

MY LIFE WITH BRIDGE

A photograph of a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a bright red long-sleeved button-down shirt and dark red trousers. He is sitting at a bridge table, looking down intently at a hand of cards in his left hand. His right hand is resting on the table near a stack of cards. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a tournament setting. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man and his red shirt against the grey background.

MIKE LAWRENCE

Mike's selection of hands is worth the price of the book.

Bob Hamman

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SECTION 1: THE BEGINNING

BEFORE I FOUND BRIDGE

Before bridge, I had a life.

I was born in San Francisco and soon moved to Mill Valley. I imagine I was a problem child but not the kind that raised the roof when I didn't get my way. I had a serious knack of doing things I shouldn't be doing. In Mill Valley, I recall putting an apple core in the toilet. How can I remember putting an apple in a toilet when two years old?

I recall this because my dad, Chuck, who got the apple out, reminded me of it more than a few times. Very shortly after this, I was sitting in a highchair, presumably enjoying a bowl of warm cereal. Most of this experience was related to me by my mom. She said I pushed the cereal bowl off the eating area of my chair. It hit the floor and broke. I don't recall this for real but I heard this story so often it became part of my memory. After pushing the bowl onto the floor, shattering it into many pieces, I escaped from the chair and followed the bowl. Headfirst. To this day, I have a scar on my forehead from this experience. Evidence.

A couple of years passed and we moved to Berkeley, where we rented a house. It had a cherry tree. I liked cherries. When they ripened, I decided to get them. Yep. Eight feet up the tree and straight back down. Like an elevator. This time nothing bad happened. But I'd tried.

My mom and I visited a friend who had a son about my age. We spent much of the time hiding in plain sight under a large rug in the living room. For some reason, the parents left the room and we took advantage of this. My friend had acquired (snatched?) a tube of lipstick, whatever that was, and we anointed a wall with our caveman art. This was not appreciated.

We were getting close to my first bridge event, but I wasn't done yet. One of my curiosities was how a toaster could run by simply plugging it in and pushing a button. When it was unplugged, pushing the button didn't do anything. Perhaps the secret was in the plug.

But before sticking the plug in the wall, I stuck a hairpin in the wall instead. I have no idea what I was thinking.

That was exciting. I must have screamed because my dad was there in a second. I no longer had the hairpin in my hand. The hairpin was still in the plug. My dad grabbed some rubber gloves and pulled the hairpin out. Oddly, in retrospect, I would have expected to hear about this. I didn't. Nothing was ever said.

My taste for exploring things never really stopped, as will be noted later on in this book.

A QUESTION I HAVE FREQUENTLY BEEN ASKED

“When did you learn to play bridge?” I got involved in bridge in a very limited way when I was five or so.

My parents, Lee and Chuck Lawrence, used to play bridge on Fridays against our neighbors, Elaine and Burt Burlingame. I recall it was a contentious rivalry. They did not know about the ACBL and perforce, knew nothing about masterpoints. But both pairs, as soon as the cards were dealt, knew that they wanted to win.

They had stakes. If you went down in a contract the losing pair put a nickel in a pot for each trick the contract was set. I do not recall how the dynamics of penalty doubles affected the finances of a hand. The pot money was put in an old bowl that had been in our family for years. Remember. This was 1945 or so, when a nickel was useful.

If someone made a contract, they took something out of the pot.

Five cents if it was a partscore. Ten cents if it was a game. Twenty-five cents if it was a small slam. The entire pot if it was a grand slam.

Dummy play wasn't very good and the bidding wasn't very good either, so the pot grew. And grew some more.

As my mom used to tell me, “That pot is worth a lot.” I have a vague memory of getting up one Saturday to the news that they had won the pot the previous evening. Something like twenty dollars. In nickels, dimes, a few quarters, and a few pennies.

Since my allowance was at that time five cents a week, that pot seemed like it really was worth ‘a lot’. Eight years’ worth of allowances.

