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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Getting Schneider

Anybody who works with me knows about Schneider. Schneider is an intermediate state between losing and winning. You got to get Schneider to have a chance of winning, but if Schneider is all you get, you still lose. Just not so big.

I grew up in a card culture. My father was of German descent and my mother of Danish descent. When my father's family came for celebrations it was schafkopf. When my mother's family came it was whist. Whist was coeducational. Schafkopf was boys only.

The standard for an evening of schafkopf was a case of Hauenstein's cooling in the shanty. It was before we had electricity, so it was Old Man Winter who kept the beer cold. Sometimes too cold. It froze. It gets cold in Minnesota!

Early on I was beer boy. Later I was a member of the gallery and eventually a player. It is in the gallery where I learned the art form of kibitzing and then honed to a fine art as a player.

Our version of the game was played with 32 cards, sevens and higher, with four players. Diamonds were trump plus the four queens and jacks. The queen of clubs was boss. She outranked all other trump cards. She was followed by the queen of spades, then hearts, and then diamonds. Then by jacks in the same order and then the ace, 10, king, 9, 8, and 7 of diamonds for a total of 14 trump.

Aces count 11, tens 10, kings 4, queens 3, and jacks 2 for a total of 120 points. To win you and your partner had to have at least 61 points if you had the black queens and at least 60 if you did not have them. To get Schneider you needed at least 31 points with the black queens and at least 30 without them.

A win for players with the black queens netted each player a nickel if the losers had Schneider and a dime if they did not.

If the players with the black queens did not have game but had Schneider, they paid a dime. If they did not have Schneider it cost them twenty cents.

It was always the same. Nickels and dimes. No COLAs. Good thing it is not today. Nobody would have change.

Winnings after an evening of play would be a dollar or two, max. It was not the amount that mattered. It was the boasting rights.

The tricky part of the game was figuring out who your partner was. You had to deduce that from plays. Knowing who you were partnered with was important because of being able to schmeer on your partner's tricks if you did not have the suit played.

Schmeer cards were aces and tens. God help you if you guessed wrong and schmeered the opposition.

If you play hearts you have to worry about players shooting the moon. You have similar worries in schafkopf. If a player has both black queens, the player can pick a partner or say nothing and go it alone. If he goes it alone everything is double. If the player loses, he pays all three players double. If he wins he gets paid double by all three players.

Schafkopf tournaments were commonplace in the winter. For obvious reasons they were held in watering holes. Mostly in Sleepy Eye and Cobden. Sometimes Evan but more whist than schafkopf there. Lots of Danes in Evan.

The schafkopf capital was New Ulm (dubbed “Little Berlin” during WW II). Only 14 miles east of Sleepy Eye but when I came along, a long way.

The game, when I was in grad school at Minnesota, was skat, a three person game with similarities to schafkopf. It was standard every noon in the department lunch room.

The great thing about card games is that everybody is equal. In the lunch room you could stick it to your advisor and gloat about it.

Here at Hopkins the game was kriegspiel, basically chess in the dark. The game involved three boards, one for each player and one, separated from view of both players, showing the actual board so the umpire could say whether proposed moves were possible.

The game was popularized by Alan Ross during his tenure as chair of biostatistics. The room where the game was played was renamed the “Kriegspiel Room”.

The game was a spectator sport. Great for kibitzing and trash talking.

Mostly male players. The only woman I remember in the game was Maureen Maguire when she was a student in the department. She got her fair share of needling plus that for being a “girl”. It did not faze her.

I have heard Maureen speak kindly of her days at the kriegspiel table. I expect, if you talked to her now, she would say the ribbing was good training for the guff she would take as a trialist.

If you got this far you are probably wondering why I wrote this piece. Because I needed a break from trials and because I wanted to be reminded that even the games we play are useful in the journey of life.