

Scrabble: More Than a Game of Words
by Marian Thomas

Lucky families have rituals, hold beliefs, and acknowledge events that bring them together in memorable and influential ways. At times a simple game can be the “tool” that binds a family together and lends them abilities useful far into the future. The game of Scrabble could be considered as a major tool utilized for three generations by my family. The game, seemingly simple, has contributed to the various professions of each family member while offering hours of companionship, challenge, and laughter.

As a child, I remember playing the game with my grandmother, Grace, on the old round oak table in her home in Idaho Falls. As a teen, I played with my brothers on the patio at our home in Boise. My children continued the tradition with their own battles on the Scrabble board. Even now, when my siblings are able to come together at my brother’s cabin on Lake Cascade, we set up the Scrabble board, count out the tiles, and go to war as each participant tries to outdo their opponents by gaining points with the longest or most unusual word. We always seek those places on the board where words intersect or reward with triple or double letter scores

The Scrabble board itself has changed over the years, as have the opponents. The earliest board I can remember was a simple cardboard version, played to the point the tiles had lost the outline of the letters. My mother used nail polish to paint the missing letters on the tiles. At one time, the letter “X” was lost, and my father created a replacement with a small piece of leftover wood. As I reached my hand into the Scrabble bag, I could easily identify the “X” tile and avoid or accept it depending on my game strategy. Today we can play Scrabble on a turntable platform with grooves to securely hold the tiles—certainly an improvement—but the challenge of finding the right word at the right time remains the same.

Looking back, I view these early games as a fine way to deal with sibling rivalry in a civilized manner. There were seven of us: five brothers and two sisters. The ages of my siblings were so spread out that my oldest brother and my youngest brother were never present to play the game at the same time. Kent, the oldest, went off to West Point the same year Bill, the youngest, was born, so the possible opponents changed often. Usually, at least three of us would gather for a lexicography challenge. At other times, friends or a neighbor wandered upon us and joined the competition. Whoever the opponents were, the conversation could move easily from words to a myriad of topics.

Arguments over whether words like *xi*, *fozy*, *zaxes* or *quipu* were actual words would arise, but the dictionary could always settle such battles. Conversation would turn to, “Are you sure that’s a word?” or “Do you know what that means? Check the dictionary.” We quickly learned which of us was more prone to make up words and needed to be challenged. While there were

arguments, the game also brought us together and developed our interest in words and their meanings. The game helped us with spelling and vocabulary more than any list we ever brought home from school.

As we grew up and moved on to college and careers, all entered fields of study requiring a significant knowledge of words. My oldest brother became a civil engineer requiring a large vocabulary and much writing. Ron, the second brother, also went into engineering and used his verbal knowledge to write reports and observations. Stan became a surveyor where exact words were important, but he also became a fine writer and uses words to convey strong opinions and deep thoughts. Janet used her words as an administrative assistant, and Mark, the math teacher, added mathematical language to his verbal knowledge. Bill, the youngest, became an executive in a health insurance company and relies daily on his words to analyze and communicate. As a teacher, I came to rely on vocabulary to convey what was essential, to motivate, and challenge students either through writing or speech.

Scrabble playing in my family continues to this day, but we don't get together as often as we would like. A few siblings seldom play the game anymore as their interests have changed. For myself, I have tried other word games and have enjoyed Bananagrams, play Wordle and Connections each day, but I always return to Scrabble as the true challenge.

A few years ago, my son encouraged me to play Scrabble online. I briefly became addicted to online Scrabble playing with people I didn't know and without conversation. Most were stronger players than me. Slowly though, I came to the realization that the game wasn't much fun without actual people sitting around the table discussing the meaning and spelling of words mixed with detours to discuss politics, education, sports, and the state of the world.

For me, the game is best played in the evening at Lake Cascade with the board set out on the picnic table under the trees. During these times, siblings are joined with their children or grandchildren in challenging each other as the sun sets over the lake. The chatter of birds settling down for the evening and the water lapping against the bank backs up the ongoing conversation at the table and the quest for the longest and most valuable word.