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**MONOPOLY:
From Berks to Boardwalk**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Our author Charles J. Adams III is a resident of Reiffton and a member of the editorial board of the Review. An announcer for radio Station WEEU, he previously authored The Eyler Station in the Summer Review, 1978. The author expresses his gratitude to Paul Sherk and Louis Thun for their sincere cooperation in the compilation of research for this article.

by

CHARLES J. ADAMS III

It seems that Monopoly has become almost a part of our folk heritage. It has been around since 1934, so many of our folk learned the game as children.¹

Of the three declarative statements made in that quote from "The Monopoly Book", two are doubtlessly true. But, for a handful of Berks Countians, only the fact that the game of Monopoly "has become almost a part of our folk heritage" holds true. For them, the game was being played - in a form not unlike the modern "Monopoly" game - nearly two decades before the game made its national debut.

As far as Parker Brothers, the manufacturer of "Monopoly," is concerned - and indeed as far as the great majority of the game's enthusiasts are concerned - credit for the "invention" and development of Monopoly goes to the late Charles Brace Darrow of Philadelphia. It was Darrow who, they say, ". . . one evening in 1930 sat down at his kitchen table . . . and sketched out some of the street names of Atlantic City on the round piece of oilcloth that covered the table."² As he devised the game board, pieces, play money and other equipment, he taught his wife and a circle of friends the game that would eventually make him a world traveler, gentleman farmer and millionaire.³

Today, no one begrudges Darrow his millions for the refining and marketing of Monopoly. But, there is overwhelming historical evidence to discredit any claims that Charles Darrow, a victim of Depression-era unemployment, originated the game. And, much of that historical documentation and testimony emanates here in Berks County.

Therefore, we shall only touch on Darrow's involvement with the development of Monopoly. In books and articles from the 1930s to the present, this story is repeated. We will examine, more closely, the introduction and evolution of the game in Berks County and among Berks Countians.

The history of the game is tarnished with legal questions. Not only in the 1970s, as we shall see later, but from the beginning of the Game according To Darrow.

In March, 1935, Darrow wrote his personal recollections of the "invention" of Monopoly:

"Friends visiting our house in the later part of 1931 mentioned a lecture course they had heard of in which the professor gave his class scrip to invest and rated them on the results of their imaginary investments. I think the college referred to was Princeton University.

Being unemployed at the time, and badly needing anything to occupy my time, I made by hand a very crude game for the sole purpose of amusing myself.

Later friends called and we played this game, unnamed at that time. One of them asked me to make a copy for him which I did charging him for my time four dollars. Friends of his wanted copies and so forth.

By mid summer of 1933 it was obvious that we should cover a valuable product with a copyright, so applied for this on October 24th of that year."⁴

A month later, a question arose at Parker Brothers headquarters in Salem, Massachusetts, as to the true derivation of Monopoly. In fact, according to Benjamin A. Hunneman, Parker's vice-president, another games publisher said that "... the original trading game came out in 1902." Hunneman continued, saying he had learned that Darrow had appropriated the discarded name Monopoly. That name was discarded in favor of the name "Finance" - of which we will learn more later. Because of these revelations, the president of Parker Brothers asked Darrow to sign an affidavit with this sworn version of the history of the game of Monopoly.⁵

Darrow reported in a subsequent letter that the publishers making the accusation handled his "Monopoly" game in 1934 - a year before Parker bought the rights. There was a falling out, and some apparent bitterness between the publisher and the "inventor." So, Darrow repeated his version of the development of the game given the previous month. He elaborated:

"As far as the investigation on the part of mythical lawyers (sic) and their discovery that I had appropriated the name Monopoly, I hardly think that such an investigation could be held, with my knowledge of the fact. This is the first time the matter has been mentioned to me."

Darrow then said he would sign any statement or affidavit "to the effect that I never heard of any game or pastime called Monopoly prior to my use of the word in this connection."⁷

No such affidavit now exists in Parker Brothers' files.

