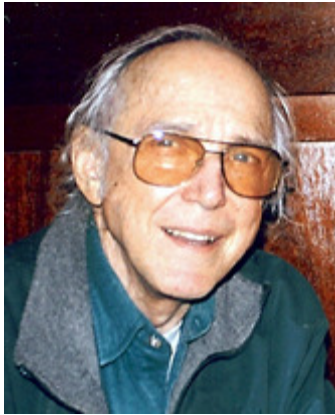


My Chess Autobiography



by Charles "Kit" Crittenden

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Tom Hales has asked me to write something about my chess adventures. He has also sent a set of questions to be addressed; some of these go beyond the boundaries of the chess world itself, and so my comments are not limited to tournament play. My focus will be on what is particularly interesting to NC players.

My family was living in Raleigh where my father was Director of the State Department of Archives and History, when in 1946, I believe, he was called to the National Archives in Washington, DC, for a year. So my mother, brother, sister, and I moved to Waynesville, NC, to live with my grandmother for that time. My siblings and I attended public schools; I enrolled in the eighth grade in Waynesville Township High School. During my time there my aunt Betsy Quinlan, who had served in the Red Cross in WWII and had learned games to entertain the troops, taught me chess. I had very much enjoyed checkers with people in my neighborhood in Raleigh and Waynesville, but here was something else, and I was immediately attracted. When we returned to Raleigh, I found that my father was an accomplished chess player, having been taught by friends of his family and professors at the college in Wake Forest, where he had grown up. He was generous about playing with me, and I have scores

of a number of our games from this period. But none of my friends played chess; there was no high school club or even players there of whom I knew.

About this time I learned about the Vass-Barden chess club, located in the building housing the Roscoe-Griffin Shoe Store, on the west side of the first block of Fayetteville Street south of the capitol. This was the main downtown thoroughfare with businesses on either side of the street. In the middle of the right-hand display window in the front of the building, there were stairs leading up to the second floor where the club was to be found. The club itself was in a small room opposite the photography studio of Albert Barden, and was founded by him and a Mr. Bass, whom I never met. There was a table running down the center of the room holding four or five boards with chairs on either side. In one corner was a cabinet with a few old books – one I think was a book of the New York 1924 tournament – and issues of *Chess Review* and other magazines. There was a chess clock which was not used in my day and possibly did not work – it was mechanical, of course, of the kind pictured in photographs of tournaments of the 1920s and '30s.

There, devotees of the game would gather during lunch and perhaps one day on the weekend, the chief time I could attend as I was in high school during this period. There I met Mr. Curry, who looked at all corners of the board before making his move, Mr. Teizer, said to have come from Vienna and to have played Steinitz; and Mr. Pickner, who seemed vaguely European although I never had any definite knowledge of this. H. M. Woods, several times state champion, and Newell Banks, former state checker champion, were out-of-towners who would occasionally visit the club. I was the only one of high-school age to play there frequently, though there were sometimes N. C. State College students; the regulars were all men – no women – in their fifties and above. Mr. Barden would occasionally come over from his studio; I have the impression that he was from England – he favored gambits and the slashing attack. These were my chief opponents during this time, in addition to my father. There were no organized events – no club championship, no matches with other cities.

For some reason I, aged 13, decided to play in the state championship in 1947 which was held in Durham. My parents encouraged me; they never raised objections to my playing in tournaments. I was a delivery boy for the *Raleigh Times*, the afternoon newspaper, and could pay my way. I finished tied for last in the five-person 'B' section, winning one game and losing three. But I was intrigued with the idea of tournament play and thought I could do better than this. So I subscribed to *Chess Review* and *Chess Life* and later to *Chess World*, published in Australia. Somehow the foreign and exotic origin of this magazine and the clever writing of its editor, C. J. S. Purdy, were appealing. I also bought books of the games of the great players Capablanca, Alekhine, and especially Rubenstein, and played over their games. I studied openings and began recording games with my father and various players in the Vass-Barden club. Chess became a central, but not an all-consuming interest as I read books on history and philosophy, and also novels and poetry, in my parents' library. Tennis and table-tennis were also favorites.

When the next state championship came around, I was eager to play. This was in Winston-Salem, a longer bus ride and again because of my paper route, I could finance the trip myself. This time I decided to play in the 'A' section. I recall being asked by someone aware of my standing in the previous year's tournament whether I was sure of this. But I remembered my results against the Raleigh players, particularly against the State student Myron Silverstein who was also entered in the 'A' section, and stayed firm.

In the tournament I was lucky, although I did not realize it at the time, to play the eventual winner, Russell Chauvenet, in the first round. This was an open tournament and the state champion was to be the highest-scoring NC player. I lost badly to Chauvenet, blundering on the sixteenth move. I was extremely nervous; this was my first clock game, and here I was in a tournament playing a very strong player from Virginia! Entering the last round with two wins (one against Silverstein!), one loss, and two draws, I was paired against Jerry Sullivan of Tennessee who was 4-1. Sullivan was Southern Junior Champion and a year older; later he became a very good friend. I

won a tense game facing a motif I had never seen before; my position was winning if only I could stop the checks by his rook, yet if I captured the rook it would be a stalemate! I finally solved the problem and won the game. As a result, I was the highest ranking NC player in the tournament, tied with two others from out-of-state with 4-2 and behind Chauvenet's 6-0. Quite unexpectedly this gave me the state title, an outcome I had not even considered when entering the round.