My dad decided I should learn to play bridge. He spent a lot of time on defense, telling me that the key to good defense was to lead ‘through strength to weakness’. Bidding was something else. He never told me about that.

During the sessions when the Burlingames and the Lawrences were playing, I got to watch the first few hands before being sent to bed. My parents and the Burlingames could not get together as often as before and the pot was discontinued. But they still played a little and I was still watching.

I remember them bidding hands, which was confusing to me. Followed by the odd ritual of someone putting one card on the table followed by the next player putting all of their cards on the table. One of the players selected one of those cards on the table and put it in the center of the table. The next two players then put one card on the table and one of the players gathered the cards and put them in a pile. I learned that this pile of cards was called a trick.

When the hand was over, someone announced something like “making two” or “down one” and someone else wrote something down on a piece of paper. One day someone said they had just won the rubber. Rubber? What the heck was that?

Then it happened. My mom asked me to play a hand with her. The Burlingames hadn’t arrived yet so my dad took the role of being both opponents. He also spent a lot of time looking at my hand during my playing session.

On one of my hands I held seven hearts, the AKQ10xxx. I had another high card somewhere. And yes, this was what I had. My bridge memory was making early strides.

I opened 3♥. My mom reminded me that I had to wait until it was my turn to bid. My dad passed and I opened 3♥. My dad informed me that this was the wrong bid. I had a good hand which should bid 1♥.

Whatever.

I ended up playing in 3♥. I guess my parents wanted me to play a hand. So I did. After a few slow tricks, each taking up at least two minutes, my dad told me that I could not lose another trick. I had all winners. This was news to me and so I continued play.

My dad reiterated that I had all the tricks and the Burlingames were coming soon.

I realized that my dad was anxious to finish my moment and get on with the real game. With his help, I finished the hand. That was my first exercise in table presence. I didn't play another hand of bridge for around twelve years.

THE NEXT FEW YEARS DID NOT INCLUDE BRIDGE

The next few years prior to 1959 were not interesting. I went to an assortment of schools and finally graduated from Berkeley High, a school that had nation-wide respect. I got decent grades, close to an A- average. It would have been better except for the physical education class teacher giving me an F because I couldn't swim. He agreed to upgrade it to a C, which I suppose helped my GPA a little.

I do recall a selection of my Berkeley teachers. I had Mrs. Montana in English. She was strict but not to excess and she took pleasure in our doing well. She took a liking to me and often asked me to read out loud from one of our class books. I seem to have impressed her enough that she called on me a lot.

My science teacher, Mr. Van Wayman, was a tougher nut. Wasn't an easy class. It was memorable, though. He once set up a Leyden jar, a device that collected electricity. He did whatever was needed to make it function and then instructed the class (the brave ones) to hold hands and form a circle around the jar. The person at each end of the circle was given a metal rod and both of them were instructed to touch the jar at the same time.

Zap!

This caused the students in the circle to shriek and much nervous laughter followed. The ones who did not get into the circle clearly enjoyed this more than those of us who had joined in.

Mr. Van Wayman asked if anyone wanted to try again. NOPE. Unanimous.

He asked if anyone who had not been in the circle wished to try it. NOPE. Some tittering. But no volunteers.

That was what passed for excitement.

I graduated from Berkeley High and immediately headed off to the University of California, where I was expected to learn something.

My new home was at Barrington Hall, one of six such places for students. My classes started with a Russian class at 7 AM. I learned quickly that my normal hours were not going to fly in college.

My classes included Russian, chemistry, some history, and ROTC. Anyone remember that?

After a few weeks of this, one of my roommates in Barrington noted that I did not seem to be doing much studying. He was right. I realized that studying was a big part of school, but putting that into practice was really hard. Life was tougher than it was in high school.

I never got my act together.

My schedule was basically to sleep through my Russian class. I tried reading the materials for my history class but found them boring. Chemistry was worth a try but my interest faded fast.

ROTC was mandatory. I couldn't hide from it. So, I went to these sessions which included getting out on a field and marching around. One day they treated the grass with something that looked like little turds. They stunk and I fainted. As did a few others.

