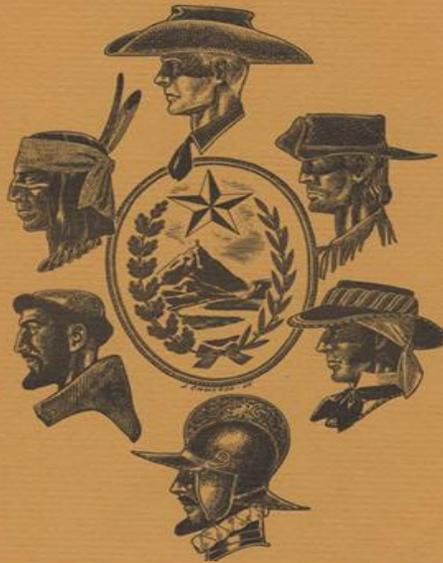


PASSWORD



Lillian was a long-time
member of Unit #159



~ PASSWORD ~

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FALL, 1985

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BIDDING AT THE PASS

The Development of Duplicate Bridge in El Paso

by Robert M. Esch

No one can set a precise day when people began to play duplicate bridge in El Paso. Many had learned bridge shortly after the turn of the century by reading the books of Joseph Browne Elwell, the American authority at the time on the original game of bridge (bridge-whist). At El Paso's fashionable Toltec Club men gathered to play rubber bridge for high stakes; and at Ysleta's equally fashionable Valley Inn, according to Martha Patterson Peterson in "All Aboard! The Interurban to El Paso High, 1913-1917" (*Password*, XXVIII, 4), "frequent and popular bridge soirees" were held during the early decades of this century. 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 25 tables in play, and while the game was ostensibly a charity game, its organizers hoped to generate interest in duplicate bridge.

Both of the organizers were well qualified to lead the way. Travis White, a prominent El Paso attorney, had read Sidney Lenz, an expert on auction bridge, and he was studying the system of contract bridge being propounded in bridge magazines by Ely Culbertson. Later, Mr. White wrote articles for *The Bridge World*, the very voice of Culbertson, and collected hands that he analyzed in his book *Odd Tricks*. Hal Foster was also an early-day convert to contract bridge

Dr. Esch is an associate professor of English at The University of Texas at El Paso, where he directs the composition program. An active participant in duplicate bridge, he has won several Regional tournaments and earned the rank of Life Master in 1976.

and a close student of Culbertson. Shortly after the Community Chest charity game, he held weekly duplicate games at his Bridge studio in the Hilton Hotel. According to his daughter Liz Goodman, he gave cash prizes for first, second, and third place. He also taught contract bridge to those who respected his demanding standards and his blunt criticism. As someone said, "We learned to play bridge with tears streaming down our faces." Among other excellent bridge teachers and energetic duplicate-bridge promoters in those early years were Elizabeth Burr and Carrie Fant.

It was Carrie Fant who helped organize Ely Culbertson's World Bridge Olympics in 1932. In this game, participants played par hands based on Culbertson's book. Two El Paso ladies, Miss Esther R. Brown and Mrs. Edith Pridgen, virtually memorized the Culbertson book, entered the contest, and won the Texas state championship as the East-West pair. They modestly claimed that they had weak opponents, but their near-perfect score brought them local newspaper publicity and a tall trophy. And duplicate bridge took another step forward in El Paso.

Players began to think in terms of affiliating with the national organization for bridge, the American Contract Bridge League (at that time called the American Bridge League). But some saw no reason to join. The games at the Del Norte Hotel were elegant social functions that meant much to players during the Great Depression. Men dressed in tuxedos; the ladies, in evening gowns. The price for dinner was only \$1.00. If it was the evening for a special event called the Calcutta, what a great time players knew they would have bidding for any partnership that might win. Dr. Jamison once bid his wife up to \$100, and she won the event. At the weekly games, which were directed by Mrs. Alves Dixon and Mrs. G. L. Moreland, players participated in pools; they might win part of the pool or they might lose their quarter, but they had a grand time regardless. Why, asked many, should we in El Paso — an isolated, inaccessible city — pay someone in New York to put on our games?

