



Ely Culbertson 1891 – 1955

Perhaps the most colorful and flamboyant figure in the history of bridge was Ely Culbertson. His career was so varied that it defies a brief synopsis, but in the world of bridge Culbertson is remembered as an extraordinary organizer, player and — above all — showman.

His success in all of these endeavors made Culbertson fabulously wealthy even at the height of the Great Depression. A self-educated man, Culbertson was also an author and lecturer on mass psychology and political science. He was born in Romania but was an American citizen from birth by registration with the U.S. consul, being the son of Almon Culbertson, an American mining engineer who had been retained by the Russian government to develop the Caucasian oil fields and who had married a Russian woman, Xenia Rogoznaya, daughter of a Cossack ataman or chief.

Culbertson belonged to a pioneer American family who settled about Titusville PA and Oil City PA. Later he joined the Sons of the American Revolution to refute rumors that he had changed his name or falsified his ancestry.

He attended gymnasias in Russia and matriculated at Yale (1908) and Cornell (1910), but in each case remained only a few months.

Later (1913-14) he studied political science at l'Ecole des Sciences Economiques et Politiques at the University of Paris (Sorbonne) and in 1915 at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, but he was largely self-educated, and the erudition for which he was admired can principally be attributed to a self-imposed and invariable regimen of reading a book designed to improve his knowledge at least one hour before going to sleep each night. In this he was aided by an aptitude for languages. He conversed fluently in Russian, English, French, German, Czech, Spanish and Italian, had a reading knowledge of Slavonic, Polish, Swedish, and Danish-Norwegian, and had a knowledge of classical Latin and Greek.

In 1907 Culbertson participated as a student in one of the abortive Russian revolutions. He pursued his revolutionary ideas in labor disputes in the American Northwest and in Mexico and Spain (1911-1912), serving as an agitator for the union and syndicalist sides.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 wiped out his family's large fortune there, Culbertson lived for four years in Paris and other European cities by exploiting his skill as a card player.

In 1921 he returned to the U.S., almost penniless, and continued to derive his chief living from winnings in card games. In 1923, having acquired some reputation as a bridge player, he married Mrs. Josephine Murphy Dillon, one of the highly reputed bridge teachers in New York City.

Together they became a successful pair as tournament players and bridge authorities. Between 1926 and 1929, the then new game of contract bridge began to replace auction bridge, and Culbertson saw in this development an opportunity to overtake the firmly entrenched authorities on auction bridge.

Culbertson planned a long-range campaign that included the construction of a dogmatic system, the publication of a magazine to appeal to group leaders in bridge, the authorship of a bridge textbook to serve as a "bible", an organization of professional bridge teachers, a dramatization of himself and his wife as largely fictitious personalities and the expansion of the appeal of bridge by breaking down religious opposition to card playing. The plan proved conspicuously successful.

Culbertson founded his magazine, *The Bridge World*, in 1929. Through the same corporation he published his earliest bridge books, all of which were best sellers. He manufactured and sold bridge players' supplies, including the introduction of Kem playing cards, maintained an organization of bridge teachers (Culbertson National Studios), which at its peak had 6000 members, and conducted bridge competitions through the United States Bridge Association and the World Bridge Olympics and American Bridge Olympics.

In its best year, 1937, *The Bridge World, Inc.*, grossed more than \$1,000,000, of which \$220,000 were royalties payable to Culbertson before profits were calculated.

As a regular tournament competitor Culbertson had the best record in the earliest years of contract bridge. In 1930 he won the Vanderbilt and American Bridge League Knockout Team events, also the ABL B-A-M Team event, and finished second in the Master Pairs.

That year he led a team that played the first international match, in England, and defeated several teams there. In 1933 and 1934 his teams won the Schwab Cup.

Culbertson seldom played tournament bridge after 1934, but he was second in the ABL's 1935 matchpoint team contest and in the International Bridge League's first intercontinental tournament in 1937. Culbertson continued to play high-stake rubber bridge until about two years before his death.

The success of Culbertson's Blue Book in 1930 caused the established auction bridge authorities to join forces to combat his threatened domination of contract bridge. Culbertson countered by challenging the leading player among his opposition, Sidney Lenz, to a test match, offering 5-1 odds.