As has been said, "The Darrow story is, after all, a good story - a nice, clean, well-structured example of the Eureka School of American Industrial Legend."⁸

In those days before television redefined American living room life, games such as Monopoly were instant rages. In fact, spurred on by the almost immediate success of Monopoly, Darrow was called to "Endorse" another game. "Bulls and Bears" was developed by Parker Brothers and the "Creator" of Monopoly agreed to lend his name to the game - in much the same way an entertainer or athletic star does today. But despite this stab at credibility by Parker for its fledgling game, the item was an instant failure."⁹

When "Bulls and Bears" hit the market, there were about six million Monopoly games in American homes and although it turned out to be a disaster, "B&B" had a pre-publication sale of 100,000 - the largest record for a new Parker game. It joined Melvin Purvis's "G-Men" and "Jury Box" as some of the top games of the times.¹⁰

Hailing Charles Darrow and his games, Time magazine said his efforts were the first smash hits perfected by an amateur in thirty-five years.

"Perfected by" is a phrase Paul Sherk of Wyomissing may find acceptable when applied to Darrow's involvement with Monopoly. But "inventor" is up for discussion.

Paul Sherk sat in his home to search his memory and record for the Historical Review, his recollections of the early play of Monopoly, or something hauntingly like it, in the parlors of Reading and Berks County.

Let us go back to the years just prior to the turn of the century. It was at this time that the teachings of Henry George, a late 19th Century economics reformer, were put down in game form by Elizabeth (Lizzie) J. Magie of Arden, Delaware. This small town was a hotbed of Georgist activists who called themselves "Single-taxers" and believed only land should be taxed. George's theory was that capitalism would work only if no one were permitted to make profits from land ownership.¹¹

From the town of Arden came a fellow named Scott Nearing. This chap would later become an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Not a proclaimed Georgist, Professor Nearing was eventually fired from Penn in 1915, considered a "left-winger" for his beliefs that did, however, reflect some Georgist theory. By the 1970's, we have found, the professor's radical ideas of "living off the land" became the vogue. And, Nearing and his wife became folk heroes. The University of Pennsylvania, sixty years after dismissing Professor Scott Nearing, saw fit to name him an honorary professor emeritus of economics.

Scott Nearing and his brother Guy were introduced to the game called "The Landlord's Game" by Lizzie Magie sometime around 1900. By 1915, the professor had taught his colleagues and students at Penn the game that was to become known widely as "Monopoly."¹²

One of those students was young Thomas Wilson, of Reading. Wilson and a group of friends entertained themselves with the game that was, apparently, in 1915, undergoing the popular identity change from "The Landlord's Game" to "Monopoly."

As early as 1916, the game was a hit in the parlors of a handful of Reading homes. The local youngsters playing their version of the game were under the apparently mistaken impression that the game was devised by Professor Nearing - that Penn "radical" who despised the economic reality of any kind of monopoly. But, Professor Nearing was to confirm later that he did not "invent" any such game. As he said:

"As far as I know the game about which you wrote was invented by a single-taxer for the purpose of proving the wickedness of land monopoly." Nearing added that he first saw the game played in Arden.¹³

The popularity of the game spread quickly throughout Reading, Berks County, and the entire mid-Atlantic States area. And, Tom Wilson anxiously taught his younger cousin Charles Muhlenberg the unwritten rules and board layout of their fast-moving pastime. Charles's sister, Virginia, is credited with actually drawing the Muhlenberg board, and it was from this board that Paul Sherk copied his. And, in no time at all, the number of home-fashioned "Monopoly" boards in Reading grew and grew.

Today, Paul Sherk recalls that the makeshift gameboards - some of which are still in existence - were drawn up without the aid of a ruling pen and graphic arts equipment. And, as mentioned before, the rules were passed down verbally. Still, the game prospered as more and more local boys and girls became hooked on the excitement.

Groups of the "Monopoly" fanatics would gather either at Charlie Muhlenberg's, Paul Sherk's, or Jerry Boyer's homes to spend nearly all evening behind the plywood boards - their fists stuffed with hand-marked "money" and crude game appliances. Of those who made up Paul Sherk's "Monopoly group," most had their own boards. And be they Sherk, Boyer, Charles or Hiester Muhlenberg, Seidel Irons, or Buss Saylor, they were bound for an exhilarating evening anytime the big board was brought out.

