

# **THE CENTRAL ALBERTA / RED DEER BRIDGE CLUB**

## **A Personal History by Rick Cookson-Hills**

**1965-1990**

One of the first articles that I read about the card game BRIDGE, claimed that there were at least 50 million people, World-wide, who played Bridge regularly. That article was written in the early 70's. It blew my mind.

In the Winter Olympics of 2002, a Canadian team of Bridge players won the gold medal. To me, it seemed absolutely legitimate that Bridge should be an Olympic sport. It was, again, mind-blowing that most of these Canadian Olympians were Albertans AND they had played many times at our club and they still do! How neat is it that members of our club can play, here, against some of the very best players in the world, for 6 dollars?

When I was in High school, I played Rubber Bridge with my friends Gord Fisher and Phil Cunningham and their parents Harry and Pearl Fisher and Slim and Betty Cunningham. Neither the Fishers nor the Cunninghams had a real bidding system. Each household had their own version of Goren. I remember Harry had a rule that was inviolate – “You couldn't pass his opening bid of 1 No Trump.” Opening leads were virtually always 4<sup>th</sup> best in your longest and strongest suit. There were lots of meaningful hesitations and, of course, all doubles were for penalty. Laughter was loud and common-place. If a stranger joined the game and that stranger knew how to “finesse” you, he was a good player.

Harry Fisher was the Grand Elk, a very successful businessman and a member of the Red Deer Golf and Country Club. It was there that he met some of the founding members of the Central Alberta Bridge Club. There, as the story goes, he lost more than a couple of dollars playing Bridge. Understand, Harry lost rarely – at anything. During the course of that game he learned about Duplicate Bridge – the kind they played at this new Bridge club. It wasn't long before Harry, his son Gord, Phil Cunningham and I were being welcomed by the Duplicate Bridge players of Central Alberta. (Years later, Harry's daughter, Crystal [you know her as Crystal Mann] would also be warmly welcomed.)

The “Club” was the back room of a rather dilapidated apartment building in downtown Red Deer – right next door to the old Coca Cola building on Gaetz Avenue. The entrance was a rickety set of wooden steps that rose up from the back alley. We were met and welcomed by Jack and Beth Gibson – proprietors and directors. Everybody there was Harry's age or older, some much older, and us, the three teenagers. The regulars made us feel at home – everybody was on a first name basis.

The game itself was a fascinating blur. I learned quickly that useful hesitations were unethical. The same with vocal volume and inflection. I was totally confused by their bidding. The pace of the game was breath-taking and, everybody knew about finesses. I was hooked, still am!

Many of those Duplicate players became an integral of my life. People like Gilbert Farthing, Don and Chris McCormick, Bob Mitten, Kerry Wood, Stan and Jean Armstrong, Paul Chatenay, “old” Camille Lerouge, Lawrence Tippie, Doug and Florence Crowe, Bob and Helen Farewell, Mike Calverly, Al and Millie Payne, Don McDonald, Bill and Tonia Mittlemeyer, even cranky old Roy Sharp.

They all loved to play cards and they loved Duplicate because “lucky” didn't mean “winner.” Farmers, Judges, Professors, Businessmen, War Heroes, Politicians – it didn't matter who you were, or what you did, whether you were male or female, young or old – what mattered was how well you played and your table manners.

A really neat aspect of playing Duplicate Bridge for me was that the Club had its' weekly winner named in the Red Deer Advocate. In those days, the mid 60's, the Advocate was the only daily paper between Edmonton and Calgary. Everybody read it. If you got your name in the paper, you were famous. For a natural born “show-off” like me, it was immensely motivational. As well, the whole master-point thing was a motivating factor, but realistically, the idea of actually becoming a Life Master was, to all of us in Red Deer,

practically impossible. I mean like there were no Life Masters in Red Deer – not even close. If you wanted to win master points, you had to go to tournaments and you had to play in Open events.

In the late 60's and early 70's, the Club's membership outgrew the little room downtown and relocated to the Eastview Junior High School library. Al Payne built an ingenious green box on wheels that had 6 doors. The "Box" held card tables, boards and all the Club supplies – securely.