Culbertson's victory in this match, played in the winter of 1931-32, fortified his leading position. The great publicity accorded the match enriched Culbertson; he and his wife both acquired contracts for widely syndicated newspaper articles, he made a series of movie shorts for \$360,000 and he received \$10,000 a week for network radio broadcasts. In 1935 Culbertson tried to recapture the magic of his match against Lenz by playing a similar match against P. Hal and Dorothy Sims, but although the Culbertsons won this match also, there was no such publicity advantage as accrued from the Lenz match.

The publicity accorded Culbertson throughout his professional career can be attributed equally to his unquestioned abilities, his colorful personality and his grandiose way of life. Culbertson lived in the grand manner, with total disregard of expense whether at the moment he happened to be rich or penniless.

Once he strolled into Sulka's (then) on Fifth Avenue in New York and bought \$5,000 worth of shirts. He smoked a private blend of cigarettes that cost him \$7 a day. When he decided to buy a Duesenberg automobile in 1934, he did not sell his Rolls Royce but gave it away.

His home for years was an estate in Ridgefield CT, with a 45-room house, several miles of paved and lighted roads, greenhouses, cottages, lakes and an enclosed swimming pool with orchids growing along its periphery.

He always had caviar with his tea and made special trips to Italy to buy his neckties. When he died in 1955, he owned five houses for his own use --- four of them with swimming pools. But Culbertson rationalized these extravagances as publicity devices. He actually lived in one small room with a cot and a table, and he spent most of his time pacing the floor and thinking.

In 1933, when a newspaper reporter asked him, "Mr. Culbertson, how did you get ahead of those other bridge authorities?" he answered, "I got up in the morning and went to work."

Culbertson's contributions to the science of contract bridge, both practical and theoretical, were basic and timeless. He devised the markings on duplicate boards for vulnerability and the bonuses for games and partscores.

He was the first authority to treat distribution as equal or superior to high cards in formulating the requirements for bids. Forcing bids, including the one-over-one, were original Culbertson concepts, as were four-card suit bids, limited notrump bids, the strong two-bid and wholesale ace-showing including the 4NT slam try.

These were presented in the historic Lesson Sheets on the Approach-Forcing System (1927) and in numerous magazine articles written by Culbertson in the Twenties and early Thirties. Specific bridge principles attributable to Culbertson, separately described, include among others Asking Bids, the Grand Slam Force, Jump Bids, and the New-Suit Forcing principle, which Culbertson first introduced and later repudiated.

In 1938, with war imminent in Europe, Culbertson lost interest in bridge and thereafter devoted his time to seeking some grand achievement in political science.

To affect world peace he proposed international control of decisive weapons and a quota for each major nation in tactical forces. After formation of the United Nations, to which Culbertson's ideas made a discernible contribution, he persisted in a campaign to give it adequate police power.

At one time 17 U.S. Senators and 42 U.S. Congressmen subscribed to a proposed joint resolution of Congress advocating Culbertson's proposals. But in the course of these activities Culbertson lost his position as the leading bridge authority; by 1950 or earlier, Charles Goren had surpassed him in the sale of books and other bridge writings and in the adherence of bridge teachers and players. When a bridge Hall of Fame was inaugurated in 1964, nine years after his death, however, Culbertson was the first person elected.

Though never an ACBL Life Master, he was named Honorary Member in 1938. Ely and Josephine Culbertson were divorced in 1938 and in 1947 Culbertson married Dorothy Renata Baehne, who was 35 years younger than he.

There were two children by each of his marriages. Culbertson suffered in later years from a lung congestion (emphysema) and died at his last home in Brattleboro VT of a common cold that proved fatal because of the lung condition.

Minor works by Ely Culbertson, such as paperbound books and pamphlets, are literally too numerous to mention, and all or nearly all were written by members of Culbertson's staff, as also were most of the newspaper and magazine articles published under Culbertson's name from 1932 on.

Earlier articles in bridge periodicals were written by Culbertson, as were the following of his major books, each of which was published in many editions: Contract Bridge Blue Book, 1930; Culbertson's Self-Teacher, 1933; Red Book on Play, 1934; The Gold Book or Contract Bridge Complete, 1936; and Point-Count Bidding, 1952. Culbertson's autobiography, The Strange Lives of One Man, was published in 1940. His principal works on political science were Total Peace, 1943, and Must We Fight Russia?, 1947.