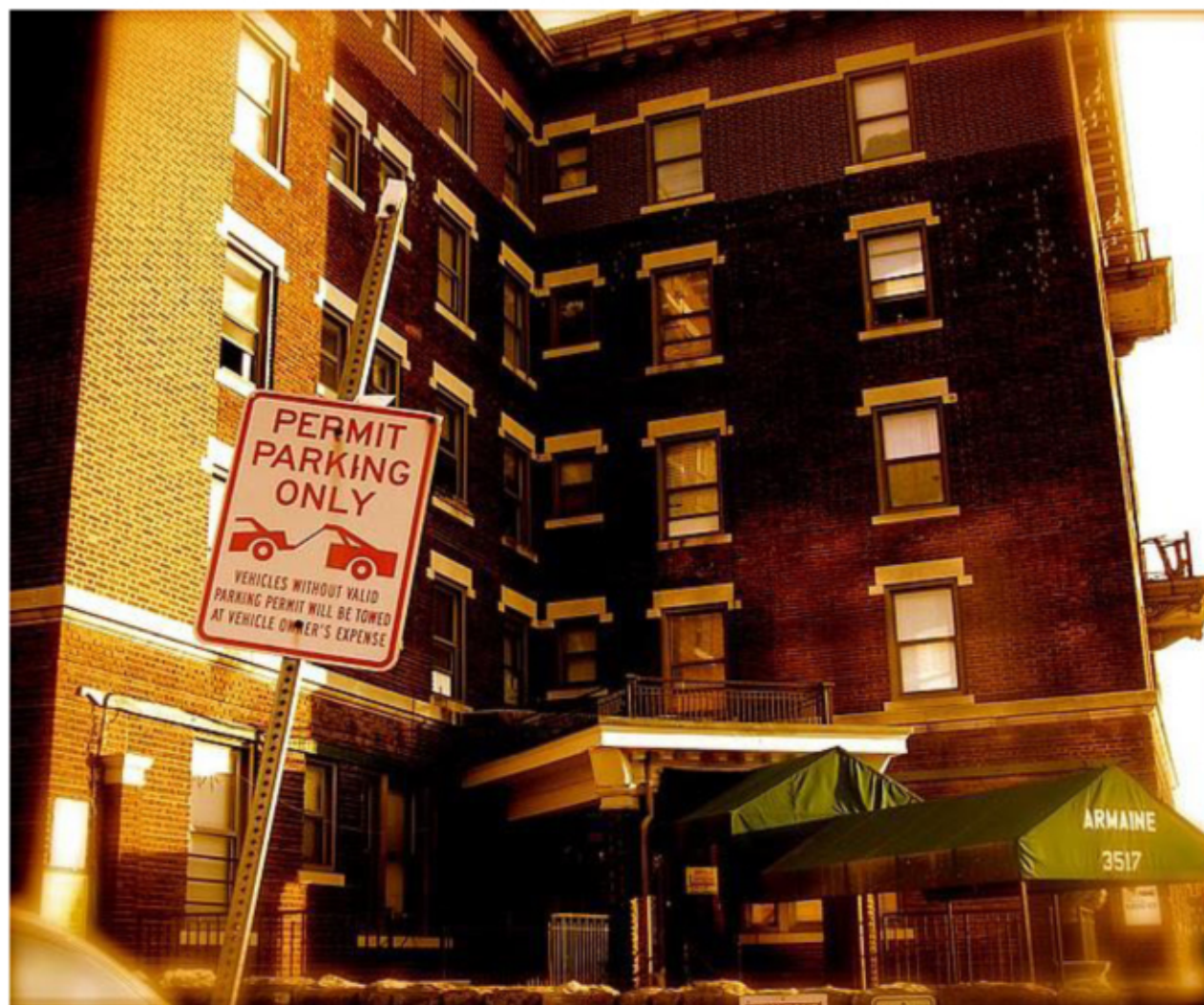


Of gold and contract bridge



The former Southland Hotel on Main Street.

Gold has been in the news lately, as in "A 24-Karat Safety Net for Investors," which was a recent headline on the front page of *The New York Times* business section. At the time the price of an ounce of gold had pushed past \$1,400.

Gold prices wouldn't seem to have much relevance to this tired, five-story brick apartment building in midtown, where a few windows display satellite dishes and air conditioners and a sign at the entrance reads "Office/Oficina." A one-bedroom apartment here – "stove and refrigerator, laundry next door" – rents for \$450 per month.

The 94-year-old Armaine – the building sits near the corner of Armour and Main in the Old Hyde Park neighborhood – was once the Southland Hotel, a World War I-era apartment hotel that boasted of its "home cooking" and "the most beautiful surroundings, delightfully cool in summer." It showed obvious pride in being "only seven minutes from Union Station" with streetcars passing "every two minutes."

By 1954 the Southland was still a hotel with "reasonable rates – private baths" for residents or travelers, but it was also the home of the Contract Bridge Club of Kansas City.

That year the price of gold was \$35 an ounce.

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Bridge is a descendant of the centuries-old English card game whist. Contract bridge is a variation invented by one of the Vanderbilt heirs in the 1920s. Apparently bored with the basics of bids, trumps and tricks, he added a

"contract" – a more accurate prediction of the number of tricks taken.

Despite ongoing attempts to introduce the game to new generations, bridge now holds great appeal primarily for people old enough to remember its popular American heyday. In the 1940s bridge reportedly was a pastime in 44 percent of U.S. households.

In 1954 the director of the Contract Bridge Club of Kansas City was a 50-year-old man named **John Hubbell**. In August of that year he became Kansas City's first national bridge champion when he and a partner from St. Louis won the Life Master Pairs competition at the American Contract Bridge League tournament in Washington, D.C. The championship came with a trophy – the Waldemar von Zedtwitz Cup, named for a former champion who donated the cup in 1930. A champion kept the cup for a year unless he had won it three times and would then own the trophy.



The Waldemar von Zedtwitz Cup

In the early morning hours of November 18, 1954, police received a phone call from **John Hubbell**. Someone, he said, had stolen his national championship trophy from a shelf in the bridge club room at the Hotel Southland.

The Waldemar von Zedtwitz Cup was the only piece missing from the many lesser trophies on display at the Hotel Southland, **Hubbell** told police. Said he'd left the room unlocked while he was at dinner. The hotel clerk said he saw no one enter or leave the bridge room in that time. The cup, 20 inches tall and a foot across from handle to handle, was engraved with the names of previous winners. Insured for \$5,000. Made of 14 Karat gold.

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The game of contract bridge was certainly no stranger to the Kansas City crime scene. In 1929 a domestic argument in a Plaza apartment turned deadly and gained national attention when a woman named Myrtle Bennett shot her husband after he failed to fulfill his contract of four spades.

"I have no idea why it would be stolen," **John Hubbell** said of his trophy. "It has all those names engraved on it, and could easily be identified in a pawn shop. Maybe somebody hopes to melt it down for the gold."

Which leads me back to the price of gold. Adjusted for inflation, \$35 per ounce in 1954 would be about \$285 per ounce today. And the cup wasn't pure gold. Still, I can't help imagining an old bridge trophy collecting dust, perhaps forgotten inside a moldering cardboard box in an attic somewhere.

Myrtle Bennett was acquitted of murder. And **John Hubbell's** Waldemar von Zedtwitz Cup was never found.