"We kids had the game down to a science," Paul Sherk says. "If we found somebody buying up cheap properties - and working toward a point where he could get a monopoly-he might get two of 'em, but he would pay dearly for the third one!"

It must be remembered that most of these gamesters were students at Reading's Boys High School at the time. Considering the sophistication of the game, Sherk today says, ". . . the most amazing thing to me is how the game - with all its complications-became as popular as it is."¹⁴

Popular? That's an understatement! The game of Monopoly today is sold in 25 countries, translated into 15 languages. Over 2 ½ billion "houses" were built by Parker Brothers and since 1935, the game company has "minted" well over 1,000,000,000,000 (trillion) Monopoly dollars for over 800 million sets.¹⁵

In Monopoly's glory days in Reading- as well as today - the game had its own identity and its own particular flair. Sherk recalls those times over a half-century ago when the midnight oil burned to illuminate a Friday night Monopoly session on some North Fifth Street home. "It was a hard game to learn . . . it took so long to play it," he says, "But it was serious business with us. While we were having fun, there was a lot of fighting - tooth and nail!"

As the Sherk-Muhlenberg-Boyer era of serious Monopoly play drew to a close with their high school days, the game was passed on to another group of players.

Still using unwritten rules and a gameboard with the names detailed on Chart "A", the 1916 game was passed from Charles Muhlenberg to his bride, the former Wilma Thun. In turn, about 1923, Wilma taught it to her inventive and very interested brothers, Louis and Ferdinand. And, it is here where the second part of our story begins.¹⁶

Louis Thun today is retired as Chairman of the Board of the Textile Machine Works. He maintains complete and orderly files on his involvement with the playing and further development of the game called Monopoly.

In testimony sworn before a California court in 1975, Thun related his story in great detail. This deposition was made during a case in which a California games manufacturer became involved in legal action by - and then against - Parker Brothers when he marketed a game called "Anti-Monopoly."

Part of Ralph Anspach's (the would-be games entrepreneur) research into the real "roots" of Monopoly led him to Berks County and the Thuns. Anspach was attempting to, and to some indeed did, prove that the game of "Monopoly" (by that name) was played decades before Charles Darrow "Invented" and Parker Brothers copyrighted the game. By proving this historically, Anspach hoped to show that the game was a "folk game", like checkers and chess, and in the public domain."¹⁷

In his research, Anspach, a San Francisco State College economics professor, found the Thun link and found that the Thuns took the game from their Reading home to Williams College. There, in 1926, Louis and Ferdinand Thun (brothers), and their Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity chums played the game incessantly. From this group of the Thuns, David Williams, Thurston Greene, Dan Layman and others, Layman took the game to Indianapolis where a Ruth Hoskins learned it and took it back to the Quaker School in Atlantic City where she was a teacher. And here, it seems, the names were changed to Atlantic City places from the mythical names used earlier and the rules were altered slightly. From this seashore resort, the game was probably taken to Philadelphia, where a man named Charles Darrow was introduced to it.¹⁸

The Atlantic City connection reveals even more controversies. For example, it is said that the Atlantic City Quakers really did change the street and place names to fit their particular locale. And, a shore area retired commercial artist, H. Kenneth Anderson, said that it was he who designed the game board in 1927 and it was he who purposely misspelled one of the names, "Marvin (Marven) Gardens."¹⁹

This claim, however valid or not, can be diluted somewhat by the text of a 1927 letter from Otto Heck of Wyomissing to his friend, Louis Thun, away at Williams College. Otto mentioned to Louis that he and a friend had already begun producing a "monopoly board" in Wyomissing. The friend was Thomas Lerch, who with his brother, Brooke, attempted to produce boards for possible marketing.²⁰

In those years just prior to Darrow's "invention" and Parker Brothers' copyright of the game of Monopoly, Louis Thun and others were involved in dealings which may have led to a different "official" history of the game.

