

Swimming in the Big Pond

By Jane Verdrager

First birthdays are a milestone, and the Eastman Bridge Club celebrated its first birthday on September 5, 2013. A couple of years ago, I never would have conceived of becoming a director and running a weekly duplicate bridge game. I had recently retired and was enjoying the opportunity to do more of the things I loved, including playing bridge.

For most of the 40 years following my graduation from college, I played Rubber Bridge socially. I played with a social duplicate group for quite a few years before venturing out to a duplicate game. There wasn't much time in my life to devote to seriously pursuing the game, until I retired in 2009 and moved to Eastman. As I looked for a community to which I could relocate, one of my priorities had been bridge. Fortunately, I found that Eastman had a weekly social game, so it was one of the first things I did in order to meet people and get involved. A couple of players told me about the duplicate games in the area, so, before long, I was playing frequently.

A friend and fellow social player, Eastman resident Bobbi Travis, suggested that we attend a Road Scholar program of bridge instruction, a nearly week-long class taught by Marti Ronemus, who is well known as a bridge instructor and columnist. I didn't give it a second thought; we immediately enrolled and traveled to New York to attend the class. By the second day, I was amazed that I was thinking about bridge in a completely different way. This was my first bridge class ever, but my bridge "appetite" became insatiable. I couldn't get enough. Hungering for more, I approached Marti to ask if she would consider coming to Eastman. She said yes.

I was certain that I could find enough players who would attend Marti's class, and The Center at Eastman seemed an ideal venue since it had the space, a great chef and a wonderful view. I presented the idea to the Recreation Department, assuring them that I would be able to get the minimum number of players to enroll. The proposal included having the restaurant cater a buffet luncheon each day, bringing business to the restaurant during the spring "shoulder season" when business is slow. There were 38 enrollees, and it was such a fantastic success that we immediately started planning for the following year.

I knew there was a large number of bridge players in Eastman and the surrounding communities, enough to warrant having a regular duplicate game here. However, I was unable to find anyone who was interested in running it. I kept getting responses of "why don't you become a director?" This seemed pretty farfetched since I was new to the duplicate scene, having fewer than five master points when I moved here, and, still less than 60, playing

regularly in games with Life Masters who had hundreds and even thousands of points. I was the little fish in the pond.

While setting up another instruction week with Marti for the following spring, she kept encouraging me to become a director and became a tremendous mentor to me in this venture. Tom Kurtz, the director of the game at Lebanon College, was also a wonderful, generous supporter. He and his wife took me home following his game every week for over a month to teach me how to use the ACBL SCORE program for scoring the duplicate games. I started reading the books on the laws of duplicate bridge that Marti had suggested and preparing for the "test."

It had been over 40 years since I had taken a test, so I was quite nervous, but in August of 2012, I took it and passed. Our inaugural game was held in the Hearth Room at The Center on the first Thursday in September, 2012. Part of the agreement with the restaurant is that we reset the tables and be out by 5 p.m. when they open for dinner, so at the end of the game, everyone hustles to bring out the plates, water goblets, silverware/napkin wraps, and salt and pepper shakers. This takes the players about 10 minutes, while I collect travelers, boards, etc. Eastman residents "Tink" Tysor, Bob and Margie Cameron and Steve and Sandi Haase are regulars, and I can always count on "Tink", Bob and Steve to help me carry things back to my car after the game.

In addition to starting the weekly game, I was working out the details for our second class, scheduled for April 2013. At Marti's suggestion, we also ran a Non-Life Master tournament that included a continental breakfast and luncheon buffet on the Saturday and Sunday following the class. (As the little fish, I'm not qualified to direct a tournament, so Marti did it.) Enrollment in the class mushroomed to 74 the second year, with participants coming not only from the area, but from Quebec City, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont. Most of the previous year's participants reenrolled and brought their friends.

Although most of the students lived close enough to commute, some needed lodging, With my assistance, some players rented condos in Eastman, as did Marti and her husband, Gary. Others stayed at local B & B's, and a few stayed with residents who offered to take in lodgers in exchange for contributions to their favorite charities or churches.

We have set March 24-27, 2014 for the next class, which will be followed by the NLM tournament March 29-30. I anticipate that we will have to cap enrollment for both events this year, since I'm already hearing from past participants who want to bring other recruits.

All I wanted was to be a better player, play more bridge and have a duplicate game here at Eastman, and look what happened! At first I felt I wasn't accomplished enough to become a director, but because of the encouragement and support of some fabulous people in my life, I

dared to give it a try. The other two local directors, Tom Kurtz and Jesse Stalker, were both helpful in guiding me in this venture as well as announcing Eastman's duplicate debut at their weekly games and including it in e-mail notices to their players. "Tink" Tysor, a friend and great supporter, has been invaluable in helping me learn how to set up and run the game. He was always there, like the protective parent making sure the toddler doesn't stumble and get hurt. There were a couple of times when he saved me from a fall.

Our game continues to grow, although the numbers ebb and flow seasonally. The snowbirds have flown south, but the golfers are returning to the table. We usually have between seven and nine tables, and I currently have over 120 players on my distribution list for the game results. Many of our players are new to duplicate and new members of the ACBL. Many of them are Eastman residents who had never played duplicate before and, in a couple of cases, hadn't played any bridge for the past 50 years! One player new to duplicate bridge said, "Social bridge just isn't much fun anymore."

I am a non-playing director so I am always available if someone comes without a partner. However, I come prepared with a book, iPad, newspaper and my latest knitting project in case I don't have the opportunity to play. It can be a long four hours if you aren't playing, so I try to amuse myself. I am thankful when that extra single walks through the door!

The Fourth of July holiday fell on Thursday this year, so I had cancelled the game, assuming that I wouldn't have many players show up. I was approached by two very good players, one of whom cannot attend our weekly game due to his work schedule, who said that they had been planning to come. I sent out an email, asking people if they would be interested in playing on the holiday and had enough of a response to hold the game. Several players stayed for dinner afterward, and it turned out to be a fantastic way to spend the holiday.

On Sunday, November 10, 2013, I started a new monthly team game we call Sunday Swiss. As pairs of players enter, I match them up with another pair, doing my best to balance the teams according to experience levels. They play against another foursome, with one pair playing N/S and the other pair playing the same hands as E/W so each team has an opportunity to both declare and defend a hand. Despite many of the regular players being unavailable, our first event drew 40 players, almost half of whom stayed to have dinner as a group.

The Eastman Bridge Club has been a tremendous asset to our community and to me, Eastman has gained very positive exposure as a wonderful place to live, the restaurant has dependable weekly business, in addition to the lesson week and tournament business, and the rental market here has benefited. I have made many more good friends, who have been wonderfully supportive of my endeavor. I never dreamed my "retirement" would "play" out like this.

Since we are using restaurant facilities, I can't serve any refreshments at our game, but there is a pretty regular group having lunch each week before the game. For our "birthday party," Chef Doug made brownies as a treat. Thirteen of us continued the celebration by staying for dinner.

Eastman Bridge Club's "first birthday" was a tremendous milestone, and each week I continue to learn more about running a game. Our group has evolved, and I am feeling much more comfortable and competent at being a director.

Like many children who are celebrated at their first birthday, I am no longer crawling, but walking steadily, and I anticipate that I will soon be running. Besides, when my own kids call for me to babysit, I can say, "I don't do Thursdays."