MY FIRST TIME WITH A LADY CAME AND LEFT

Near the end of the semester. I was walking towards my next class, chemistry, with diminished enthusiasm.

I heard my name and turned to find a young lady. She had been in some of my high school classes. I knew her only as a face. We had never acknowledged each other. Hers were the first words between us.

She was Chinese, attractive, and as I had learned during our mutual classes in high school, very smart. She was also very nice. She said she was between classes and invited me to go to one of the many nearby places where we could catch up. But there was one little catch. She had to return to her sorority, which was nearby, and would be back in about fifteen minutes. She said I could wait in the lobby area if I wished.

My first ever such moment. So how did I handle this?

I froze. To this day I cannot imagine saying what I said. I told her that I couldn't go into her sorority because "there are girls in there." She assured me it was safe but I somehow managed to thank her and left. I never saw her again.

CONSEQUENCES

My few moments with her had life-changing consequences.

With a week to go before classes ended, I was in my chemistry classroom trying to decipher what was in a little bottle filled with a white substance. We were supposed to know how to test a substance and identify it. I had no idea where to start.

One of the other students asked how I was doing. My substance was not diagnosed, but we managed to discuss something he was doing. This was a decision that changed my life.

Profoundly.

He showed me something he was working on. It required we perform a few steps with some chemicals he had acquired. We ended up with a tiny amount of white powder. I later confirmed we had silver acetylide. If I had access to the internet then I would have learned that this substance was classified as a 'high explosive'.

KAPOW!

Something I did caused it to explode. There was very little of it but it was enough.

My right hand took the brunt of it. My companion managed to get me to his car and we took a frantic ride to the university hospital. There was a woman manning a desk and she asked what I needed. My hand was encased in a large towel and I raised it to show my problem. She told me to go down the hall to the emergency room, which I did.

The nurse there asked what I needed. I held up my hand, now partially free of the towel, and she said something like, "Omigod!" She disappeared for a moment and I heard a call on the hospital intercom. Sounded something like:

'STAT EMERGENCY! STAT EMERGENCY!' Just like in TV shows.

The nurse returned to the room where I was seated. She was followed by two other staff members. I was quickly taken to the

adjacent room where the doctor observed what he could and asked what had happened.

The short version of this is that one of the members of the emergency team was the president of Barrington Hall. I knew him fairly well. A good person. He told me that normally I would be punished for this. (The explosion had occurred in one of the rooms of the facility.) Both of us knew my action had violated every rule Barrington Hall had. He added that what had happened was sufficient punishment. No one else was hurt.

I was given a room in the hospital where I was soon visited by my mom. My dad never did visit. My mom, Lee, worked there. She took this better than I did. I would see her a few more times in the next two days when she was on duty.

Since the explosion damage was limited to my right hand, I had a fairly easy recovery. To this day, I have a reminder of this event. The palm of my right hand and some of the fingers still bear evidence of the accident. They have black marks which are the residues of the explosion. I am often asked still about the ‘ink stains’ on my hand. I have explained them many hundreds of times.

Since I was due to take final exams and since I couldn’t write, my advisor suggested I stay in the campus area. My right hand was not yet up to handling all the writing I’d be doing during the tests. I was cleared to take the final tests later.

My hand healed fast enough that I could use it in a week, but working or not, I was faced with eight weeks of nothing to do. I could have reviewed my classes in that summer session but I knew that this would not help.

WHAT TO DO WITH MY TIME?

I had no possible agenda that made sense. By accident, perhaps, I wandered into the Student Union, an old building in the shade of the Campanile, the well-known icon that represents the university.

I wasn’t interested in icons but I was interested in the restaurant within the Student Union.

As I headed for the restaurant, I spied a room filled with tables. There were people sitting around the tables. Playing bridge.

I was allowed to watch. Didn't take long to become immersed in the game. I didn't realize how bad the level of play was but it was clearly better than mine. A couple of weeks later, I was asked if I would fill in.

