

Bridge keeps town from falling apart



Virginia Wood, (left to right) Lady Bird Irby, Elizabeth Irby, and Nan Manson

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The ladies of the Thursday Bridge Club couldn't remember when Blackstone has not had bridge. This week the club was meeting at Frances DeBerry's house, on Thursday, of course, and most of the eight women there remembered learning the game from their mothers and picking up their own cards in the early 1930s. They knew there must have been bridge here long before that.

One lady remembered rocking her baby with her foot so her hands would be free to hold cards. But young women aren't interested in bridge like they used to be, she said sadly. A lady next to her quickly countered that some did, trumping the other's card.

The ladies spent some time trying to recall the names of all the bridge clubs that had passed over the waters of Blackstone's time, but with little success. Few had any names other than "so-and-so and so-and-so and that bunch." Always they names two "so-and-so's" before taking on "that bunch" so they all knew what club they were talking about.

After much shuffling the ladies finally dealt up the names of a few clubs, but they were named after the days of the week: The Tuesday Bridge Club and so on. That was so the members could remember when they were to meet, but no one felt it necessary to mention that.

All agreed that the 1930's were a time when there was plenty of bridge to go around. With no money for anything but home parties, and television and cars yet no threat, the weekly communion of ladies was a noted event. Even the newspaper devoted a large portion of its space mentioning who attended and what prizes were given. You would find names like the West End Bridge club, The Bellefonte Bridge Club, the Blackstone Bridge Club, and two clubs that weren't afraid to get right to the point, the Idle-a-While Club and the Chatter Bridge Club.

"I think that was the Chatterbox Club," one lady threw out and nothing more was accomplished until that idea worked its way through.

Joining a bridge club was more than just playing cards. For those who deemed themselves part of the social fabric of their community there were two places you never missed attending at least once a week: church and your bridge club. And you could wear the same clothes to each!

Club members took great care in serving the best refreshments they could make on the best silverware and china they could acquire. As long as there was bridge club, Blackstone could be sure there was at least one island that was sane, civilized, orderly and proper.

So a bridge club was a bridge to more than just idle entertainment and aimless chatter, despite those two clubs that dared to suggest otherwise. When it was time to deal the cards, talk took a back seat and a concerted concentration settled over the room. Occasionally, some mind would forget what the purpose at hand was and start wandering like a child, that is, until some player would take a parental role and pull the distracted mind back to the table, saying, "I can't concentrate with all this talk."

In this way a gentle form of self-discipline occurred so the women could sharpen their memory and learn how to pay attention to what was being said. If the ladies weren't trying to remember what had just been played they were constantly checking each other's recollection of the past. A bridge club is like a gymnasium for the memory.

You never saw men at bridge games; maybe because the clubs always met in the afternoon, as it to avoid them, or because they thought it was as waste of time.

Perhaps men failed to see anything in bridge because there was no struggle for supremacy in it. The ladies seemed to play bridge for it own sake. One lady did recall that two from the area went onto higher levels of competition. They were men, it turned out.

One thing for sure though, every member of a bridge club feels needed. The only way a club member fails to show up is if she moves, is too sick or dies. Not showing up was a sin of great magnitude because the table would be left with nothing to do but talk, and there was no telling where that might lead.

The popularity of bridge is dwindling now. Although everyone agree to that, no one could fall upon a common cause. One said that her daughter thought it was a waste of time, while another said that her daughter played, and liked it.

Looking back to Blackstone's golden age of bridge, the ladies all settled on Mrs. W.A. Land as having won the prize. She would open the season and "carry out the color scheme" with ten tables and all the ladies would wear white kid gloves, high heels and large hats Having a chair at her bridge table was the most sure way of knowing that you were socially alive.