It was not until a few days after my return to Raleigh that the trophy, which had to be engraved with my name, arrived in the mail. I imagine that only then did my parents fully believe that I had won the championship – naturally enough, since I had been having mixed success against my father most of the year, and my results against the Vass-Barden players were far from overwhelming. Indeed, the procedure whereby the title was awarded was hardly ideal, and later the state championship was decided by tournaments which only NC residents could enter, a much more satisfactory arrangement. The next year, however, I did have some immediate successes – a tie for first in the Tennessee Open and clear first in the Eastern NC Championship. But not everything went so well, and my 5-0 scores in both the NC Open and Closed tournaments in 1951 gave a much more convincing result.

What helped my game immensely was playing in national and strong northern tournaments. A grant from the NC Chess Association enabled me to participate in the 1949 US Junior Championship in Ft. Worth, Texas, where my score was 5½ - 4½. Although there were some decent games, more important were the people I met there, some of whom have remained among my best friends ever since. I renewed my acquaintance with Jerry Sullivan, with whom I drove back from Ft. Worth to Knoxville. There were the New Yorkers Eliot Hearst and Jimmy Sherwin and others, who in the early '50s visited me at my parents' home in Raleigh, and whom I visited in turn in New York.

There I was introduced to a general level of play far above what I had known in NC – club players in the Marshall or Manhattan Chess Clubs were often my equal or superior. In

each of these clubs, there were weekly rapid tournaments in which some of the best national players competed and which provided wonderful practice for young players wanting to improve their game. The clubs themselves were spacious – more than one room! – and always open during the day, often with strong and even nationally-known players enjoying off-hand games or analyzing positions – or playing bridge. In a different class were the chess hustlers in Fischer's Divan on 42nd St, I think the name was – no relation to Bobby! Washington Square Park, not far from the Marshall, and other venues had their habitués, and it was easy to find opponents there for speed chess. I realized that I had been successful in NC largely because of the much lower level of general skill common here. Chess literature was also easily available in NY; *Chess Review*, the pre-eminent national magazine, was published there, and I remember seeing its editor, I. A. Horowitz, at the Manhattan. Chess books and magazines from around the world were for sale, and I remember buying copies of the Soviet magazine *Shakmaty v SSSR* in a bookstore in Greenwich Village and puzzling through them when I got home. This rich chess culture, sustained by immigrants from chess-playing nations around the world and drawing on a long tradition of accomplishments by native-born New Yorkers, was unequalled in this country. Raleigh was hardly parochial, but it far from a chess center, and my trips to New York gave me a sense of what a real chess environment would be like.

During the '50s I participated in state and area tournaments with varying degrees of success. I did not always play even in the summer because of other interests and commitments, and sometimes there were conflicts with area or national events. As an undergraduate at UNC from 1951-54, I met other players, and we organized a very informal club. Some of the members were Douglas Kahn from Charlotte, who went on to become a professor of law at the University of Michigan, Tommy Makens of Charlotte, Robert Hubbard from Washington, DC, Pete Henderson of Lynchburg, VA, and Malcolm Clark of Pinehurst. We held intercollegiate events against Duke, Davidson, UVA, the University of Richmond, and the US Naval Academy, among other schools. In 1952 Eliot Hearst and Jimmy Sherwin of the Columbia University national championship team visited Chapel

Hill for a match opened with remarks by the UNC Chancellor. Despite enjoying these encounters we were serious about our studies, which ultimately came first. Almost all of us went into professions – Eliot became a professor of psychology, Jimmy a business executive, and Jerry Sullivan a computer programmer at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Unlike later generations of young players, ours had few opportunities for becoming chess professionals.

Slightly earlier, in January 1951 as a high school senior, I put out a newsletter, the *North Carolina Chess Bulletin*. At that time no publication reporting tournament results and chess activities in NC existed. The *NCCB* was primitive by any standard, written on my typewriter at home and duplicated on a commercial Xerox machine. It ran for only six issues, ending with the 1952 Jan-Feb double issue as I found it too difficult to do the work required of a UNC undergraduate and also produce a chess publication. But others took up this task and shortly the *Carolina Gambit* appeared, under the editorship of Norman Hornstein with me as games editor.