This was the start of my bridge. After a while, I got to the point that I knew enough about the game to play a legal game. This continued to the time I was to take those tests. I missed them. The bridge games felt more important.

The bridge games continued with little change in the players. Seems like the Student Union was a place for lost souls. I had some memorable experiences during this period.

One in particular had a message for me. I was East, playing with Herby, rumored to be the best player in the Student Union. One who didn't mince words when he felt offended. I gave Herby something to talk about.

Herby was West. I was East, holding:

♠ Q 10 8 5 4 ♥ J 9 6 5 2 ♦ 7 2 ♣ 2

West	North	East	South
	1 ♦	pass	1 ♠
pass	3 ♣	pass	3 ♠
pass	4 ♣	pass	6 ♠
pass	pass	dbl	redbl
all pass			

I had a lot of spades and doubted declarer could make 6♠. I doubled. My double was not well advised.

With my hand, I expected South couldn't make 6♠, but my double would help him in the play. Further, my hand didn't suggest that we could defeat 6NT. It turns out I was right about one thing. South could not make 6♠XX.

Without my help. Here's how I blew it.

	♠ —		
	♥ 10 7 4		
	♦ A K Q 8 5		
Herby	♣ A K Q 7 6	Me	
♠ 2	N W E S	♠ Q 10 8 5 4	
♥ K Q 8		♥ J 9 6 5 2	
♦ J 10 9		♦ 7 2	
♣ J 10 9 8 5 3		♣ 2	
	♠ A K J 9 7 6 3		
	♥ A 3		
	♦ 6 4 3		
	♣ 4		

The bidding was standard Student Union stuff. Few of us had any idea what bidding was all about.

Herby led the king of hearts. Declarer won the heart and played the ace and king of spades, finding out the bad news. It looked like I had three spade tricks, which would result in down two, doubled and redoubled, vulnerable, for 1000 points.

The play stopped for a moment after West showed out in spades. Declarer continued by leading the ace and king of clubs. I ruffed the second club, which stopped South from discarding his losing heart. He overruffed.

Next declarer went to the ace of diamonds and led the queen of clubs. At this point I had the ♠Q10 doubleton.

If I don't ruff this, I will get two spades later.

If I ruff it with the ten, I will still get the spade queen and West will get a heart. Declarer won't be able to discard his heart loser on diamonds because I can ruff the third round.

I had another idea. I ruffed the queen of clubs with my queen of spades. Declarer got rid of his heart loser and he made 6♠XX. That was worth 1660. A rare number.

Herby went ballistic. Because there were often ladies in this room and in the adjacent room, there was a rule that you must not use foul language. Loud was OK but not foul.

Herby rushed to point out that if I had just waited with my three high spades, they would have gone down two. If I had ruffed the first club, and then defended sanely, we would have set it one.

My play was just as horrible as could be. Why am I putting this hand in this book? For five reasons.

1. I learned a lot, starting with the double. That was foolish. I had no tricks outside of spades and my double would give away important information. It turned out that we could set 6♠ but not if I insisted on being an imbecile. This was a terrible mistake which I have not forgotten.
2. I still remember this hand. After sixty-three years, I remember the layout. I remember Herby going into overdrive in the postmortem.
3. I remember being crushed by Herby's diatribe. Deservedly, but it was unsettling. I learned that being a nasty partner was a bad thing. This is a lesson I could have learned better than I did.
4. This hand was the first 'forever' hand in my life.
5. I learned that the hamburgers sold next door were excellent.

WHAT DID I DO FOR MONEY?

My parents gave me a monthly allowance of \$25. Nice, but not stretchable into a month.

I discovered that the Student Union provided an answer to this. The adjoining room to the card room was some kind of lecture hall. It had fifty-foot-long rows of couches. The seats were the kind where you could reach between the back of the sofa and the seat of the sofa. Somehow I got the idea of sticking my hand into this space.