Logical as that argument seemed at the time, a few of the El Paso players kept thinking about the Big World of Bridge outside the local scene. In 1940, six of those players — Mr. and Mrs. Moreland, Margaret Wilder, Alves Dixon, Bert Semple, and Miriam Mottelson — went to San Antonio for an ACBL tournament. The members of the San Antonio unit enthusiastically welcomed these visitors who had driven more than 600 miles from "isolated" El Paso in order to play in

a recognized bridge tournament, and they wondered how they might interest El Paso in joining ACBL.

As it turned out, they did more than just wonder. In 1941, the San Antonio unit sponsored a regional championship tournament for El Paso at the Del Norte Hotel. Bert Semple and Mrs. Moreland helped generate interest in the tournament. Clara Carter was the dark horse winner of the Calcutta, which netted her the sum of \$186.00, and several "old-timers" remember that Jackie Epstein was on the winning team. Bridge celebrities from all over Texas attended the tournament. George Beynon came from New York to direct. And, as Bernice Burnett recalled several years ago, "he made a magnificent and impassioned speech — then called for speeches from the players to express their ideas. Many responded both pro and con. When the vote was counted, out of the ballroom full of people only five voted to join ACBL!" The vast majority, it seems, felt that they didn't quite hold the cards for further bidding at that time. Or perhaps it was the "forbidding" clouds of war on the horizon which prompted their conservative "Pass."

In 1947, John and Elaine King moved to El Paso from St. Louis, where they had enjoyed the advantages of affiliation with ACBL. They embarked immediately on a vigorous campaign of educating El Paso's duplicate-bridge players to the benefits of ACBL membership. And this time there was success. In May, 1949, Max Moyer, president of El Paso's Del Norte Bridge Club, presented to Mrs. W. E. Thompson what was to be the last traveling trophy for the highest total bridge score earned for the season at that club; for on May 17, 1949, the El Paso Bridge Club, the Fort Bliss



In May of 1949, Max Moyer, president of the El Paso Bridge Club, presents to Mrs. W. E. Thompson the club traveling trophy for the highest total bridge score of the season. (Photo courtesy Judy Thompson Koplan)

Officers Bridge Club, and the Kings' Bridge Studio organized as Unit 159, American Contract Bridge League. Many El Pasoans who are still active in competitive bridge recall the excited players in the game that evening when they won their first ACBL master point (the unit which measures bridge achievement in tournament play).

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. Elaine King was elected president. Frank Harriss, the unit's first treasurer, established a bank account at the El Paso National Bank. Clara Carter, Ross Hill, and Bernice Burnett wrote the unit's first code of by-laws and constitution.

Not long after that, the members of Unit 159 began planning for a sectional tournament in El Paso. Mrs. King was acquainted with bridge luminary Charles Goren, and she invited him to attend. In May, 1950, the *El Paso Herald-Post* recorded 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 Pairs; and Dr. Vincent Ravel and Elmer Berkenfield, two veritable "unknowns" in the duplicate circle, won the Open Pairs. Shortly after this tournament, the Goren column became a regular feature in *The El Paso Times*.

It was not until 1955, when Frank Harriss was president of the Texas Regional Conference, that El Paso held its first Regional tournament. Its setting was the attractive reception rooms of the Woman's Club. In later years, as duplicate bridge became more popular in the El Paso Southwest and as travel to El Paso became easier for the region's bridge players, the Regionals moved to successively larger quarters — to the Hotel Cortez (in 1956, 1959, 1962, and 1968), to the Hilton Inn and the Rodeway Inn (1972), and to the El Paso Civic Center (1976 and 1984).

In 1957, Mrs. H. A. (Effie) Woods became El Paso's first Life Master (the highest rank of player in the ACBL) when she won the Mexican Nationals. Mrs. Woods 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 the publication *Texas Bridge*. With her son Al, she successfully defended twice her statewide bidding championship for that magazine. She also received even wider recognition for her skill: various hands which she and fellow El Pasoan May Belle Long had 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 1966 Mrs. A. H. Butler initiated a controversial movement when she applied for a sanction for the inmates of La Tuna Federal Correctional Institute. The El Paso unit held its first masterpoint game there in December, 1966. As part of their rehabilitation to society, many of the players were later allowed to participate in local games and sectionals. This daring experiment was subsequently commended by the National Board of Governors of ACBL.

