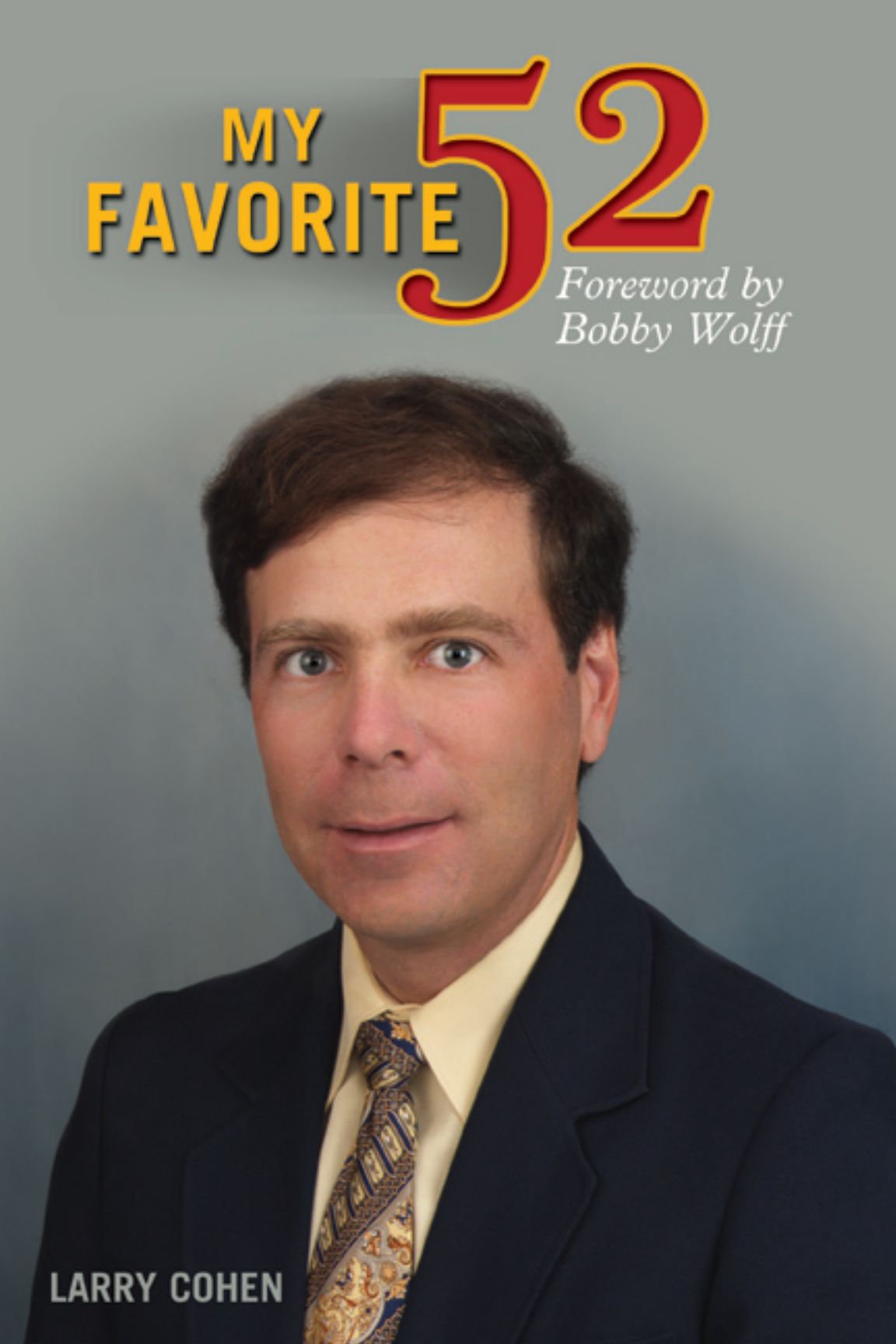


MY  
FAVORITE 52

*Foreword by  
Bobby Wolff*

A professional headshot of a man with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored dress shirt, and a patterned tie. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

LARRY COHEN

MY  
FAVORITE 52

LARRY COHEN

*Adapted by  
Linda Lee from the  
original software*



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# FOREWORD

I've known Larry Cohen throughout his thirty-plus years in the tournament bridge world. By combining his talents as player and writer to select his favorite 52 deals, he has come up with a compilation that will be a treat to bridge aficionados everywhere.