Up till now, the only "franchised" game was the Thursday evening game. Membership in and interest about Duplicate Bridge kept growing so a new franchise was created for Tuesday afternoon.

Playing space was an ongoing problem. The solution was elegant. Several members created a Corporation – High Card Holdings – and they bought the original apartment building at 4611 Gaetz Avenue. The entire ground floor got radically renovated and became the Bridge Club's home in 1973.

I had finished my education in 1972 and was working as the Education Director for the Red Deer Day Care Society so, when the Bridge Club executive offered me an apartment in their building if I would manage the Club, give lessons and direct games, I moved in. Happily!

Our first party in our new premises was a Grand Opening. Our Member of Parliament, Gordon Towers cut the ribbon, Sadie Whitesell cut the cake and I cut my teeth on a media man with CKRD television. A good time was had by all.

When I left Canada in 1974 to go teach in Australia, the Club was still playing on the main floor of its building. When I returned to Red Deer in the spring of 1978, the Club members had moved downstairs. The renovation included an electric chair lift that allowed members with restricted mobility to ride up and down the steep stairway. This delightful device was donated by the wonderfully generous Bob Mitten – one of the original shareholders of High Card Holdings. Bob's legacy as a generous person and a fine(excellent) bridge player endures to this day.

During my 4½ years in Australia, the make-up of the Club's regular playing population had drastically changed. Before my leaving, almost all of the regulars were couples. Now, in 1978, there were many more singles and they were much younger. Players like Cheryl Affolder, Louise Miazga, Austin Morrical, Robert Short, Lorna Deschner (nee Armstrong), Virginia Arnold, Gerry Granlund, Gerry Francis, Frances Dansereau, Gerda Brouwer and especially Doug Deschner were active players and they were keen. Going to tournaments was normal. Dougie, as manager, had recruited a host of new players. Kids like Peter Terpstra, Craig Mundle and the delightfully talented Ronnie Poseyn came and had fun.

For the next five years, I directed the regular Thursday night game. A normal night would be anywhere from 11 to 15 tables. By now the Club had a Friday afternoon franchise and because the Club had begun to be such a "happening" place, we opened it up for Saturday "cards." I would offer a "tutored" bridge game, (no master points just playing practice for beginners and students) while many of the Club regulars would get a "Smear" game going in the other half of the room. It all ended, for me, when the Smear game organizer, Roy Sharp, refused to let my Mom play with them. No women allowed!

The Central Bridge Club became the Red Deer Bridge Club and was granted Unit (#248) status in the early 80's. As part of our efforts to expand our new Unit mandate, Dougie and I visited interested bridge groups in Stettler, Rocky Mountain House, Ponoka and Innisfail. We even went to Bowden jail a couple of times. I also opened a Duplicate Club in Rimbey. On our official opening night we had 22 tables – only 5 of which were from Rimbey. Players from Edmonton, Calgary and Lethbridge came, ate, played and charmed. In Rimbey we played every Wednesday until I retired (got fired) from full-time teaching in 1985.

Marg Barr (Lawrence Ferguson's daughter) and her husband Rick began a Bridge Club in Ponoka about the same time and it still plays regularly. Marg started playing Bridge with her Dad way back in the Eastview School library days.

Throughout the 80s, the Club battled with smoking issues. The basement location had a low ceiling so when 13 tables of players "lit up", the room became pretty uncomfortable. Attempts by many members about the issue went unresolved until Gerry Francis, a chain smoker, quit smoking. He, as manager, saw the light.

A few bridge stand-out moments:

One Thursday night, there was another full house. Recently a Ray Stevens single, “The Streak” had been getting a lot of air time. A fine person and regular player at the Club, Ethel Bannister and her regular partner, Leslie Husband, were playing against me and “young” Camille Lerouge. Something distracted me and I spilled my whole hand on the floor. Like a thunderclap Stan Armstrong shouted “Don’t look Ethel!” It took quite a while for the hilarity to die down. To this day I smile every time I recall the moment. Stan was like that – he bestowed joy generously. Good player too.

