

AWC Bridge Club – A Long and Fabulous Run!

The AWC Bridge Club and the American Women's Club of Calgary were intertwined entities. "In March of 1912 Mrs. Herbert Edgar Anderson extended an invitation to all American women in Calgary interested in forming a social club to meet at her home in Lower Mount Royal. Seventy-five women responded. Formal organization was set for April 11, 1912 at Unity Hall, Calgary. There was need for a group where wives of American engineers and businessmen, often in Calgary on a temporary basis, could meet friends and participate in social activities". The inaugural constitution committed the organization: "to be an organized centre of action, for the promotion of social life, and for cooperation with other local organizations in carrying out of improvements – civic and philanthropic; and to be a means of mutual improvement. Neither theological questions nor partisan politics shall be discussed." (Source of both quotes: Glenbow Archives)

For many years, the women met in each others homes, mostly in Mount Royal (what some at that time called 'American Hill'). Typical functions were teas, picnics, a big function on American Thanksgiving, an annual ball at the Palliser, and of course, bridge. There was an official membership, initially restricted to American born women, and later relaxed to be available to Canadian born daughters of Americans.

The club was prestigious and influential and as the club flourished there was a need for a more established meeting place. The West End Telephone Exchange Building – Calgary's first telephone exchange (built around 1910 and vacated in about 1923) at 1010 – 14th Avenue SW became available and the industrious members of the AWC created and sold cookbooks, raising the \$3000 to purchase and renovate the building in 1938. With a tangible asset, the AWC needed further formalization and incorporated under the Alberta Societies Act, 28 Jun 1938. Functions previously held in people's homes, including bridge, shifted to the new location which opened in October 1938. In its heyday, the AWC had over 100 members and over 20 committees coordinated a wide variety of activities, including bridge. The vibrant 'new' facility also was home to the Calgary Boy's Choir which rented the basement.

Bridge at the club was initially social bridge, including a variety of bridge parties and 'Dessert Bridge' which featured delicious desserts supplied by members. Thursday evening duplicate bridge (non sanctioned) was created by Mrs. Jessie Kinder in 1970 and shortly after Marguerite (Swanson) Perry established the initial sanctioned Wednesday afternoon game - a game that continued to 2007. In about 1977, in response to many players Marguerite designated AWC's Friday night game as 'non smoking' - Calgary's first. A tower of strength through much of the recent history of AWC was Emily Follensbee (13 Nov 1903 – 22 Oct 2003: See Kibitzer January 2004) who for many years served as President. When Marguerite left as Director of the AWC game, Emily became a Director under Walt Alex's tutorship, and then ran the AWC bridge games. The Wednesday sanctioned game was especially popular, frequently having 11 or 12 tables. With

the passing of Emily Follensbee, Mrs. Grace King directed the Wednesday game. Yvonne Hess taught bridge lessons at AWC for many years, and also helped with Directing. Her lessons focused on the nuances and competitive nature of duplicate bridge as most were seasoned players of social bridge.

First entry to the AWC facility presented a charming building with a lot of artifacts, mostly with a USACanada theme. Those who played also noticed the unique 'card theme' table cloths created by Helen Degenstein in about 1990, and also the wide variety of decks of cards (and noticeable absence of ACBL cards) - a legacy of an aging membership downsizing and cards donated to the club. An interesting feature of the Wednesday game was a mid game car shuffle – with 2 hour parking, players could shift their cars at the 2 hour mark, each going to the parking spot vacated by the other. The club location was perfect for bridge players traveling by bus.



Photo by Kelly Flock

With a dwindling membership and the increase in city property taxes, the AWC facility became less and less viable. The AWC constitution stipulated that the building could not create a profit, and if sold, profit arising would have to be donated to a charity. In October of 2007 the building

was donated to the Children's Legal & Educational Resource Centre (CLERC) – a 'not for profit'. Documents were donated to the Glenbow Archives, as was the Alice Innes painting of Burlington Falls, Ontario that hung prominently in the classy clubhouse. The Innes painting had been donated by founding member and 1936 President, Mrs. E. T. 'Anne' Chritchley on the 1970 occasion of the 58th Anniversary of AWC. The last game of bridge was played at the American Women's Club Wednesday October 24, 2007 before the AWC Bridge Club relocated the following Wednesday, under the new direction of Barry Pashak, to Scarboro United Church. Although sanctioned duplicate bridge was provided at other Calgary clubs before AWC, in many respects the AWC provided the longest operating bridge club in Calgary. The many, many bridge players who enjoyed games at AWC would echo Grace King's (perhaps understated) comment, "We had a good run".

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