In my partnership with Bob Hamman in the 1980s we often found ourselves face-to-face with Larry and Marty Bergen. It was no surprise to me that several deals from that era have found their way into his favorite 52. They brought back memories for me and made me wonder how many other 'lost gems' were never written about. So many deals in this book have never been published before — it is like an unearthing of recent bridge history.

Many of the exhibits are spectacular. It increases one's fascination with the great game of bridge to see how these amazing deals were actually solved at the table by real humans in real time. I enjoyed the way these deals were presented — I had a chance to try to find the right bid or play for myself, and then read the story of what actually happened at the table.

I have always admired and respected Larry's great contributions to the game, and it was a treat for me to see his all-time favorite deals. I know that readers will share my joy.

*Bobby Wolff*  
*Las Vegas, NV*  
*May 2009*

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# Introduction

Welcome to *My Favorite 52*. I've been collecting these deals for more than thirty years!

I played all 52 of these deals. (Actually, there are 60 deals because Deal 8 has seven bonus deals called 8A-8G and you will also find there's a phantom Deal 53 when you get to the end of the book.) Sometimes I am the hero, but at times I am the goat. In those cases, you can try to avoid the error I made at the table. I was tempted to call this *My Greatest Hits...and Near Misses* — but I couldn't resist the alliteration in *My Favorite 52*. Anyway, how bad can it be to use the number 52, in a book about bridge?

These deals are presented interactively. In fact, they are also available as software — you can play through them on your computer. They were first released in the software version, but I know that most bridge players like books — they prefer to read their bridge in a book as opposed to sitting in front of a computer. Accordingly, I've been persuaded to let the material be released in print format too.

The deals in this collection border on the sensational. They aren't your everyday instructional deals where declarer has to make an ordinary safety play. There are many positions that I trust will be new to even the most veteran readers. Still, I believe that with the warning bells sounded, even the hardest of these problems are actually solvable by advanced-level players.

Each deal is presented in four parts. The first part is the story of the deal itself: where it took place, who was involved and sometimes why it was special. The second part is the bidding. You will follow the auction as we bid one of the hands together. At various times I will give you an opportunity to make your own choice about the right action. From time to time, you will see this symbol:



When it appears, take a moment to think about the situation and try to decide what you would do. In the third part you take the seat of one of the players (be warned, it will usually be the hot seat) and follow the play, making decisions — some critical, some challenging and some less so. You will usually not know which! Again, the clock symbol tells you when to stop and think. Finally you will see the whole deal and learn the result of the deal when it was originally played.

Some of the deals are easy, some are medium, and some are difficult — just like in real life. My hope is that there's plenty to learn from each of them — and I know you'll have fun doing it!

Larry Cohen  
Boca Raton, FL  
May 2009

# SWEET BEGINNINGS

## 1. Once in a Lifetime

♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4 2   ♥ —   ♦ A K Q 8 6   ♣ —

Do not adjust your glasses. This hand was actually dealt to me! It was during the 1980 Vanderbilt in Fresno, California, in the Round of 16.

The boards were dealt by us, actual human beings. According to the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*, if you play a million deals, you can expect to hold this exact pattern three times. To put that in perspective, imagine that you play twenty-four deals a day, three days a week: that's seventy-two deals a week, 3,744 a year. Even if you played eighty years at that rate it would still be against the odds ever to hold this exact distribution.

Here I was, at the age of twenty, already using up my lifetime expectancy of holding such a hand.

### The Auction

I was dealer, with both sides vulnerable. What is the correct opening bid? If you know the right answer, it will be all downhill from here. The bidding problems only get easier.



Most people opt for 4♠, 2♣ or 1♠. If I had to pick one of those, it would be 1♠. The hand is much too good for a preemptive 4♠, and you don't have enough aces and kings to open 2♣.

However, there is a better and more accurate call available: 5♠. If you don't believe me, you can again consult the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*. Look up 'Five of a Major Opening' and you will see the following definition:

**FIVE OF A MAJOR OPENING:** *Shows a hand missing both top honors in the trump suit, but no outside losers. Partner is invited to raise to small slam with one of the missing key cards, to grand slam with both. Probably the rarest bid in bridge.*

I can't recall from whom, where, when or why (probably a misspent youth), but I was aware of this 'rarest bid in bridge'. So I reached into the bidding box and pulled out the 5♠ bid and placed it on the table. This drew a few amused looks from the other players. Even in the Vanderbilt, there is room for levity. Left Hand Opponent passed, and my partner, Ron Gerard, started to think.