Another sweet memory involved 4 Club members, Pat and Ella Pitman and Bob and Helen Farewell. In those days, the most enjoyable tournament by far was the Banff Sectional. It was hosted at the Banff Springs Hotel and everybody went. The Sunday Swiss Teams had well over 100 teams, - many of very high caliber. Can you imagine what it must have felt like for Pat and Ella, Bob and Helen to go undefeated? They were so happy and we all were so happy for them!

Another sweet and lovely Bridge moment involved the irrepressible Dougie Deschner. He and I had wrapped up our Duplicate Bridge talk to about 50 Bridge playing inmates at the Bowden Penitentiary when a notorious inmate, Peter Petrasik and his partner, Peter Hooker, challenged us to play a few hands. They were the reigning “alpha” players out there. They even had their own deck. On the first hand, Peter dealt and opened with a 3 NT bid. It made easily (6 Clubs would also have rolled home.) To the delight of the crowd of on-lookers he remarked, smugly, “that’s the Jailhouse 3 NT Opening.” On the next hand, I opened 3 Clubs, the L.H.O. passed and Dougie bid 3 NT. Peter doubled- loudly! Dougie, before he passed, asked, “Is that the Jailhouse Double?” “You’d better believe it Son,” Peter said and laid his Ace of Spades on the table.

Peter’s hand was	Spades: A K J	My dummy was	Spades: 3 2
	Hearts: A K J		Hearts: 3 2
	Diamonds: K Q J		Diamonds: 3 2
	Clubs: 9 8 7 6		Clubs: A Q J 10 4 3 2
Dougie had bid 3 NT on	Spades: Q 5 4		
	Hearts: Q 5 4		
	Diamonds: A 6 5 4 3 2		
	Clubs: 5		

After Peter took his Ace and King of Spades, his Ace and King of Hearts, he led the King of Diamonds. Dougie took his ace, cashed his Queen of Spades, and Queen of Hearts and then led his singleton Club to my hand. When Peter followed low, Dougie called for my Ace. When the singleton King fell under it, Dougie turned to Peter and said, “We call that solitary confinement.” The other inmates were still laughing when we left. Nice moment.

Another consequence of becoming a Unit was that now Red Deer would take turns hosting Alberta’s annual Regional tournament. Understand, the Club makes no money, - none, from a Regional. The Club is expected to supply significant volunteer hours for which they get the glory, the ACBL gets the money. The directors do quite well, too.

Doug Crowe chaired our first Regional in 1983. It was a huge success. Players came from all over Canada and America. I remember clearly the excitement of playing against Barry Crane – in my estimation, the best American player of his generation. Eric Rodwell and Jeff Mechstroth were there also and although I can still remember going down 1, doubled and vulnerable in 2 Diamonds, what I can recall most clearly is watching Eric play the grand piano in the lobby of the Capri. He played Beethoven for over ½ an hour. Beautifully. Nice moment!

From then till now, the Red Deer Regional has been held every three years. The volunteer support required for such a big event is wearing. I know, I chaired 2 Regionals in the 90’s. I think what surprised and

disappointed me the most keenly was the lack of direction by the directors and the total absence of volunteer recognition by the ACBL. Shocking!

Other Regional chair people were Don McCarthy, Crystal Mann, Pat Young and Charlie Lamb. As a Bridge player, and one who has been there, let me say, enthusiastically, thank you.

