

Family Card Games

Hours after burying my father, his children and grandchildren gathered around a long table and played Uno. This honored a long family tradition of playing card games - a tradition in which my father excelled.

The tradition began before I was born. My father's parents and two unmarried sisters came each Saturday evening to play canasta. Those Saturday evening games are part of my early memories, although I never played myself. Grandma and Grandpa were on opposite teams. When Grandpa got a wild-card joker, he would reverse it in his hand so that everyone could see it. "Here's a little bicycle boy," he would say with a smile. This invariably invoked Grandma's angry retort: "Oh, Ralph. You're not supposed to show your cards." The smirking of the winners and the frustrations of the losers formed intricate parts of the family tradition.

My early card games were Fish and War, two mindless games that depended upon the luck of the draw and could engage two people for an hour or more. Crazy Eights required some decision making. The right choice could effect the outcome as much as the luck of the draw. It also worked best with several people at the table.

Poker soon became the game of choice. Its many variations offered hours of entertainment. Small plastic chips marked winners and losers.

The dealer got to name the game and the wild cards. Friends gathered on our back porch to play, and our house always had a spare deck of cards.

Games with friends ended when I went to high school across the city. At the same time, my brothers went away to college. Gatherings at holidays and summer vacations became special occasions. Card games gathered everyone around the dining room table and conversation flowed more freely once the cards were dealt. The games took a long time to produce a winner and that person reaped the scorn of all the other players. Winning took second seat to the time of being together.

Games with fewer players proved more intense. When Aunt Eunice and Uncle Mat moved three blocks away, they started playing bridge with Mother and Dad. The women played against the men and the losers ever complained about the luck of the winners.

Pinochle captured the continuing tension between skill and luck. I played a three-handed game with Mother and Dad until I moved away to Harrisburg. The bidder played against the other two. A successful hand could gain many points and being set could loose just as many. By common understanding, the winner received the silent treatment for at least an hour after the end of the game.

Dad won more than his share of the games. He had great card sense and an uncanny knack for getting good cards. Mother always said he was

lucky at cards. Dad always retorted that she was lucky in love. I was lucky to share that time with my two parents.

Sadly, the family card games died with Dad. Family gatherings are less frequent and centered around food instead of cards. Dad has many legacies and card games are surely one of them.