With a slight smirk (and more amused glances from the table), he reached into his bidding box and produced a 7♠ bid!

I hoped he had interpreted 5♠ the way I had meant it. If he was raising based on the ♣A and ♥A (as opposed to the top spades), this wasn't going to work too well. Everybody passed, and I anxiously awaited the dummy. At least I knew we weren't off the ♠A (no double!).

### The Play

Both Vul.

♠ A K  
 ♥ K 9 8 4 3  
 ♦ 5 2  
 ♣ Q 9 4 3  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 ♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4 2  
 ♥ —  
 ♦ A K Q 8 6  
 ♣ —

West	North	East	South
pass	7♠	all pass	5♠

The final contract is 7♠ by South. Perfect! He had the hoped-for ♠AK. You win the trump lead in dummy, as everybody follows. Will there be anything to the play of this hand?

What should you play to Trick 2?



It would be wrong to draw the last trump. If diamonds split 3-3, you will always make 7♠. If they split 5-1 (or 6-0), you will never make your contract. The only relevant diamond split is 4-2. It also happens to be the most statistically likely division. So you should start the diamonds, planning to ruff one in dummy. Everyone follows to two rounds.



♠ A  
 ♥ K 9 8 4 3  
 ♦ —  
 ♣ Q 9 4 3  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 ♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4  
 ♥ —  
 ♦ Q 8 6  
 ♣ —

What if somebody had ruffed this second round of diamonds? As already mentioned, if diamonds were 5-1 or worse, you never could make this contract so don't worry about it. What now?



Let's not screw up the good work: ruff a small diamond in dummy. Playing the ♦Q would subject you to a ruff if an opponent had started with two diamonds and two trumps. Diamonds were 3-3 all along. You ruff something high in your hand and claim your contract.

## The Result

Both Vul.

	<b>Gerard</b>										
	♠ A K										
	♥ K 9 8 4 3										
	♦ 5 2										
	♣ Q 9 4 3										
♠ 6	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 7 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ Q 10 7 6 2		♥ A J 5									
♦ J 10 4		♦ 9 7 3									
♣ 10 7 6 2		♣ A K J 8 5									
	<b>Cohen</b>										
	♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4 2										
	♥ —										
	♦ A K Q 8 6										
	♣ —										

Notice how disciplined East was. He had two aces (and a king), yet trusted the North-South bidding enough to restrain from doubling the grand slam. Also notice West's proper opening lead. Expecting declarer to have a solid hand outside of trumps, the only 'extra' trick could come from ruffing a small card (from declarer's side suit) in dummy.

At the other table, the South player was unaware of the possible 5♠ opening bid. He started with 2♣ and reached only 6♠, receiving a club lead. Playing IMPs, what is the correct line of play in only a small slam (try to take twelve tricks)?

♠	A K
♥	K 9 8 4 3
♦	5 2
♣	Q 9 4 3
▬	
♠	Q J 10 9 8 5 4 2
♥	—
♦	A K Q 8 6
♣	—

After ruffing the first club, should you?

- a) Draw trumps
- b) Play the ♦A and ♦K
- c) Other



Needing only twelve tricks, declarer can always make his six-level contract if diamonds are 4-2 or 3-3. At IMPs, you don't worry about overtricks. In six, you can try to find a way to protect against a 5-1 diamond break. There is an easy way to do so: after cashing a top diamond, continue with a *low* diamond from hand. This is a safety play to guarantee the contract.

If the suit splits 3-3 or 4-2, you've given away a potential overtrick, but you can win any return and draw trump and claim. The advantage comes if the suit splits 5-1. Even if somebody shows out on this trick, you can win any return (even a trump won't hurt you) and ruff your other low diamond in dummy to make twelve tricks. If instead, you laid down another high diamond and an opponent ruffed, you'd be in big trouble. On a trump return, you'd have only one trump left in dummy, but two losing low diamonds in hand. Down you'd go.

Anyway, the diamonds behaved well enough for either 6♠ or 7♠ to make, and our team won 13 IMPs for bidding the grand slam. Take one last good look at the South distribution. You probably will never get to hold such a hand in your lifetime.

