



BRIDGE

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Visionary

Harold Vanderbilt's
Game Turns 100





Centennial

Contract bridge turns 100 on November 1

By Paul Linxwiler with extensive content from the Official Encyclopedia of Bridge

This year, contract bridge players around the world will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Harold Vanderbilt's invention of the game in 1925. The now-famous story of Vanderbilt and a group of traveling companions creating the game while aboard a cruise ship requires a bit of a prologue, however, because contract bridge did not arise overnight, but rather as part of an evolution of earlier trick-taking card games. To get a better idea of why Vanderbilt's version of the game became so popular, therefore, it helps to take a quick overview of these earlier incarnations.

Whist



Title page of Hoyle's 1750 edition on the game of whist (ACBL collection)

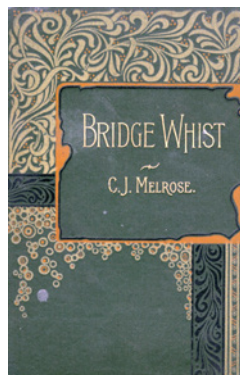
Whist was king of all card games for more than 300 years, and its Anglo-centric fan base wrote extensively about this addictive pastime. Best known, of course, is Edmund Hoyle's "Short Treatise on Whist," first published in 1742. Hoyle wrote books on all types of games, but his primary focus was cards, and his expertise gave rise to the expression "according to Hoyle," a synonym for authoritative writing.

But Hoyle may be one of the best-documented victims of intellectual property theft, as his works were endlessly copied by others using his name.

Whist is played by four people, two partners against two partners. A regular pack of 52 cards is

dealt, 13 to each player. The last card dealt is turned face up on the table. Its suit becomes the trump suit. This card remains on the table until it is the dealer's turn to play to the first trick, when he may return it to his hand. The player at the left of the dealer makes the first lead, and the play proceeds as in bridge except that all four hands are concealed; there is no dummy. Six tricks taken make the "book." Each trick won over the book scores one point for the partners winning that trick. The range of possible scores for either set of partners is from one to seven. Any number of deals may be played. Scoring is by games. Most versions provide for rubber bonuses and honor bonuses. At the conclusion of play, the side having the greatest number of points is the winner.

Bridge whist



Bridge whist appeared in the late 19th century and succeeded whist in popularity until auction bridge became the vogue early in the 20th century. The chief differences between bridge whist and whist are the manner of selection of the trump suit, the introduction of play at notrump, the exposure of the dummy hand, and the innovation of the double and redouble calls, which could continue indefinitely. This endless redoubling feature introduced the element of gambling for very high stakes into the staid game of whist, which caused a storm of disapproval. The "Whist

c. 1600–1900

Originating in England, **whist** is a hugely popular trick-taking card game.

c. 1875–1905

Bridge whist adds a twist to the game: a dummy that all players can see.

c. 1903–1930

Auction bridge allows competitive bidding. Overtricks count toward game and slam bonuses.

c. 1918–1940

The French game **plafond** ("ceiling") requires players to bid game or slam to earn bonuses.



Harold S. Vanderbilt modifies
plafond's
scoring
table and
adds the
concept of
vulnerability
to create
contract bridge.



The first national
championship is played
for the Vanderbilt Cup.
The contest is still
played today.



Ely Culbertson publishes
the Contract Bridge Blue
Book. The bestseller uses
honor tricks for hand
valuation.



Easley
Blackwood
invents the
famous
ace-asking
convention.

Reference Book,” published in 1898, called doubling
“the most objectionable feature of the game.”

Instead of the trump suit being selected by the
turn of the last card dealt, the dealer or his partner
has the privilege of naming the trump suit or
notrump. It was a requirement of the game that the
leader ask, “Partner, may I lead?” to which his part-
ner, if he did not plan to double, was required to
respond, “Pray do.” The play then proceeded as in
auction or contract bridge.

The scoring is different from whist, in which each
trick counted only one point. In bridge whist (some-
times called just “bridge” in that era), the four suits
and notrump have varying values. Spades are the
lowest of the suits in value, followed in ascending
order by clubs, diamonds, hearts and notrump.
Honors, games, rubbers and slams are also scored.

