

Bridge club thriving with 350 members

There are 350 members, some of whom play every afternoon Mondays through Fridays, at the Saskatoon Bridge Club – a unique organization because it is one of only two bridge clubs in North America owned by its members.

Once hooked by the challenge of a competitive game, players seldom give it up.

Mary Clarke, a past club manager and director who has been a member since 1956, has been a witness to the Saskatoon club's growth. She joined because she wanted to get beyond kitchen table bridge into something more competitive.

Lee Von Hagen joined in 1967, and liked the activity because "the game itself and the competition keep your head going." His friend, Ken Connell, joined in 1969, basically on the advice of Von Hagen.

Peter Gerrard, another active member, perhaps said it best: "For \$6, you get three hours of entertainment in an afternoon. Bridge never gets boring. It is a constant challenge because there are so many different ways to bid and play a hand."

Doug Schmeiser is one who can claim he shared in a rare piece of Saskatoon bridge history. He is the only current member to have played at the CNR clubhouse, near the CN Station which once existed in the downtown area where Midtown Plaza now stands.

"They say the railway men had been playing there since 1933. My first games were played on the University of Saskatchewan campus. Otto Lang and I



NED POWERS
People

were playing partners, and we decided to try our skills downtown. It was a little house not far from where the main depot was. I would call it more of a social game as compared to how duplicate bridge is played today," said Schmeiser.

The Saskatoon club rented space for a time, but according to Clarke, "the first time we had a space we could call our own was in the Travellers' Building. We entered the building through a door in the alley."

Ken McGuirl, who is considered the club founder, for many years contributed a weekly column on bridge to the Saskatoon StarPhoenix.

The club relocated later to Eighth Street, in the same building that once housed Imperial Bowl. Everything was seemingly going well until the club was stunned by a rent increase of twice what it was paying.

Along came a new hero, Allan Tubby, a contractor who agreed to build today's quarters in 1976 on Louise Street. Schmeiser said Tubby "built it at a great price for us."

Clarke thinks the price might have been in the \$275,000 range, but "it was a gift for his wife, Madge, who was an avid bridge player, and a gift for her friends and the community."

Club members paid off the first mortgage in 1994. When they added a second room for players in 2005, they again quickly paid off the mortgage.

The club has been a member of the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) since 1958, a decision which came about because Doug Scott and



Ken Connell, left, Mary Clarke and Lee Von Hagen have long histories with the Saskatoon Bridge Club. (Photo by Sandy Hutchinson)

his wife, Mona, Hazel Larson and Jean Drinkle went to a tournament and saw the value of being part of the Manitoba unit of the ACBL.

Today Saskatoon is part of a North Saskatchewan unit and part of a region which includes players from Alberta, Manitoba, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Nevada. Saskatoon gets to host a regional tournament every four years.

Andy Anderson, the current club president, is also with the Canadian Bridge Federation. He has travelled to play in national tournaments, which are 10 days long; regionals, which last six days; and the sectionals, which run six times in the province each year.

Coming up soon is an open house on Sept. 9 from 1 to 4 p.m. and a regional tournament from Sept. 11 to 17.

The club has an active education committee which provides training for newcomers, using existing members as mentors.

The biggest change has come through computerization. At each playing table now is a hand-sized machine used to compile the scores, which are fed to the room's main computer. Results of an afternoon's play are tabulated virtually before anyone leaves the building.

It's a far cry from the days years ago when all the results were tabulated manually on large spreadsheets.

"I've been up until one and two in the morning, trying to figure out where we lost half a point or a point in our tabulations," Clarke said.

Jerry Mamer said the club plays an active role in charity events as well.

"There was an event one year where the Saskatoon club raised \$7,000 in one day to support Alzheimer's Canada. A club in Halifax raised more money, but they took about two months to reach their total. We have continued to support Alzheimer's in recent years and usually contribute \$6,000 a year."