

SHEPHERD EXPRESS
NOVEMBER 2, 2011

THE RENEWED SURPRISING APPEAL OF MAH JONGG



I always loved my grandmother's mah jongg set. I never knew my grandmother, but as a child I'd touch the buttery smooth tiles, hear their satisfying click and feel I almost did. Though I never learned the game (who played mah jongg anymore, anyway?), the tiles with their pretty Chinese designs evoked my grandmother's era: the exotic, dusky 1920s.

I was stunned, then, when I recently walked into Fiddleheads, a Mequon coffee shop, and saw three tables of women playing the game. I'd thought it was extinct! A little research proved how wrong I was. In fact, mah jongg is enjoying a revival.

The game arose in China during the 1800s and was played only by men from the elite class. In 1912, American businessman Joseph Babcock of Standard Oil introduced it to the West. In 1920, Abercrombie & Fitch, then a sporting goods store to upper-crust New Yorkers, imported and sold as many Chinese sets as it could find. The gin-rummy-like game took hold, with some American modifications, and a huge mah jongg craze was born.

By the mid-1930s, the game's popularity began to fade. However, mah jongg stayed alive in American Jewish culture, where it became a deep-seated tradition among women. From generation to generation, Jewish women played in their apartments and homes, eventually spreading the game to communities across the country.

The children who grew up in those households have memories of falling asleep to the sounds of the game. Rosie Lieb (whose business Shanghai Moon imports mah jongg sets) says, "They remember 'the click of the tiles.'" The game's title, aptly, means "the twittering of birds."

Jody Hirsh, director of Judaic Studies at Milwaukee's Jewish Community Center (JCC), lived and worked in Hong Kong and remembers that sound well. "In my apartment I could always hear my next-door neighbors playing," he says. "I could not hear the voices, because the insulation was good, but I could hear them shuffling the tiles."

People played for high stakes in Hong Kong, Hirsh recalls: "It would be mostly men and there would be piles of \$100 Hong Kong bills." He describes the mah jongg parlors as "dark and sinister, with obsessive people sitting at square tables with green felt tops. When you'd walk by, the doors of the parlors would open and all this smoke would pour out. Now every time I see little Jewish ladies playing mah jongg for pennies, I laugh."

Game Among Friends

American players like the companionship the game offers. As mah jongg instructor Janet Fine explains, "Women play because of the long talks with friends—'How's your husband? What did you do last week?' It's like talking on a park bench in old-fashioned times."

Laura Waisbren agrees. "We talk about our children, their college, their med school, week after week," Waisbren says. "That's the best part... And we talk about food and lack of food—we're always dieting."

Fine says the game used to be played only by her mother's or grandmother's generations. "Women's libbers didn't want to be like their mothers then. But now we've grown up and want to play like they did. It's not an old ladies' game anymore."

Women used to play in their homes, after elaborately prepared meals. Today, they're more likely to keep their "mahj" dates at places like Fiddleheads, Einstein Bagels or Bravo! Cucina.

"We play once a week, leave the real estate business or office," Karen Hellmann says. "We work, we are 'women of purpose,' but we need to take time for ourselves."

Sarah Kriger Hwang, young professional and novice player, is a fan. "It's a nice combination of relaxing and getting social time with your girlfriends—an extremely important part of my life," she says. "We do a lot more chatting and noshing than we do playing. You can take breaks and be social, but you really have to use your mind, at the same time."

Mah jongg is in the middle of another renaissance. Memberships in the National Mah Jongg League have increased from 100,000 to 350,000. Internet versions of the game are exploding. There are even "Mah Jongg Madness" cruises. Locally, a "Mah Jongg Friend'zy" tournament will be held Dec. 4 at Congregation Emanu-El in River Hills. The JCC offers classes. Kalahari Resort in Wisconsin Dells holds a "Mah Jongg Weekend" every November. In Waukesha, Sheboygan and other communities, classes for all ethnicities, genders and ages have sprung up in schools and rec departments. All across the country, the ritual pleasures of the clicking tiles are burgeoning. "The twittering of the birds" goes on. I think I want to learn to play—with my grandmother's set, of course.

photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express