Completing the Doctorate

When Virginia and I came back to Princeton after WWII, she again became Merrill Flood’s secretary, and I was to write my dissertation. Social life in Princeton burgeoned, and both duplicate bridge and folk dancing were all the rage. Virginia was most pleased to participate in the folk dancing. She had always enjoyed dancing, and the folk dancing had the advantage that it started early in the evening and was over early so that it did not intrude on her resting hours—she was an early riser and had to get to work first thing in the morning. Duplicate bridge started rather late because it did not begin until all players were assembled—and some were always late; and then when playing was over, we were still not finished because it took an endless time to make the calculations required for the scoring. Players did not know how well they had done, or at least not usually because we were not allowed to talk about what had happened at the various tables for fear of giving information to others who had not yet played the hands.

How did she and I learn to play bridge? Although we had often played with Virginia’s parents back in Pittsburgh, neither of us had studied the game. Virginia’s father was a good player and a pithy critic; it is from him we have the family saying applied to any bungled activity, “Poorly bid and poorly played.” By accident, we owned a very small book that gave the elements of a method called the Culbertson system, developed by the bridge expert Ely Culbertson. Although this system was already old-fashioned by the time we began to play, it was the only book we had, and so we tried to use it. I called it the Cumbersome system. When we went to Trenton, New Jersey, and played in a more serious tournament than the local ones we were used to attending, one pair of opponents—to whom we had to announce our system—could not believe that we were playing this system and called the tournament director to complain, and he assured them that this was a legitimate system in the rules of the game and that we did not have to explain it to them. Even so, they sometimes sent us away from the table and asked what certain bids meant, which they were allowed to do.
At the same time, Merrill Flood, who was a whiz at all sorts of games and sports, decided that he wanted to play duplicate bridge more seriously than he had before and wanted a partner who could be available often. As a graduate student writing a dissertation, he thought I'd have plenty of time and so he asked me to join him in this venture. I explained that we played the Cumbersome system, and asked what he played. He didn't play anything, but he had been reading a book by Charles Goren, *Better Bridge for Better Players*. Because I didn't have any preference, we decided to try to use Goren's system. As a text, the book itself was excellent. It had hard homework problems that taught us a great deal. Shortly, Merrill and I began playing together in local tournaments and then going to more important ones in Atlantic City, The Oranges, New York, and so on. We began to accumulate master points, mostly from local tournaments. Often it was great fun. We were beaten by some of the greatest bridge players in the United States, and we beat a few ourselves. Part of our pride though came from playing against Goren himself, and from playing him and his partner dead even. It was only fair; after all, we were using his book.

One attractive and successful bridge player named Helen Sobel always played with one or another bridge columnist. At each tournament where Merrill and I met her, we were trounced, and he claimed it was because I liked her. Not long after we played with her, she was named U.S. bridge player of the year, and so probably she and her partner were just much better than we were. Toward the end of that year I began to understand something about bridge on a level different from when I had started. I began to feel from looking at my hand and listening to the bidding that I could visualize what the cards in other people's hands were. I suppose that good players do that very well. I also realized that duplicate bridge is a wearing game and that every player wants to reassess every successful and every unsuccessful hand to a fare-thee-well as soon as it is over. When you have been successful, of course, it's a pleasure. At any rate, after I left Princeton and went to Harvard, I never played another game of duplicate bridge, and that left more time for other things.

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But you didn't want to hear about folk dancing and bridge, but about statistics. Although I was finishing up various statistical papers just then, my fundamental task was to complete my thesis. The training I had at SRGPJr stood me in good stead. I knew how to break the task down into chunks and work on a chunk for a while until it was either finished or a cul-de-sac.

I worked at night. After folk dancing, for example, Virginia and I would come home, and I would settle down to work and she would go to bed. I would work long hours during the night and sleep til midmorning and then go to the library at Fine Hall or to see colleagues. Unfortunately, Sam Wilks, who had suggested the problem I was working on, was still heavily involved with