In 1950 I also played a small role in an event that foreshadowed the coming civil rights movement. W. A. Scott, a black player from Atlanta who had participated in two Tennessee tournaments earlier in the year without incident, had been invited to the Southern Championship in Durham. The Pittsburgh Courier for July 15, 1950 reported the story, how that “a small group from Georgia and Florida objected and stated that they would withdraw” if Scott were allowed to play. The management of the hotel hosting the event also brought up the state’s segregation laws. “A few players suggested that the tournament be moved to a location where Scott might play”, but Scott withdrew from the event because he did not want to “break up the tournament.” When “Kit Crittenden, state champion, and others volunteered to pay his return fare back to Atlanta”, Scott said he appreciated the gesture but refused. When I was in Tampa in 1952 for the US Open, I recall speaking with a Maj. Holt, one of the segregationists present at the Durham event, about this. Holt said that his generation would have to die off before Negro players would be welcome in chess events such as

this. And now NC has a black champion and the country a black president – real progress!

Despite my commitment to an academic career, I tried to participate in the US Open and in tournaments in the northeast when I could, usually in the summer. Certainly one of my best achievements during the 50s, in addition to success in state tournaments, was in the 1958 District of Columbia Championship. I was living in nearby Fredericksburg, VA, teaching philosophy at Mary Washington College, and could manage the required one game a week in Washington. I tied for 3-4 and defeated several strong masters. After this I had a solid USCF master rating. In 1962 my rating qualified me for a play-off for a place on the US student team, my only invitational master tournament. It was played at the Marshall Chess Club in New York, which gave me a sense of participating in the New York chess tradition. I tied for 4-5th place out of 6.

As a college undergraduate, serious about a career in philosophy and so having to prepare for graduate school and then rigorous graduate programs, chess received less and less of my attention. In high school I had realized that I wanted a career in philosophy. The depth of its questions, their pervasive implications for individual life and society, and a deep natural curiosity about the world – inherited from my mother – made this a natural choice. Chess certainly has its creativity, beauty, and tradition, and of course there is the fun of competition and camaraderie. It has been a marvelous vehicle for meeting people with backgrounds very different from my own, as I experienced with my friends in the New York chess community. As noted, I have life-long friends through chess; I can also mention Al Jenkins, former state champion, and his wife Sue, and Jim Tarjan whom I met in California. Chess has also provided a way of gaining acceptance in foreign cultures. In France I was welcome in the most traditional clubs; in Austria I played speed chess at a Viennese pub with some of the local experts and when I won, there were whispers of “Grossmeister” from the onlookers. In England I actually played in one area tournament (the result blessedly gone from memory), and again found chess groups most welcoming. But I learned in a London pub that it is bad form to win a speed tournament by too large a margin; the

fate of winners is to be solicited by chess hustlers waiting for an overconfident victim.

Although I never had any question about the field in which I would like to work, many of the activities central to chess are essential to philosophy and other intellectual pursuits, for example, careful analysis and calculation, studying texts thoroughly and understanding complicated reasoning, developing good judgment, and remembering and evaluating complex steps in an argument. Chess also teaches resilience and the value of persistence, the possibility of rescuing bad situations and so remaining open to the possibility of the unexpected resource, the value of individual study, self-reliance and self-confidence. Anyone can learn these lessons; chess is a natural addition to any school curriculum.

After leaving UNC in 1956 with an MA in philosophy, and spending eight months in the US Naval Flight Training Program in Pensacola, Florida (a change in program requirements allowed me to leave early while fulfilling my military obligations), I entered graduate school at Cornell in the fall of 1958. Here chess was an unexpected asset; my advisor for the PhD program turned out to have been one of the best junior players in England. Chess was a bond between us and gave him a special interest in my graduate and professional career.

After being married in the summer of 1960, my wife and I left in the fall for the University of Florida at Gainesville, where I taught for five years, and then for five more at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Although I played in a handful of Florida tournaments, my duties as husband and father and as university instructor were necessarily my main focus. This was also true after 1970 when we moved to San Fernando Valley outside Los Angeles after I accepted a position at what became California State University, Northridge. The chess possibilities in LA were in some ways comparable to those in New York. Although I sometimes enjoyed the 5-minute tournaments at the Herman Steiner club in downtown Los Angeles and later at the Santa Monica club, and occasionally entered state tournaments, my interest in chess was at best intermittent. There were no major tournament victories in California although there were

some reasonable results and wins over strong players; after one event I had a provisional FIDE rating of 2305. During my last few years as a tournament player, my USCF rating was around 2270, declining to 2257 by the time I stopped altogether around 1988.

I stopped because I realized that if I were to accomplish my goals in philosophy I could not afford the loss of time that even occasional weekend play, and even superficial opening preparation, required. I still have occasional 5-minute sessions with friends – pleasant when winning but not to worry when not. And the first item I read in the Sunday *Los Angeles Times* is the excellent chess column. Computers were introduced into chess just as I was leaving it; they are a great instrument for those not located in chess centers and have no doubt improved the overall level of play. But their use has also become a practical necessity in preparation for serious competition, and I was just not willing to put in the time required.

I have not regretted my decision; certainly my work in philosophy benefited from it. (A web search for <"Charles Crittenden" philosophy> will locate some of this.) But chess has provided friendships and experiences that I would not have done without. So I congratulate the North Carolina Chess Association for its support for the game in the state and particularly for presenting young players with the kinds of opportunities that were open to me.

Edited by Mark D. Stout and Tom Hales