By 1931, Louis and Ferdinand Thun, along with the Lerch brothers of Wyomissing, transposed a four-page, typewritten set of rules for the game of "Monopoly." Their rules included the practice of auctioning properties as players landed on each one." These sales-to-the-highest-bidder were found to be deleted from the Atlantic City Quaker version of the game because, as it was said, the Quakers "didn't like the noise of the auctioneering."²²

The "Statement of General Theory" of the 1931 Thun-Lerch Monopoly game rules says:

"Monopoly is designed to show the evils resulting from the institution of private property. At the start of the game every player is provided with the same amount of capital and presumably has exactly the same chance of success as every other player. The game ends with one person in possession of all the money. What accounts for the failure of the rest, and what one factor can be singled out to explain the obviously ill adjusted distribution of the communities (sic) wealth which

this situation represents It is necessary to point out in detail the many points of contact between the game and real life.”²³

With a group of dedicated and enterprising young men, and a set of rules to accompany their hand-made game boards and exciting, proven concept, the Thun brothers sought to sell their game to major New York City stores. Louis went to Saks Fifth Avenue and Ferdinand to Macy's. But, at twenty dollars per game, there were no takers.

A friend helping the Thuns in their attempt to market the game theorized that twenty dollars may have been too high a price for the game. It seems the prospective games magnates figured to maintain a 33% profit margin. But David Williams, a Thun friend we shall meet again later, said their marketing disappointment may be solved if manufacturing cost cutbacks could be made and a cheaper set produced.²⁴

But, the Thuns were thorough in their quest to successfully market their game. They printed on their personal press the game cards and play money to accompany the game boards. And, they consulted patent counselors and solicitors Donald and Walter Stewart of 530 Washington Street in Reading. It was the lawyers' job to probe the possibilities of securing a patent, trademark or copyright for the game.

At that point - as he does today - Louis Thun maintained that neither he nor his brother ever "invented" the game of Monopoly. With that attitude in 1931, Atty. Donald Stewart said that since the Thuns did not "invent" the game, they could not legally "patent" it. And, a copyright would only cover the rules, affording little real protection.²⁵

As the Great Depression hit rock-bottom, a friend of the Thuns who feared for his job at a New York bank, began to actively pursue the marketing possibilities of the game. David Williams, a Deke fraternity brother of the Thuns at Williams College, was seeking patent information in New York at about the time Atty. Stewart was giving the Thuns his decision.²⁶

Louis Thun wrote to Williams, after hearing Attorney Stewart's opinion. And, in Williams' response to Thun's bad news, there were overtones of disappointment and, perhaps, desperation.

In that letter back to Thun, Williams tried valiantly to convince the receiver (and probably the sender!) that there was still hope for the patenting and marketing of the game. Hoping against hope, Williams advocated simply placing the game (the word "Monopoly" was, for some obscure reason, never used in the Thun-Williams letters) on the market and making the most of it. Williams offered several ideas, and added:

I have a not too sneaking suspicion that none of these suggestions would work, but at the same time I feel that there must be some way to get around the problem. A clever lawyer these days can almost do anything. Probe your man further if you think you can get anything more of value out of him. Maybe he can suggest some sort of scheme."

Alas, neither the Lerches, the Thuns, nor Williams could successfully launch a sale of their version of "Monopoly." And, in the years between 1931 and 1935, there was action on another front.

In the Midwest, the Thuns' old DKE brother Dan Layman had put together a game he called "Finance." According to Louis Thun, the president of Parker Brothers was disturbed because

Layman's game was getting in the way of Parker trying to get protection for the new "Monopoly" game "invented" by Darrow and in the process of being marketed by Parker.²⁸

With that, Thun was contacted by Parker Brothers and asked about his own involvement in the development of Monopoly. Thun's recollection of what transpired during his meeting with Robert B. M. Barton, president of Parker Brothers is crisp. He said he (Thun) "was in the machinery business and he (Barton) was in the games business, and that was that." In return for his honesty and candor, Barton later sent Thun a top-of-the-line Monopoly game set - which Thun has since lost.²⁹

During Barton's visit to Wyomissing, he sought any available Monopoly boards from the 1915-1925 era. Thun remembered that his old friend Paul Sherk had one he might sell. And, in October, 1936, Sherk was approached by Barton, and wound up selling his original 1916 Monopoly board to Parker Brothers - ostensibly for their "small museum of old and original games." Sale price: \$50.³⁰

Sherk was either sentimental or shrewd, or both. Before he parted with the original board, he made an exact copy. This copy is still in his possession today. And, another of the pre- Darrow Berks County Monopoly boards is in the New England home of Louis Thun's son, David.

