

Mah Jongg in Fishers isn't like online games

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A feverish clicking can be heard among the voices of friends as small plastic tiles are swept around a table at the Fishers Mah Jongg Center.

"One bam," "four dots," "one crack," "green dragon," players say as they exchange tiles and concentrate on this game of strategy, memory and luck. When a victor wins, they yell, "Mah Jongg."

Mah Jongg originated in China in the mid-to-late 19th century. Some hold to the false myth that the game was played in ancient times. "Confucius did not play it," says Ellen Sharp, who founded the Fishers Mah Jongg Center.

Others believe the game was invented by a Chinese general to amuse his troops between battles. "It used to be only for men, as a gambling game," Sharp said.

We do know for sure that after World War I, Joseph Babcock, an American who lived in Shanghai, brought the game to the United States. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Babcock wrote his own rules, gave English names to the tiles and added index numbers to the tiles.

Mah Jongg is a strategic game of skill and luck where players put together sets of tiles to make combinations outlined on the prescribed hands cards. The game is similar to rummy but uses tiles instead of cards. It is very different from the game played online, where it's usually a solitary matching game.

The game took hold in the U.S. in the roaring '20s. It was mostly played by the wealthy because the expensive game tiles were made of hand-carved ivory or bone and bamboo. Today tiles are made of plastic.

In 1937, the National Mah Jongg League was established in New York City when a group of game enthusiasts came together and developed standardized rules. The new rules of play and prescribed hands with which players can win a game are set on cards and changed every year, keeping the game vibrant and interesting.

National Mah Jongg League President Larry Unger says the game's popularity has increased steadily in the past 10-15 years. His mother, who was league president for more than 20 years, used to "say the game lost one generation during the '70s and '80s as many women didn't want to be anything like their mother," Unger said. But now, he adds, "American women are once again looking for ways to connect, make friends, have stimulating games to stay sharp."

He says the nonprofit national or-



Lisa Larkin, from left, Ellen Sharp and Greg Larkin play a friendly game of Mah Jongg on Jan. 15 at the Fishers Mah Jongg Center. PHOTOS BY KELLY WILKINSON/INDYSTAR



Players "wash the tiles," a shuffling of the tiles at the start of a Mah Jongg game. Mah Jongg originated in China in the mid-to-late 19th century and is a strategic game of skill and luck.

ganization has more than 375,000 members and growing.

The Fishers Mah Jongg Center became a club in 2016. They play at 9006 Technology Lane in Fishers. The center meets on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. It can accommodate up to 24 players at one time.

The center follows the Mah Jongg National League rules. Players new and old to the game are welcome to come and go during hours of play, or sit down

and learn how to play.

"My favorite part of the club is meeting people," says Sharp. "Mah Jongg is a social game. It's built on fellowship."

The clicking sound and the smooth, pretty tiles make the game so unique. The game used to be called "the game of sparrows" in China, Sharp says, because the sound of the clicking was found to be similar to birds' chirping.

Shuffling the tiles on the table, called "washing the tiles," starts play. Players

then do a series of moves called the Charleston, taken from the popular 1920s dance of the same name, where unwanted tiles are passed from one player to the next. Then play continues as gamers put together combinations of tiles.

Greg and Lisa Larkin learned the game at their winter home in Florida. They found Sharp and the Fishers center when they returned to Indiana. "She's the expert," Lisa Larkin said with a smile. "She can remember from one week to the next what one of us has played."

Sharp said the game is a good memory builder because the strategy of the game includes knowing what tiles others have played versus what tiles you should play.

Though most players are in the U.S. are women, the Fishers club has three male members, including Greg Larkin. He says you find competitive, demanding atmospheres at some clubs, but this club is much more relaxed.

Smiles and friendly play fill the room as the tiles continue to click.

"Mah Jongg!" Beth Mink laughs as she claims her victory. "Now we're going to go to Disney World," she jokes.

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