Auction bridge



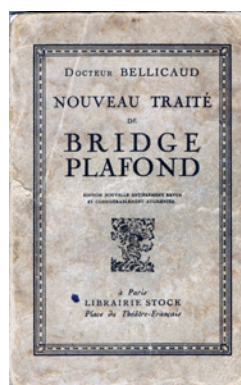
Auction bridge is the third
step in the evolution of the
general game of bridge. The
great innovation in auction
bridge was the introduction
of competitive bidding. It was
first played in 1903 or 1904,
but the precise circumstanc-
es are disputed. The popular-
ity of auction bridge
increased enormously, and

the activity in whist and bridge whist decreased
proportionately. After the introduction of contract
bridge in 1926, auction bridge lost favor rapidly.

In auction bridge, the aim was to keep the con-
tract as low as possible because the declarer's side
was credited with the number of tricks won,

whether contracted for or not. For example, the
declarer might have bid 2♠ and actually won six
tricks over his book; he was credited with making a
small slam. Penalties and premiums in auction are
the same without regard to vulnerability. Honor
scoring in auction bridge is different from contract
bridge – so important, in fact, that it could distort
the bidding.

Plafond



This French card game was
the immediate predecessor of
contract bridge. Vanderbilt
used plafond (which means
“ceiling”) as the basis for his
approach to the new game.

An article from the
September 1931 issue of *The
Bridge World* dates the origin
of plafond to 1918. Only those
tricks bid for and made were
scored “below the line” and counted toward game.
Overtricks scored 50 points above the line for each
additional trick. Except for increasing the slam
bonuses to 100 for a small slam and 200 for a
grand slam, awarded whether the slam was bid or
not, the trick scores and penalties were much as in
auction. However, a bonus of 50 points was scored
for making any contract successfully; the first
game for either side received a bonus of 100; win-
ning the rubber was worth an additional 400.

Synthesis: Contract bridge

Up to this point, whist, bridge, auction and pla-
fond had simply grown, which is generally the way
with card games. No individual can be given credit

for inventing the dummy, the idea of bidding, the auction principle or the ceiling principle of *plafond*. But Vanderbilt perfected a new form of the game, embodying the *plafond* principle but including the element of vulnerability and producing a scoring table that corrected the major faults in *plafond*. He succeeded so well that his game of “contract bridge” became the staple diet of card players everywhere. Afterward, he wrote, “Many years of experience playing games of the whist family were, I think, a necessary prelude to acquiring the background and knowledge needed to evolve the game of contract bridge. Starting as a young boy about 70 years ago, I have played successively over the years whist, bridge [whist], auction bridge and *plafond*.”

“I compiled in the autumn of 1925 a scoring table for my new game. I called it contract bridge and incorporated in it, not only the best features of auction and *plafond*, but also a number of new and exciting features: premiums for slams bid and made, vulnerability, and the decimal system of scoring which, by increasing both trick and game values and all premiums and penalties, was destined to add enormously to the popularity of contract bridge.

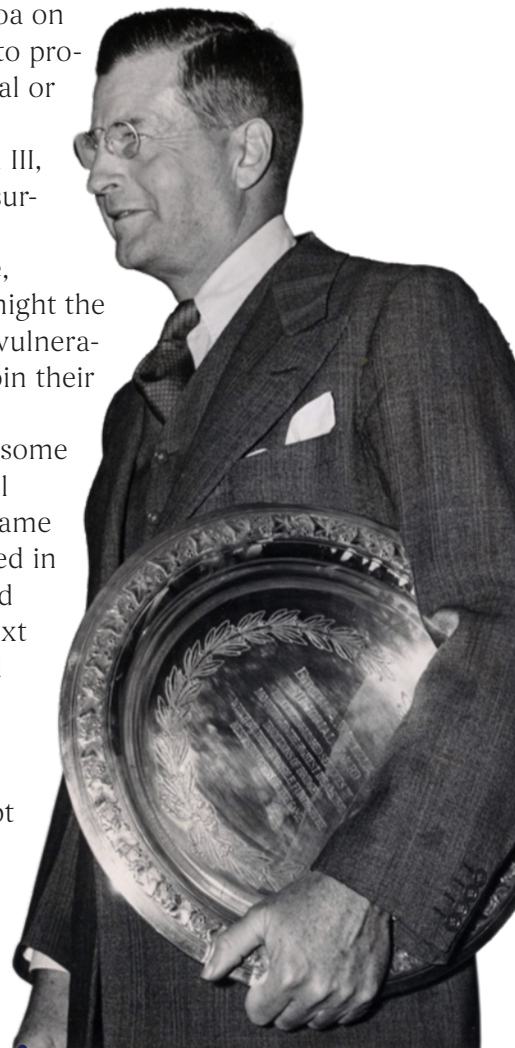
“An ideal opportunity to try out my new game presented itself while I was voyaging shortly after completing my scoring table with three auction bridge playing friends on board the steamship *Finland* from Los Angeles to Havana via the Panama Canal, a nine-day trip.

