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The Origin of Poker - pg1

[CPP Home](#) > [Poker Articles](#) > [October 2004](#)

The Origin of Poker - pg1

4/8/2005

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Column name: Feature Article

The Origin of Poker

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Contract bridge was invented on November 1, 1925 by socially prominent millionaire Harold Vanderbilt. He wrote down how and why he invented it, and listed the four earlier games on which it was based. The best-known one was whist, which is the subject of the original Hoyle in 1742. Whist can be traced back to 1526 in England, and its forebears are some of the oldest known card games. This is the kind of genealogy De Brett's Peerage and dog shows respect.

Poker historians have been looking for this sort of story. Never mind that virtually all card games are spread informally, without written rules until they become popular. By the time a game appears in print, it's seldom possible to determine who invented it or even what the name means.

Even the contract bridge story weakens under scrutiny. The game is documented seven years before Vanderbilt's inspiration; there were at least two earlier published rule books. Whist is not a direct ancestor; there is no feature of whist present in contract bridge that is not also present in one of the other three named sources. No one knows where those three games originated. The name "bridge" is completely mysterious.

Even with perfect documentation studied while all the principals were living, we don't know the origin of contract bridge. Going back another hundred years, the situation is obviously much worse. It wouldn't help to have a diary entry from November 1, 1825, explaining how Vanderbilt's great-grandfather invented poker. We wouldn't know where the ancestor games came from and we couldn't know that Vanderbilt's version was the one that evolved into modern poker. Whatever the diary said, it would conflict with some of the other evidence we have about the origin.

Once we forget about a contract-bridge style story for the origin of poker, more interesting questions emerge. First, what is poker? Today it is a family of card games that share betting rules and hand rankings based on five-card hands. All modern variants can be traced to older poker games that meet this same definition, back to either five-card draw or five-card stud around 1900.

1900 to today

This is poker's legitimate period, in which all new games are children of existing poker games. We don't know much about the origin of specific variations. Games are usually well-established for several years before the rules are written down. But no one seriously doubts that games like lowball and Anaconda were invented by poker players, probably in regular games where the players got bored and decided to add a new dealer's choice. They were designed to be variants of an existing game, rather than importations from some other tradition or attempts to make up a new game.

This is why contract bridge is a card game and poker is something more. Imagine a bridge player saying "let's make things interesting by adding a couple jokers to the pack next hand, and letting one-eyed jacks be wild" or "how about splitting the points with the hand that holds the highest spade?"

Contract bridge is a specific set of rules administered by a formal organization. That's why it has a consistent history; all bridge-like variants are ruthlessly excluded from the gene pool in order to produce a game that breeds true. Modern poker is a basic framework with no organizing body. Players can make up rules within the parameters, as long as they don't offend the collective social consciousness.

Most of the popular poker variants of the legitimate period can be traced geographically. Texas hold'em, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Omaha all seem to have originated near the named place. If you lose all your money in a poker game in any of these places, jump in the largest nearby river. You'll float down to New Orleans if no one pulls you out first. Poker variants named after other places are misleading. English stud probably originated in St. Louis, another city with the river property. California poker and Asian poker are not poker games. San Francisco was



probably first played in Chicago. Indian is only debatably poker and has nothing to do with India.

The relic principle in linguistics tells us that languages change fastest near their origin; peripheral areas are conservative. It seems reasonable to apply the same principle to games and look for poker's origin in the area drained by the Mississippi river. Even if this is factually incorrect, even if someone proved that poker was played in, say, ancient China, it is clear that the living heart of poker in the 20th century was watered by the Mississippi.

Pre-1900

1850 to 1900 was poker's adolescence. Before the Civil War, poker was a regional game of Mississippi river ports and riverboats. Later, poker spread throughout North America and to England. By the end of the period, it was played throughout the world, although it retained its regional identification.

This period lacked the tolerance of the legitimate period. Changes were made to the game, but different versions did not co-exist peacefully. Innovations were debated fiercely before being either adopted universally or discarded. The arguments provide plenty of documentation for the introduction of modern features such as straights, flushes, and antes.

The only major exception was the development of draw poker during the Civil War. Neither draw nor stud could displace the other. Between them, they displaced all other forms of poker. Draw poker began its legitimate period around 1875, when it started allowing, but not requiring, innovations like wild cards, openers, and progressive antes (jackpots). The first optional stud poker variants, seven-card hands and pot-splitting, date to around 1900.

The earliest set of printed rules we have for poker dates to 1847. Five-card hands are dealt face down. There is a single round of betting. Straights and flushes are not allowed. People who want a respectable ancestry for poker seize on this game. It's tempting to assume the modern game evolved through the sequential addition of features to this game. It is clearly related to an earlier version of poker which has the same rules except only 20 cards are used (tens, face cards, and aces). This game is mentioned in several sources as being played on Mississippi riverboats as early as 1825, but no formal set of rules survives.

It then becomes easy to link 20 card poker to As Nas, a Persian game dating back to the 1600's. This game is played with 25 cards, five denominations in each of five suits. If you want to play As Nas, and your deck has only four suits, 20 card poker is the natural result. This gives us centuries of lineage with links to royalty and the oldest card games. It's even better than the contract bridge story because Persia probably had playing cards before Europe. John Scarne goes so far as to imagine Persian sailors bringing the game to New Orleans.

