centers and churches throughout the city offer classes in beginning, intermediate, and advanced card technique.

In 1963, a rather controversial system appeared at the local games when Stormy Horn introduced the Reed-Horn system in the area. The system is basically a strong club, weak no trump system with five card major suit openings. Its forte is precise slam bidding sequences with numerous asking bids for suit and trump controls. The R/H Four No Trump convention, a part of the system, was recently approved by the ACBL. Several local partnerships play the system regularly.

In 1966, Mrs. A. H. Butler began another controversial movement in bridge building in El Paso when she applied for a sanction for the inmates at La Tuna Federal Correctional Institute. The club held its first master point game in December, 1966. As part of their rehabilitation to society, many of the players are allowed to participate in local games and sectionals. President W. H. Lewis brought this move in El Paso before the National Board of Governors at Montreal and received approval from the Board for the unit's efforts.

In 1967, at San Antonio Regional, Steve Lawrence was elected Vice-President of the Texas Regional Conference, recognizing his many efforts to build bridge throughout the state by his participation in almost all of the sectionals in West Texas, his help in the revision of By-laws of the conference, and his ability to make decisions that encourage bridge in Texas. It was his work with Jerry Lewis that helped Lubbock get a place in the tournament cycle for their successful West Texas Regional. Steve and Frances originally came to El Paso in 1954. A year later they moved to Bogota, Columbia, where they established a bridge club. They represented the state of Bahia in the Brazilian Nationals in 1959 and 1960, Steve being the representative once and Frances, twice.

Many fine players have come to El Paso and have lived among us. Among these was Mrs. Martha Newbill who was a Life Master from St. Louis when she came. Jim Jacoby made Life Master while stationed at Ft. Bliss as did Fred Karpin, who later became one of Washington, D. C.'s finest teachers and theorists of the game. Robert Barrett, one of the founders of the Houston Bridge League, whom everyone remembers as sending an orchid to his Mixed Pairs' partner, became a regular at the El Paso tournaments before he retired from tournament competition. Many others have come and gone, leaving their mark on the growth of bridge in early El Paso. At present several clubs are actively supporting Unit 159 in the promotion of bridge: the Ft. Bliss Officers' Wives Club, the Ft. Bliss Duplicate Club, the Woods' Bridge Studio, the Skyliners Duplicate Club, the Cortez Bridge Club, and the William Beaumont Officers' Club. Other clubs are in the process of being sanctioned at the Ft. Bliss Special Services Club and the Ft. Bliss Non-Commissioned Officers' Club. Although some of the clubs are necessarily invitational, one can play bridge almost anywhere in El Paso every day. There are small games and large ones, club championships and local championships; there are new games like the Strong/Weak game and the Open Team with a limitation of only one Life Master per team. Regular supporters of unit games from Las Cruces help continue the growth of bridge in our city, and El Pasoans reciprocate by attending games in Las Cruces, Alamogordo, and other areas.

So what started with Hal Foster's and Travis White's benefit for the Community Chest has now mushroomed into the large tournament that all of us are now attending. It is through the efforts of the bridge builders who have been mentioned in this history and the many others who joined them that bridge has prospered in El Paso and will continue to do so.