# THE CAVENDISH

## 2. Don't Get Greedy

These next five deals come from the Cavendish. This prestigious (and big money) event is held every May in Las Vegas. Both Cavendish events (Teams and Pairs) use IMP scoring. You just want to make (or defeat) the contract — don't worry about overtricks or undertricks.

### The Auction

Take these South cards and see if you can do better than many of the world's top players.

♠ Q J 8 7 5   ♥ —   ♦ A Q 10 8 3   ♣ 7 5 3

With neither vulnerable, your partner deals and opens 1♣; East jumps preemptively to 2♥. What is your choice of action?



My choice is 2♠. A free bid here shows a pretty good hand. It is forcing (not to game), but usually is played as guaranteeing a rebid unless opener raises, rebids his suit or bids notrump. Typically this free bid at the two-level contains at least ten high card points, but here, even though you have only nine high card points, the hand is worth so much more. Starting with a negative double could work out, but with a five-card spade suit and enough to bid it, I prefer 2♠.

After West takes up your room by jumping to 4♥, partner bids 4♠.

Are you done?



Yes, you should be. You have some good features here such as the ♦A, the good diamond suit and the heart void. However, you are close to a minimum and your trump suit is not so good. In general, when a slam try is a possibility, look at your trump suit. If your trumps were, say, ♠KQJ109, or even ♠QJ10873 or the like, it would be more tempting to look for slam. Here, where partner might have raised on ♠Axx or ♠Kxx, slam would be shaky because a 4-1 trump break would probably

spell defeat. And even a 3-2 trump split would mean you have to take all the rest of the tricks (you'd have to lose a trump trick).

West passes, and you'll soon see if you bid enough.

## The Play

♠ A 6 4  
 ♥ K 6 4  
 ♦ J 9  
 ♣ A K Q J 2  
  
 ♠ Q J 8 7 5  
 ♥ —  
 ♦ A Q 10 8 3  
 ♣ 7 5 3

West	North	East	South
	1♣	2♥	2♠
4♥	4♠	all pass	

West leads the ♥Q. Looks like 4♠ was enough: partner has a lot of high cards but still, slam is not so hot. Barring a miracle spade position (such as ♠109 doubleton with East), you will lose a trump trick. So even if spades are 3-2 you'll still need the diamond finesse. This is a less than 50% slam, thus not worth bidding.

Meanwhile, what should you play to Trick 1 in only 4♠?



It's unlikely West would underlead an ace on this auction, so East is likely to have the ♥A. There is no reason to surrender your ♥K. If East later gains the lead, he won't be in a good position to continue the heart attack. Speaking of which, this deal almost caused some heart attacks (figuratively speaking, of course) around the room, but more on that later. You ruff the first trick in hand and have to decide how to continue. What should you do at Trick 2?



Lead the ♠Q. You might as well start drawing trumps and this is a good way to go about it. Even if the spade finesse loses, East will be on lead and he (with the presumed ♥A) won't be able to do much damage by tapping you. West covers with the king — so much for losing the finesse. After West covers, you win in dummy as East follows with the ♠2 and you have more decisions.

♠ 6 4  
 ♥ K 6  
 ♦ J 9  
 ♣ A K Q J 2  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 ♠ J 8 7  
 ♥ —  
 ♦ A Q 10 8 3  
 ♣ 7 5 3

Two tricks in. What now?



It's right to lead the ♦J at this point. Sad to say, I (and many other participants) got this wrong at the table. Let's back up and make the mistake I made, playing another trump, to show you why it is wrong. East showed out, not a big shock on the given auction. Now I was in big trouble. Let's take a look at the whole deal after I won the ♠J at Trick 3:

	♠ 6 ♥ K 6 ♦ J 9 ♣ A K Q J 2				
♠ 10 9 ♥ J 9 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ 10 9	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W      E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W      E	S	♠ — ♥ A 10 8 7 5 ♦ 5 4 ♣ 8 6 4
N					
W      E					
S					
	♠ 8 7 ♥ — ♦ A Q 10 8 3 ♣ 7 5 3				

West still had two high trumps and there was nothing I could do about it. I cashed two high clubs, but this was just postponing the inevitable. To get up to ten tricks I would need the diamond finesse. Just running clubs would let West ruff in, cash a trump, and play a heart to force out my last trump. I'd be in the wrong hand to take the diamond finesse. So I had to take it now. Unfortunately, once it lost, this meant I'd go down multiple tricks.