Lo. My own personal bank was discovered. I made a habit of spending time doing this. I usually found a dollar or two in change per session. Once I found a money clip with seven dollars in it.

I made do with this income and my allowance.

You may wonder how my income could stretch to cover expenses at Barrington Hall. Someone must be paying for my room and the three meals a day.

This is something that at the time, I gave no thought to. Later I found out that my parents had arranged for me to live there and

they had paid something for this. I did not consider this for some time. Yes. I was that oblivious. A trademark, perhaps. All I had was bridge. I was now addicted to something stronger than anything else I had experienced in life, or would experience later.

MY FIRST ACBL BRIDGE GAME

One of my friends in the Student Union invited me to play with him in a tournament. I knew vaguely about these. The local newspaper, the Oakland Tribune, routinely carried a small blurb detailing the winners in various local bridge clubs.

“Let’s do this,” he said.

Our first game was at the Berkeley Tennis Club. Our score was hopeless. We did not make the Tribune list. I played a total of ten such sessions with zero success. No masterpoints for me. No Tribune mentions.

I tried something new. Recalling that my dad played bridge, I inveigled him to play with me one night at a local game. By my standards he played quite well.

We won. The prize? 0.76 masterpoints. My dad kept his masterpoint slip forever. And he managed to mention it rather frequently. I sent mine to the ACBL for recording. That’s how we did it in those days.

We never played again. Perhaps my dad liked the idea of being a winner. I was now addicted to the game. There was nothing else in my life worth discussing.

I was hit with this thought: What would my life be like if I had gone with the Chinese girl to her sorority? If we had any kind of relationship, I might not have blown up my hand. I might not have found bridge.

My routine looked something like this. I was supposed to be studying to take my finals during the summer session. I slept through my morning classes. I played bridge in the afternoon at the Student Union. I played in one of the local bridge clubs in the evening.

In one of the clubs I managed to earn free plays by cleaning up the tables and emptying the ashtrays after the game. A bargain.

After the evening game, my partner and I would head off to the all-night movie houses in Oakland to catch a late movie, typically around midnight. I remember *A Town Without Pity*. Loved it. Then we visited a pinball hall for an hour.

After that, we went to Mel's Diner in Berkeley, a local icon. It was always open. This was not a schedule well suited to learning anything.

My parents eventually saw that I was not made out to be a student and they accepted that I came home. As long as I agreed to do a modest amount of work around the house, that was OK.

A CAR

My mom gave me a present on my birthday. Fifty dollars and a key. A key to what? She told me she needed help doing something in the garden and she took me to see what it was.

It was a plot. When we got to the front of the house, I found a car, decked out in a red ribbon. It was a used VW Bug. It was beautiful. And my new key fit it. It was the last generation of VW Bugs that included a special lever that you could pull to let a gallon of gas go into the tank. It had no gas gauge so it was a needed addition.

MY SUMMER JOB IN THE FOREST SERVICE

In the middle of all this my dad arranged for me to go to Placerville, California, where I would work for the US Forest Service for a summer. He drove me up to Placerville and introduced me to what was my new place of employment. That was a Wednesday.

My instructions were that I would go to a camp outside of Placerville where my group would be part of a road survey crew. Transportation was supplied. Late Fridays, I could either stay at the camp over the weekend or could find lodging in Placerville. I was told that whatever I chose, I had to be ready for work the following Monday.

I elected to stay in civilization that week. Placerville had a cheap hotel and a movie house where *Around the World in Eighty Days* was playing. Who could resist that?

I WAS ARRESTED

On the following day, I was wandering through the town when I was accosted by a cop who wanted to know what I was doing there. It was a small town and I guess this cop knew everyone. I told him I was in town on the way to the Forest Service camp, which was not enough for him.

He took me in to the jail where I got fingerprinted and lectured. I was freed after a couple of hours.

So began my service in the Forest Service.

It turned out I had two jobs. One was helping survey the land for later installation of roads. The other was to help fight forest fires. This turned out to be a bad year for fires so I spent a lot of time cleaning up hot spots.