At the San Antonio Regional in 1967, Steve Lawrence, an El Paso resident since 1954 and one of the first ten El Pasoans to earn the rank of Life Master, was elected vice-president of the Texas Regional Conference in recognition of his many efforts



to build duplicate bridge throughout the state—for example, his participation in almost all of the sectionals in West Texas, his help in the revision of the by-laws of the conference, and his work with Jerry Lewis which helped Lubbock get a place in the tournament cycle for its highly successful West Texas Regional.

Many other fine players have lived in El Paso — some for only brief periods — and have helped to popularize the game of duplicate bridge and to build its prestige in this area. Jim Jacoby, now one of the world's leading players and the author of the column "Win at Bridge" which appears regularly in the *El Paso Herald-Post*, earned the rank of Life Master while he was stationed at Fort Bliss. The same is true of Fred Karpin, who went on to distinguish himself as an outstanding theorist of the game and one of the best teachers of bridge in Washington, D.C. Other nationally ranked professional players like Neil Chambers and Mark Lair began playing and perfecting their game while they were stationed at Fort Bliss.

For many years the members of Unit 159 had envisioned the day when the unit could establish in El Paso a Bridge Center which would be the focal point for ACBL club and unit events and other duplicate-



This 1962 photo shows the ten El Pasoans who were the first to earn the American Contract Bridge League rank of Life Master. Seated, from left, are Mrs. Frank Harriss, Mrs. H. A. Woods, Mrs. A. P. Mottelson, Miss May Belle Long, and Mrs. T. R. Burnett. Standing, from left, are Steve Lawrence, Mr. Harriss, Mack Carroll, Mrs. Vernon Berry, and Alex Harrison.

bridge activities in the area. This dream came to be realized principally through the generosity of the late Clarence V. Decker (affectionately known as "Deck"). In 1957 and 1958 he held numerous positions of responsibility in the unit. "Deck" passed away on May 15, 1976, conditionally leaving the residue of his estate to assist in the acquisition of a unit bridge-club facility. Following final settlement of his estate in mid 1977, it was determined that the amount available to Unit 159 would be approximately \$19,000.

Numerous meetings were held, and a detailed digest of requirements were developed. Then a search for a suitable facility — or for land on which to construct a Bridge Center — was undertaken. After about eight months of search, with particular emphasis on locations reasonably centered in the residential areas of the city, the duly designated committee members located a building at 2216 E. Yandell Drive. The owner agreed to rent it to Unit 159 with an option to buy. By August, 1978, the experiment demonstrated that operation of a Bridge Center was financially feasible. On September 19, 1978, following agreement by several unit members to cosign the mortgage note, the site became the property of Unit 159.

After extensive renovation, refurbishing, and ongoing improvements — all accomplished with the financial assistance and the

donated labor of many unit members — the former semi-manufacturing facility was transformed into the attractive, comfortable home of Unit 159: the Clarence V. Decker Bridge Center.

At present, several clubs are actively supporting Unit 159 in the promotion of duplicate bridge: the Fort Bliss Officers' Wives Club, the Del Norte, Sunshine, and Mountain Shadows Bridge Clubs, and the unit game, now called the International City Bridge Club. There are small games and large ones, club championships and local championships, charity affairs, the various Grand National Pairs and Team events, games for "rookies," and an assortment of "flighted" events which group players by the number of master points they have earned. A special feature of the large tournament held in El Paso during the Labor Day weekend of 1984 was a two-session Open Pairs event for "seniors only" (players 55 years of age and older). Because this event attracted more than 50 tables in play, the ACBL district which includes El Paso will qualify for a special Seniors Regional Tournament.

A final major change in the direction of bridge in El Paso occurred in the spring of 1985 when the national organization completed a redistricting plan that shifted the El Paso unit to District 17, which includes New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming. This is an exciting change for Unit 159 in that its members will no longer have to travel to such distant cities as Dallas, Austin, or Houston in order to participate in regional Grand National Pairs or Teams championships.

In the five-plus decades since that opening bid at the 1929 Community Chest benefit, a lively sequence of sound calls and a resolute series of skillful plays have secured the "contract" for duplicate bridge in the region of the Pass.★