

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

The Indian Hill Canasta Club and Bowl

In 1956 the New York Times reported that “Canasta is the top card game with an estimated 43,000,000 players according to American playing card manufacturers. Contract bridge comes next with 32,000, 000 players.” The popularity of the game brought Americans together around the card table for organized fun.

The game originated in 1939 in Montevideo, Uruguay, where an attorney, Segundo Santos, and his friends regularly played bridge at night at the elite Jockey Club. Sanchez played 6 hours every night, and when he awoke each morning, he was exhausted. He switched to rummy, which was less mentally taxing. However, he thought rummy involved too much chance, so he and his bridge partner, Alberto Serrato, devised a new game over a period of weeks. They asked two other friends to play a trial game, and the question emerged – “What do you call it?” Santos looked at the restaurant basket which they used to store cards, and decided to name the game “Canasta,” the Spanish word for basket. The game spread from Uruguay to Argentina, thence to Chile, Peru, and Brazil. After World War II, a woman from Buenos Aries introduced it to her New York friends, and it became all the rage there, and then spread across the country.

By 1953 over 30 books about the game had been published. Time, Newsweek, Life, Fortune, and the New York Times Magazine all wrote articles about the craze that enveloped the hemisphere. American soldiers in Germany and Japan took the card game to Europe and Asia. Many variations of the game existed: Classic, Samba, Hand & Foot, Modern American, and Pennies from Heaven.

Canasta is played with 108 cards – two regular 52 card packs plus 4 jokers – by two to six players. The original and most popular version is for two players (a team) opposing two others. The main object is to score points by melding cards of the same rank and then “go out” by discarding all your hand. Points are earned by having melds of 3 or more cards of the same rank, with bonus points for a meld of 7 or more cards canasta”).

In 1949 in Cincinnati, expert Oswald Jacoby gave lectures on winning techniques. By 1950 the Indian Hill Canasta Club was established, with six couples playing twice a month at each others’ homes. They convened at 6:30, had cocktails and dinner, then played canasta. The last hand was dealt at 11:00 p.m. The club met from fall through early spring for over 20 years.

They kept score, and at the end of each season awarded a 12” silver bowl to the top female and male players. The bowl rotated from house to house each year and was displayed with pride. A smaller bowl was given annually to each winner.

After drinks, a simple three-course dinner was served – this was when many Indian Hill families employed cooks. Standard fare was an appetizer, a meat entrée with sides, and dessert. Three card tables were set up in the living room or den, and each table had two decks of cards on a rack. Each person played with a different partner every night, one never played against one’s spouse, and players stayed at the same table all evening. If a couple was out of town, a substitute couple was invited.

The core group was Joseph & Betty B. Andrews (Given Rd.), John & Jean Deupree (Park Rd.), Roger & Jeanne Drackett (Old Indian Hill Rd.), Robert & Sally Dunlap, Webster & Mary Harrison (Drake Rd.), Willis and Kate Nichols (Indian Hill Rd.). Other players included Freddie Schneider, William and Phyllis Rowe, and Francesca King. Roger Drackett and Betty Andrews each had their names engraved 10 times on the large silver Indian Hill Canasta Club Bowl. In 1971 many of the couples were wintering in more southerly climates, and the group disbanded.

Recently the bowl was auctioned at Main Auction Galleries downtown. A generous friend of the Indian Hill Historical Society purchased and donated it, so that it could be saved for posterity. The bowl is a treasure. Its story – one of camaraderie and cards - is a notable bit of local lore.

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