Another enormous change for the Club that resulted from our Unit Status, was with regard to our ACBL's permission to host our very own Sectional tournaments. Previously, Calgary gave us one a year. In the tournament community, Red Deer became THE destination. I remember one tournament where the Sunday Swiss had 72 teams – and the team game didn't start until after the softball game where the Red Deer Slammers destroyed the Rest of the World Bunters. Edmonton's Vince and Paula Nowland, and Red Deer's Barney and Bonnie Dolan, Robert Short and myself hosted a pancake breakfast at the ball diamond. Phil Wood was the home plate umpire and busy eating pancakes while the game went on. "Sweet Stanley" Matheison, the first base ump was deeply into pancake and bacon roll-ups. Whenever he called one of those rascally Bunters out at 1<sup>st</sup> base, he did so emphatically. I can still see syrup flying from his finger-tips as he pointed and shouted, "YOU ARE OUT!" I can also bring back the picture of Barney sliding into 3<sup>rd</sup> base – he left a lot of skin on the hard playing field. The opponents cried foul, when with the score tied, Phil Wood said there was only time for 1 more at bat and, oh lucky day, it turned out that it was Dougie's turn to hit. He strode slowly to the plate and with grace and good humor acknowledged both umpires. Then, after casually tapping home plate, he pointed his bat at the storage shed way out in left field. A bystander would've thought all the Bridge players must have been drinking spiked orange juice, that's how wild and raucous the crowd was. Dougie watched the first pitch. S T E E R I K E 1 called the Head Director in Canada. Dougie watched the second pitch. S T E E R I K E 1 roared Marvelous Phil. The crowd was going crazy. Dougie smiled knowingly and then, when the next pitch came in, he hit that sucker right over the shed in left field. WOW. Another nice moment. And then we all went and played Bridge.

In the late 80's, Heather and I went North. When we came back in the early 90's, Claire had 3 more sisters – Carmen, Pippa and Molly. Bridge for us, became a rare luxury. By the time Claire was old enough to mind her sisters, the Club had moved from 4611 Gaetz Avenue to its present location at Bay 16, 5579 47<sup>th</sup> Street. A whole new group of members had joined the few members left from the early years to become the Club. Bridge had gone high tech and few people played the Standard American system.

Any history of our Club must make special mention of the people who have held the Manager's position. Jack Gibson, Stan Armstrong, myself, Jack Paul, Gerry Francis, Lisa McCarthy, Doug Deschner, Crystal Mann, Locksie Campbell, Ed Flett, David Chambers, Alan Berlanquet, Evelyn Sisonenko and Annabelle Wiseman.

Duplicate Bridge doesn't work well unless the Directors work well. Our directors have been, for the most part, a strength for our Club. They include Beth Gibson, Stan Armstrong, myself, Al Payne, Jack Paul, Gerry Francis, Mike Calverly, Doug Deschner, Dave Chambers, Crystal Mann, Joanne Buhler, Charlie Roberts, Lisa McCarthy, Mike Christianson, Marlene Wallace, Liz Warren, Evelyn Sisonenko, Wayne Moss and Annabelle Wiseman.

Specialty Clubs like ours, prosper or wither on the basis of their teaching efforts to bring new membership into the fold. I gave my first lessons to beginners in 1969 and continued through 1973, always in Red Deer. While in Australia, Heather and I became friends with a superb Australian teacher and player, Ron Klinger. When I came back to Red Deer in 1978, I used his books, but now I also gave beginners lessons in the Standard American System in Bentley, Lacombe, Sylvan Lake, Rimbey and Pine Lake.

Luckily for the Club, lessons have been continued over the years by a number of people. Under the auspices of the ACBL, Audrey Grant developed The ACBL Series of 5 books with supporting material for the use of teachers trained at ACBL sponsored workshops. Al Quinn, Doug and Lorna Deschner, Jim Wallace, Marion Hoveland, Patti McCabe, Mary Lynn Ghitter, Pat Young, Barb Colton, Ellen Van Doesburg, Wayne Moss, Evelyn Sisonenko, Bryant Hawthorne, Charlie Lamb, and Glenn Cossey have all taught lessons from beginners to advanced levels and many impromptu lessons are given quietly by those who can share their expertise in their own way. Laurie Shapko even taught Bridge at the Middle School for a short period.

These days the Club runs smoothly as it has done for the last 20 years. Hard working Executives at the Club and Unit level, computers, set schedules and ACBL restrictions and requirements combine to keep operations on task, and on time. For me the last 20 years are a blur.

When I look at Mona's photographs I can remember, with clarity, so many lovely people that I met over the Bridge table. I treasure the friendships and look forward to collecting and experiencing many, many more "nice moments."