What that meant was that where a forest fire had been stopped, it still smoldered in spots and my group was to identify places where the fire was dormant, but not dead. If we could not handle it, they'd hustle a real crew into the site and they would kill the fire before it got serious again.

I lasted the summer and got an exit evaluation that said I was 'bottom of the barrel', not to be hired again. I guess I wasn't made out to be a forest fire fighter. I had one incident where I showed one of the group leaders a better way to do his job. I don't think he appreciated that. It didn't help me either when, during a work break, I got immersed in one of my bridge books. When I looked up, everyone was gone. I was lost in the woods. They found me two hours later.

The summer was over and I was back home. Back with my bridge books and the bridge clubs.

A SPECIAL MOMENT

This was a period that had no real direction. I was playing bridge but had little idea what I was doing. I was gathering masterpoints in dribs and drabs.

When a sectional in nearby Santa Rosa was scheduled, a friend of mine and I decided to play in it. We were not good by any standards so we decided to play in the junior pairs.

The bridge was indeed horrible and on that Saturday, we managed to place in both of our sessions. We decided the next day to play in the normal side games, which was a step higher than the junior pairs. And it awarded more masterpoints.

The field was better but not that much better. We won our section in the afternoon game. And with hopes, we played in the second session.

We won our section in that one, too. Not only that, we also placed in the overalls, which rewarded us with a lot more points than was given for a section top.

We felt ready for the big time.

Our weekend in the sectional was notable for an unexpected reason. Later that month, I received a postcard from the ACBL. It was their method of letting members know how many masterpoints were won in tournaments that month.

My card showed this information.

I started the month with about eight points.

It read something like this:

Santa Rosa Sectional

Michael Lawrence

Saturday afternoon. Junior pairs.	Section 3rd.	.28 points
Saturday evening. Junior pairs.	Section 4th.	.15 points
Sunday afternoon side game.	Section 1st.	1.5 points
Sunday evening side game.	1st overall.	4.0 points
Points won.		5.93 points
New total points.		13.93 points

The person who had filled out this card in ink (no computers yet) wrote “Very Nice” in HUGE letters.

The event result was special to me. I had this card for many years before losing it.

In this year, I learned an important thing that players don't appreciate right away.

You need to know how you are doing in a tournament. You can use that information to help you plan what to do on upcoming hands.

In one event, I demonstrated that I had no clue about this.

During the first of two sessions, it felt like we had 58%. Imagine my feelings when it turned out to be 32%. The second session was just like the first. I thought we were around 57% but it turned out to be another 30% game.

Estimating one's game turned out to be more important than I thought at the time.

There was a meaningful moment to come. My partner and I entered a two-session event that required 20 or more masterpoints to enter.

We won. Two days later, I learned about the 20 masterpoint rule, which neither me nor my partner had known.

Our win was negated, and they kept the table fees.

Of small note, I can still remember a few of the hands.

GENERAL INTEREST

I've written thirty books and thousands of articles on bridge. This in itself has been a challenge. First, I have to learn what I'm talking about. Then I have to put it into words — that is the easy part.

This book is, for me, a totally new adventure. It's got bridge. It includes a lot of advice. Some system suggestions, strong ones in many cases. And a lot of hands. Bob Hamman wrote the quote on the cover about these hands.

But the bulk of the book is made up of stories that were created as a result of my being in the bridge world. Some of them may seem unlikely, but I promise that all of them are true. In the sixty-four years since I joined the ACBL, I've been privileged to meet a wide range of people. Everyone has a story to tell, and I have heard a lot of them. I've met movie stars, titans in the world of business, sports stars, other writers. And I've conversed with a range of people on various topics.

So this book is to enjoy as much as it is to improve your bridge.



MIKE LAWRENCE (Tennessee) has Hall of Fame credentials both as a player and a writer. An original member of the Dallas Aces, he has won three world titles and eighteen national titles. Several of his books are widely regarded as classics of the game.



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