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## In Florida, a One-Woman Campaign for the Ladies' Bridge Lunch

**Ms. Simony, 91, Extols Benefits of Cards, Canapés, Cookbooks from 1920s**

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla.—Maggy Simony thinks canapés and chicken à la king are ready for a comeback.

So for that matter are tea sandwiches, Waldorf salad, lobster Newburg on toast points, and, for dessert, some nice cream puffs—all homemade, of course, and in sufficient quantities to serve several friends over a leisurely game of bridge.

These dishes—and the idea of consuming them over a genteel card game—spring from another, largely vanished era.

Ms. Simony, on the cusp of turning 92, has become the self-appointed curator of the cuisine and customs surrounding the ladies' bridge lunch, a ritual popular throughout the early and mid-20th century, when bridge was all the rage and President Dwight Eisenhower played at the White House.



Afternoon bridge games, and the elaborate meals that went with them, faded as women joined the work force. Suddenly, there was neither the time nor inclination to play bridge for hours or prepare the fancy dishes that went with it.

More-competitive forms of the game also declined. Membership in the American Contract Bridge League—the association of tournament bridge players—was once at 190,000. These days, it is about 165,000 and the average age of the players is nearly 70, according to editors at the Bridge Bulletin, the league's official publication. But Ms. Simony isn't sitting back in her rocking chair, misty eyed for bridge games past. Posture-perfect in her ergonomics work chair, she is up at her computer early each morning waging a one-woman campaign against the social and technological forces that put bridge and other leisure activities in danger of becoming obsolete. She battles the tide of modernity with modern weapons. She blogs. She surfs. She posts. She has a website called—what else?—Bridge Table Chronicles. She emails bridge experts and foodies.



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She draws the line at Internet bridge. "Never," she says. "I want the face-to-face bridge to come back."

Food is as important as the game itself. Here in her modest condo, minutes from NASA's Kennedy Space Center, Ms. Simony maintains a literary time capsule filled with faded cookbooks and frayed magazine articles that date back to the 1920s.

Her collection of some 80 cookbooks and bridge books includes primers by Fannie Farmer, Betty Crocker, Peg Bracken, even a 1954 recipe book by Alice B. Toklas. "Fannie Farmer, now she is important," Ms. Simony says, as she leafs through a 1927 edition of Ms. Farmer's "Boston Cooking School Cook Book."

In a neat pile marked "1930s" is a yellowing 1932 volume called "Bridge Food for Bridge Fans." It features a "salad sandwich loaf," cucumber aspic salad and peaches in custard. "That is a gem of a little book," she says.

A couple of years ago, when she was 89, Ms. Simony wrote her own book: "Bridge Table or What's Trump Anyway? An Affectionate Look Back at Sociable Bridge & Ladies Lunch."

While it was self published and sold modestly, she received endorsements and reviews from top bridge players, professional associations and even pop culture mavens. Her tireless efforts on behalf of what she calls "sociable bridge" have earned respect. Audrey Grant, a prominent bridge teacher who has authored books on the game and offers educational software and bridge cruises, says she admires Ms. Simony's effort "to bring a certain elegance" back to the game.

In the mid-1990s, Ms. Simony began corresponding with David Scott, then a young academic who had done his Ph.D. dissertation on bridge.

Mr. Scott, now a professor of leisure studies at Texas A&M University, calls Ms. Simony a "lay anthropologist" who has unearthed relics of an era when leisure meant seeing friends, not watching TV or surfing the Internet. "It wasn't about competition," he says. "It was about community."

Robert Putnam, author of "Bowling Alone," a best-selling book that looked at the decline of social and civic life in America, says bridge—and bridge lunches—were once part of the glue of communities.

Mr. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard, says as women played cards, they "were having a conversation about whether schools should be requiring Latin and [offering] social support—'How is your husband doing?'—at the same time they were eating angel food cake."

Ms. Simony remembers learning to play bridge as a young suburban wife in Long Island in the 1960s; her husband was an avid player. She and friends took turns preparing lovely bridge meals. She treated guests to chicken salad in pastry shells and ice cream parfaits doused with liqueur.

Then, it was all over. Her husband died in 1973, and both her world and the world around her changed. Young women who had typically learned bridge in college seemed to want nothing to do with the game. "Really, what killed bridge was the turmoil," of the 1960s and '70s, she says.

By the 1980s, she was collecting any books she could find on "sociable bridge." She scoured used bookstores and public libraries, carefully photocopying old magazine articles on the subject.

Neatly filed in her home office, they offer a glimpse into the mood of Americans throughout the last century. A May 1944 article in *House Beautiful* titled "Don't Stop Entertaining Just Because He's Away," urges women to keep playing bridge even though their husbands are overseas and there is rationing in America.

Ms. Simony says she realizes working women may be too tired to prepare molded salads, let alone play for hours.

She is cooking up solutions. Why not have "Bridge and Brunch," she suggests—games on Saturday or Sunday. As for fancy meals, there is always takeout: "They can go and buy chicken salad from a deli," she says.

Next on her agenda: She hopes to turn her collection of blogs—including one posting, "Is 100 the new 90?"—into an eBook.

Meanwhile, she is taking part in a study of nonagenarians exploring, among other things, why some seniors don't develop Alzheimer's. Every six months, researchers from the University of California, Irvine, visit for tests. Ms. Simony volunteered for the study and agreed to will the researchers her brain.

She has had to make some accommodations to modern times and age. She plays two games or more of "sociable bridge" a week. But she doesn't cook any fancy meals nor do her friends. Once a month, they will play at a restaurant. Typically, they meet in the community room of a condo.

"It's evolved into 'Bring a sandwich and I will give you a cup of coffee,'" she says.