“At first, we were at a loss for a term, other than ‘game in’ to describe the status of being subject to higher penalties because of having won a game. Fortunately for us, a young lady on board the *Finland* solved that problem by suggesting the word ‘vulnerable.’

“We enjoyed playing my new game on board the

Finland so much that, on my return to New York, I gave typed copies of my scoring table to several of my auction bridge friends. I made no other effort to popularize or publicize contract bridge. Thanks apparently to its excellence, it popularized itself and spread like wildfire.”

No world-popular game in history can so accurately pinpoint its conception and the first time it was ever played. Research has established that the *Finland* reached Balboa on Oct. 31, 1925, too late to proceed through the canal or for passengers to go ashore. Francis Bacon III, in 1975 the then sole surviving member of Vanderbilt’s foursome, recalled that on that night the lady who suggested “vulnerable” was allowed to join their game of *plafond* and attempted to suggest some exotic and impractical changes based on a game she said she had played in China. This so irritated Vanderbilt that the next day, while the *Finland* passed through the canal, he worked out the scoring table for contract which, except for notrump tricks then being valued at 35 points each, remained virtually unchanged half a



1937

The American Contract Bridge League is formed from several rival contract bridge organizations.



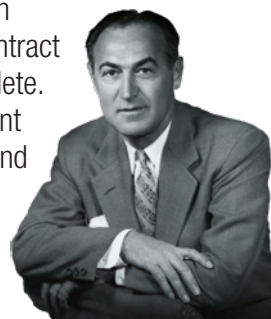
c. 1940

George Rapee develops the convention that becomes known by the man who publicizes it: Stayman.



1942

Charles Goren publishes *Contract Bridge Complete*. His point-count method of hand valuation dethrones Culbertson’s approach.



The first Bermuda Bowl is held. The world championship contest features teams from the U.S., Britain and Europe.



The World Bridge Federation is formed.

One of the first major bridge-cheating scandals occurs at the world championships when England's Terence Reese and Boris Shapiro are accused of signaling the length of their heart suits with their fingers.

Matchpoint wizard and top masterpoint earner Barry Crane is found murdered in his home after a session at the Pasadena Regional.



1950

1958

1965

1985

century later. On that night, Nov. 1, the game became contract bridge, scored under Vanderbilt's new rules.

Taking root

In 1928, the game was adopted in the major New York clubs, and late that year, the first national championship was held, with the Vanderbilt Cup as the prize.

In 1929, the American Auction Bridge League dropped the word "Auction" from its title, and it became clear that contract had supplanted auction. The established auction authorities struggled to achieve expertise in the field of contract, but for the most part, unsuccessfully. Leadership in the new game went to Ely Culbertson, who founded the first contract magazine in 1929. The first issue of *The Bridge World* magazine advocated the promulgation of an international Code of Laws for Contract Bridge. Subsequently, committees representing the United States, England and France were appointed, and the first International Code became effective Nov. 1, 1932.

The growth of tournament bridge was hampered in the '30s by the simultaneous activity of three separate organizing bodies: the American Bridge League, the American Whist League, and the United States Bridge Association. But after the organizations joined forces in 1937 to form the American Contract Bridge League, there followed a period of steady growth stimulated by the masterpoint plan.

1935 became the year of the first recognized world championship, although several semiofficial international matches had been played earlier. Later landmarks on the international scene were the first of the postwar world championship series in 1950, the foundation of the World Bridge Federation in 1958, and the first Team Olympiad in 1960.

Scoring changes

The only major innovation in contract bridge during its first 40 years of existence was the development of Chicago, the four-deal game which displaced traditional rubber bridge in many clubs during the early '60s. But this, like contract bridge itself, was a change in scoring rather than in structure.