Today, none of those local folks who amused themselves and sharpened their economic skill with the Monopoly game lay claim to the invention of the game. History does, and shall continue to, record the founder of one of Americas most popular games as the late Charles Brace Darrow of Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But, the memories of a handful of Berks Countians hold their own versions of the way- it all began so many years ago. As Paul Sherk says today:

(Charles) Darrow was a first-class liar. Now, I think he was entitled to the money he made out of the game because he was responsible for marketing it. But when he said he invented it, he was a liar because we were playing it here years before he said he invented it.³¹

CHART "A"

Names used on original 1916 "Monopoly" board designed by Paul Sherk of Wyomissing:

Wayback	Lonely Lane
The Pike	The Farm
Rubeville	Boom Town
Goat Alley	Beggarmen's Court
Market Place	Rickety Row
Cottage Terrace	Easy Street
George Street	Maguire Street
Johnson Circle	Fairhope Avenue
The Bowery	Broadway
Madison Square	Fifth Avenue
Grand Boulevard	Wall Street

NOTE: The above place names differ little from the names used in the "Landlord's Game" devised by Elizabeth Magie near the turn-of-the-century. In that game, "Maguire Street" was called "Maguire Flats."

In the "Landlord's Game," the names of the railroads differed from Sherk's:

In Sherk's version of "Monopoly", the four corners of the board were occupied by properties called "The Poorhouse," "Private Estate," "The jail" and a listing of property rent values. The "salary" collected in Sherk's game was \$100 (as opposed to today's \$200), and the houses used to improve the properties were tiny chips of wood. There were no hotels in Sherk's game. Money was hand-printed on cards, as were the "Chance" cards. The game markers used by Sherk and the Berks County Monopoly players included some rather exotic items - each, says Sherk, with its own "superstition." Players would use one particular marker and ONLY that one as it was thought to bring luck. These markers included a Travelers Protective Association (TPA) identification token, an authentic ancient Greek coin, a Chinese coin, a bolt, a washer and a French coin.

FOOTNOTES

1. Brady, Maxine, *The Monopoly Book*, (New York, David McKay Co., 1974) p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. Letter: Charles B. Darrow to Robert B. M. Barton. March 21. 1935.
5. Letter: Robert B. M. Barton to Charles B. Darrow, April 15. 1935.
6. Letter: Charles B. Darrow to Robert B. M. Barton, April 17. 1935.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
8. Trillin, Calvin, *Monopoly and History*, *NEW YORKER*. February 13, 1978, p. 91.
9. United States District Court for the Northern District of California, Deposition of Robert B. M. Barton, May 8. 1975.
10. 1937 Games, *TIME*, February 1, 1937.
11. Trillin, p. 92.
12. Trillin, p. 93.
13. Letter: Scott Nearing to Ferdinand Thun, April 26, 1929.
14. Personal Interview with Paul Sherk, September 21, 1978.
15. Brady, p. 29.
16. Sherk interview.
17. Trillin, p. 94.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Who Really Invented Monopoly?, *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*, January 26, 1978, p. 166.
20. Letter: Otto Heck to Louis Thun, May 9, 1927.
21. Thun, Louis and Ferdinand, *Statement of General Theory*, ca. 1931.
22. *INQUIRER* article.
23. *Statement of General Theory*, p. 1.
24. Letter: David Williams to Louis Thun, March 14, 1931, p. 3.
25. United States District Court for the Northern District of California, Deposition of Louis R. Thun, June 17, 1975, p. 22.
26. Letter: Williams to Thun, p. 1.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
28. Thun Deposition, p. 41.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 43 and Sherk interview.
31. Sherk interview.