



JOHN KOULBANIS THE PRESS

Bette Bemis poses with cribbage boards from her collection.

By Josh Catone

The Press

In retrospect, I can now confirm that prior to last week I had indeed seen a cribbage board, but beyond being a piece of wood with a myriad of tiny holes, I had no idea what I was looking at. In preparation for this story, I logged onto the American Cribbage Congress website and took a gander at its rulebook - 42 pages later. I was more confused than ever.

Enter Carolina-native Bette Bemis.

Bemis is one of Rhode Island's

preeminent cribbage authorities and one of the world's foremost experts on cribbage hoards. I sat down with Bemis in her home-turned-cribbage board museum to discuss the finer arts of the card game and get to the bottom of what created her passion for cribbage.

Cribbage, as it turns out, is all about counting and adding, and the multi-holed board is nothing more than a scorekeeper. According to Bemis the game is a great way for children to improve their counting skills. In fact, Bemis taught her two grandsons to play and has since noticed that their arithmetic skills have vastly improved. But while anyone can learn to play cribbage, it takes a true lover of the game to collect cribbage boards, and Bemis has amassed quite a collection. At over 1,200 cribbage boards dating back as far as 1840, Bemis' collection has slowly taken over her entire house. And with cribbage boards around every corner, I quickly learned that not every board is made out of wood. Bemis has boards made out of everything from ivory to metal, used matchsticks to (hopefully unused) toilet seat covers, and in every imaginable shape and size.

Bemis's cribbage boards come from all over the world, too. From India and China, to Australia, Canada, and England (pretty much any place the British colonized) everyone has seen the game of cribbage.

In 1991, Bemis founded the Cribbage Board Collector's Society, which just wrapped up its fifth annual convention this past September, held this year in Branson, Missouri. The CBCS now boasts a membership of over 225 cribbage board enthusiasts and has recently enjoyed the first member found via their new website.

Bemis got into collecting cribbage boards in the late 1980s when she ran a cribbage league for the South County Masonic Center. She liked to give out prizes to the winners of their tournaments but had trouble finding cribbage-related items. Her search for prizes led to her love of cribbage boards and cribbage memorabilia.

Bemis has published one authoritative work on cribbage board collecting, 1999's "Cribbage Boards 1863 – 1998" which details the plethora of American made boards available, and is finishing up work on her second volume, a 200 page follow-up that will focus on hand-crafted and foreign made boards. Both books are being published through Schiffer Publishing, Ltd.

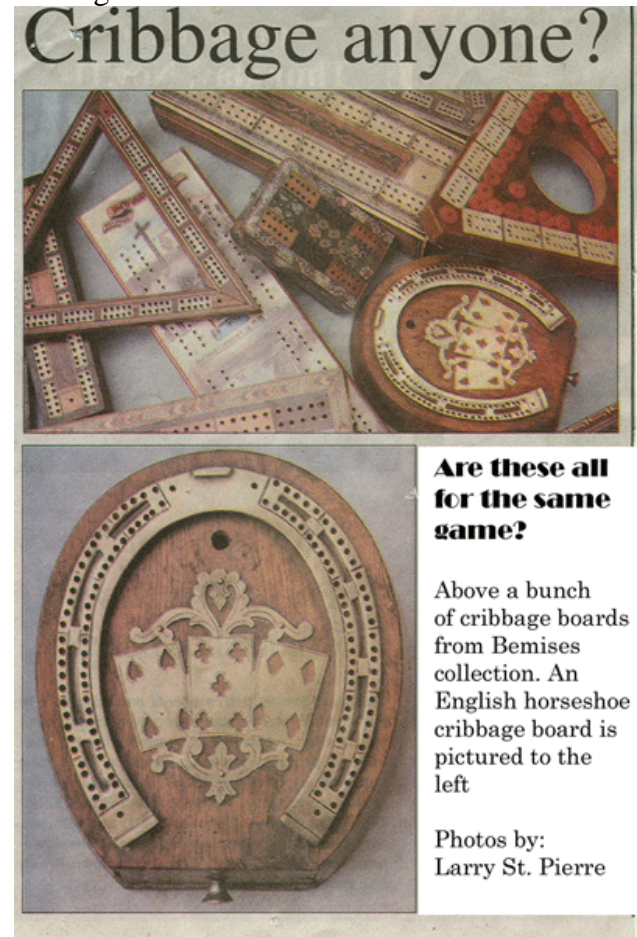
Bemis' collection is truly impressive, and a few hours spent studying antique cribbage boards has given me a newfound appreciation for something I admittedly knew nothing about. But be forewarned, a simple fascination in cribbage can easily become an obsession, and I fear the Bette Bemis has made a cribbage player out of me. If you're interested in cribbage board collecting, visit the Cribbage Board Collector's Society online at [www.cbcs.us](http://www.cbcs.us).

### **A brief history of cribbage**

Cribbage was created in the mid-1600s by the English poet Sir John Suckling, and most experts agree it is a combination of an Ancient Egyptian game "Dogs and Jackals" and the English game called Noddy.

Basic 61-point cribbage enjoyed popularity until the 1930s, when the game was doubled to 121 points. Bemis speculates that because people simply had more time on their hands during the

Great Depression in the United States, they decided to play longer games of cribbage.



Cribbage has always been a popular diversion among soldiers and prisoners. During World War II, many soldiers reported that the portable cribbage board in their front breast pocket saved their life, says Bemis.

Today, people play cribbage the world over in all age groups. The youngest player at the cribbage league where Bemis plays in Hope Valley is 13.