Vanderbilt's scoring table has undergone very few changes over the years, but a significant one was made to the 1987 version of the Laws. It became clear that sacrificing at favorable vulnerability over an opponents' likely-to-make grand slam was often profitable. This was demonstrated dramatically from a hand in the final of the 1981 Bermuda Bowl. Munir Atta-Ullah and Jan-e-Alam Fazli, playing for Pakistan, reached a vulnerable 7♥ contract, which would have scored them 2210. But their nonvulnerable opponent Jeff Meckstroth, playing for USA, calculated that down 11 would cost only 2100 points, and thinking he might do better than that, sacrificed in 7♠ on a weak hand with five spades to the jack. This was doubled and went down nine for a score of -1700. The 510-point differential resulted in an 11-IMP swing in his team's favor. So a few years later (1987), the World Bridge Federation Laws Committee created a change to the scoring of the fourth and subsequent nonvulnerable undertricks, from 200 each (-100, -300, -500, -700, -900, etc.) to 300 each (-100, -300, -500, -800, -1100, etc.). The change in scoring increased the penalty for down nine when doubled and not vulnerable from -1700 to -2300.

Bidding theory

As contract bridge developed, the need for constructive bidding treatments grew. Beginning with Culbertson's suggestion that all one-level suit responses



The online bridge site OKbridge begins offering games.

The Summer NABC in Las Vegas attracts a jaw-dropping 24,221 tables to become the largest bridge tournament in history.



The COVID pandemic shuts clubs and tournaments across the world; tens of thousands of players turn to online, notably at Bridge Base Online.



Jeff Meckstroth becomes the first player in ACBL history to top 100,000 masterpoints.

should be forcing for one round, the “informatory” (takeout) double was also quickly recognized as indispensable. But this change in the use of double from its traditional penalty meaning opened the door to other calls being used in a conventional way.

Bidding after a 1NT opening was notoriously difficult without conventional tools, and so by the late 1930s, John Marx in England and (independently) George Rapee in the U.S. developed the idea of using a 2♣ response to inquire about opener’s major-suit pattern. Sam Stayman published their ideas, and his name stuck to the convention.

Oswald Jacoby later came up with the idea that responder could artificially show major-suit length via a treatment he dubbed a transfer. Not only did the treatment allow contracts to be right-sided more often, it created an extra step in the bidding to allow opener and responder to exchange more information.

In 1935, Easley Blackwood suggested using 4NT as a way to ask partner for the number of aces they held. But because this method clashed with an alternative interpretation already endorsed by Culbertson, The Bridge World magazine rejected the idea. Despite this setback, Blackwood’s idea caught on with the general public, eventually replacing Culbertson’s approach.

But the king of bidding theory was Al Roth. Not only did Roth come up with the idea of negative doubles, forcing 1NT responses, the unusual 2NT and many other now-common treatments, he did so to incorporate these ideas into a general system structure.

Roth saw the big picture. Roth later boasted that he invented almost every convention that existed, but his exaggeration was rooted in a truth: All conventional



Master theorist Al Roth

gadgets should belong to a family of treatments that supported a unified bidding system rather than as stand-alone pieces.

Alternatives to shaped-based constructive bidding began to emerge in the 1950s with systems that instead limited opener’s strength at the outset. “Big club” systems – where a 1♣ opening showed a strong opening hand – grew in popularity. “Precision” was the name chosen by theorist C.C. Wei, but these systems sported a variety of names through the decades.

Today in North America, the most common system among duplicate players is Two-Over-One, featuring five-card major-suit openings and a strong 1NT.

The digital age

Of course, progress in game theory and contest formats occurred throughout the 20th century, but the biggest change in way bridge is played – and the one its earliest practitioners would no doubt find to be the greatest departure from the traditional card table – happened with the introduction of online bridge. Beginning in the 1990s, companies such as OKbridge began offering games online, allowing contestants from around the world to play together day and night. The ACBL began sanctioning online games soon thereafter.

The creation of bridge “robots” allows players without human partners or opponents to enjoy the game, providing an outlet for those who live in remote places, are unable to attend live games, or who just prefer to quickly begin play without needing to arrange a bridge date.

The COVID pandemic of 2020 led to an explosion of online play, as home-bound bridge enthusiasts flocked to sites such as Bridge Base Online to get their bridge fix. A large percentage of ACBL members play at least occasionally in online games. ■