I suffered the embarrassment of having West draw my trumps and play a heart through for the defense to run the hearts. At least I wasn't doubled and wasn't vulnerable: it was only fifty a trick, down five and -250. (Even after my early misplay, astute readers will note there were ways to avoid down five, but at fifty a trick, it

wasn't too painful.) However, one declarer was in 6♠ redoubled and took the same line that I did. When he lost the diamond finesse and lost control he was down seven redoubled for -3400! That was the heart attack I was referring to.

Let's go back to Trick 3.

```

♠ 6 4
♥ K 6
♦ J 9
♣ A K Q J 2

♠ J 8 7
♥ —
♦ A Q 10 8 3
♣ 7 5 3
    
```

The lead was in dummy after capturing West's ♠K with the ♠A. It was a big error to play the second trump at this point. The 4-1 break coupled with the losing diamond finesse spelled disaster. This was not a matchpoint event; overtricks were not of concern. Accordingly, I should have taken the diamond finesse right away. What could go wrong?

Nothing, really. Remember, the ♦K would be the only trick lost so far. West would win and play a heart. Even with the diamond finesse losing, and the heart back to tap me, I would still be 100% okay...

```

♠ 6 4
♥ K
♦ 9
♣ A K Q J 2

♠ J 8
♥ —
♦ A Q 10 8
♣ 7 5 3
    
```

...by doing what next?



Simply stay off the trump suit. Keep control. You can still afford to lose two trump tricks, so there is no need to draw any more trumps. Let's say you play the ♦A. Even if a defender ruffed this, you'd be fine. There would be only two trumps remaining, and you'd be in control. Meanwhile, you can just keep playing diamonds and laugh at them (well, that wouldn't be polite, but you know what I mean). Diamonds happen to split 3-3 but that doesn't really matter. If you erroneously laid down the

top trump, the 4-1 break would spell doom. You could cash some winners, but eventually West would ruff in, draw your trump and run the hearts. But if you just run winners you have the timing and control. As soon as the defense ruffs in (even if spades are 3-2), you can win the return, play the ♠J and then continue with your winners.

## The Result

Neither Vul.

♠ K 10 9 3 ♥ Q J 9 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ 10 9	♠ A 6 4 ♥ K 6 4 ♦ J 9 ♣ A K Q J 2	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;">                     N                      W      E                      S                 </div>	♠ 2 ♥ A 10 8 7 5 3 ♦ 5 4 2 ♣ 8 6 4
	♠ Q J 8 7 5 ♥ — ♦ A Q 10 8 3 ♣ 7 5 3		

Surprisingly, less than half the field managed ten tricks in this spade contract. It just goes to show you that even the world's best make mistakes. In retrospect, this deal doesn't seem extremely difficult. Once you realize that the goal is only ten tricks, you should recognize the need to play safely.

**ONE** of the most successful American bridge players of the last 20 years, Larry Cohen, presents a collection of his favorite personal bridge moments. Using an intimate ‘over-the-shoulder’ presentation, Cohen takes readers through more than 60 deals (no, not just 52!) – deals that are important to him in some way, or technically interesting, or just plain fun. The book’s interactive style allows readers to follow the bidding and play, and even to make their own decisions at key points. Cohen discusses the pros and cons of different options at each critical moment, explaining the reasons for his own choice and why the winning action is also the correct one. Read this book for fun, or study it in depth and learn from it – whichever you choose to do, you will find it hard to put down.

*My Favorite 52* was originally published as interactive software, and won the American Bridge Teachers Association ‘Software of the Year’ award in 2005. This is its first publication in book form.

**LARRY COHEN** (Boca Raton, Florida) won his first National Championship at age 22 and went on to collect 25 more titles before retiring from competition in 2009. Director of the prestigious *Bridge World* Master Solvers’ Club and a frequent contributor to bridge magazines around the world, he is a popular bridge lecturer on land and at sea. His book *To Bid or Not To Bid: the Law of Total Tricks* is one of the all-time best sellers on the game. Aside from bridge, his passions are playing golf and watching sports, especially his beloved Yankees.

**LINDA LEE** (adaptor – Toronto, Canada) is a World Life Master. The author of four previous books, she conducts a popular internet blog on bridge matters at [www.bridgeblogging.com](http://www.bridgeblogging.com).



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