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# How It All Happened by Gary Gygax

*The Inspiration for the D&D Game, its Creation, GenCon's Founding, How TSR came into Being, and its Early Days...*

## Miscellaneous Make-Believe



### Gary Gygax

has written and had published over 70 games, game products, and books since he began creating in the 1960s, when he founded the world-renowned GENCON gaming convention. His first professional gaming work was published in 1971.

He co-founded the game publishing company Tactical Studies Rules (later TSR, Inc.) in 1973 with his longtime friend from Lake Geneva, Don Kaye.

His best known game and fiction credits include co-creating and authoring the original DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Role-Playing Game, creating the AD&D game, WORLD OF GREYHAWK Fantasy World Setting, and the Gord the Rogue novels. He is often referred to as the "Father of Role-Playing".

*This is the final installment of Gary Gygax's "How it All Happened." This column has taken you from Gary's childhood through to the creation of D&D and TSR. It has been an honor to host this column for Gary. We thank him for the opportunity and challenge. It is yet more, if the final, echo of Gary's voice in these offices and this journal.*

*After the first issue of Crusader hit the stands, Gary turned this series of articles over to me, offering them to me for publication. I was very excited to take it on. Here was the story of "how it all happened" by the man who made it all happen. He touched on so many of the early influences that drove him to imagine and eventually create the material that served as the bedrock for the RPG industry. Personally I have thoroughly enjoyed these reads. They punctuate moments that were no doubt the culmination of hosts of events and happenstances in Gary's youth. They give us Gary Gygax in a new light. He's not only a business man, not only a game designer, not all the other things, both good and bad, that people have labeled him. Rather, they give us something far more valuable. They give us Gary Gygax, the man. This was Gary as I knew him. A jovial, good natured, company loving fellow who possessed a volcanic temper, an amazing drive, an indisputable ability to forgive and forget and above all a man who never lost his childhood and that wild imagination that gave birth to and brought together so many amazing stories.*

*Enjoy this final read from the ultimate Dungeon Master. I know I have.*

*Steve  
2008*

One night we heard there was going to be a beer party (beer could be purchased at 18-years of age then in Wisconsin) in the "Crazy House." I was highly skeptical, but I followed along so as to not be left out of whatever else happened. I was correct, for when we entered the place by the rear entrance in the west, walked around on the ground floor, it was clear no one else was in the place. A sudden

crash sent panic through the group, and out the nearest window they went—John Rasch, John Kohn, Don Kaye, Dave Dimery, and Terry Criner. I had been leading the way, and as I came last to the jumping out place, I heard Terry complaining about a twisted ankle, as someone helped him off and away into the trees. No way I was going to risk my ankle or leg jumping out a window about eight feet above ground onto ground littered with broken masonry and bricks! I took a deep breath, clenched my fists, and walked down that central hallway past the half-dozen doorways to either hand, into the foyer, out and down the steps. After all, I had experienced real poltergeist phenomena years before, and the noise was likely that of a raccoon disturbed by our presence. Nonetheless, when I hit the last step on the way out I was breaking into a run. When I found the others downtown and they learned I had walked out the front way, they were impressed with my bravery. I didn't tell them that a likely sprained ankle was more fearsome to me than a bumping sound in the night...

Of course only a small part of my time was spent on adventurous things like being in the ruins of Oak Hill Sanatorium. Far more time was spent playing chess. On many a school day Tom Keogh and I would meet in the back booth of the restaurant that served as the local bus station, there to drink coffee and play chess until it was "safe" to go to the YMCA and play there. Often game play would be at my place; there we would play double chess or the circular variant I had picked up from the *Boy's Own Book*. There was no formal chess club, but of the regulars playing, Terry Criner was best, I was second, Ron Hudson was third, and Tom was fourth. Tom and I thought much alike, though, so that when we played as a team in double chess, we regularly defeated Criner and Hudson, much to their annoyance. None of us could beat Karl Szabo, an old timer from Chicago who owned a local bar. I worked there as porter and dishwasher, and in due course I learned that Karl had played against masters and grand masters, so that answered that question. I was sad that my Grandfather Burdick wasn't alive, so I could see those two having at it, grandfather often playing seven boards at once when he was younger.

Don Kaye wasn't all that fond of chess, but any card or board game was fine with him. From poker to **Clue**, **Touring Monopoly**, and including the old **Big Business** game, Don was in there playing to win. One night when six of us started playing a **Big Business** game, it came down to Tom Keogh, Don Kaye, and I having to call it a three-way draw after way too many hours. Don's favorite games were military-based ones, and thus he loved to join me in setting up battles with my toy soldiers, firing off the lady-finger firecrackers in the Britons cannons. As I have mentioned before, we tried to devise some rules to make gunfire and hand-to-hand combat reasonable and fun, but we failed. Had we thought of dice instead of coins, it would have been another matter. We didn't...

Most summer evenings were spent hanging out with the regulars down around the lake front or riding around in someone's car listening to rhythm & blues music on WLAC from Nashville, Tennessee—a station I discovered in 1954. I'll never forget when disk jockey Gene Nobles played Chuck Berry's *Maybelline* 17 times in a row. All of us were really rocking and rolling at that, and it didn't hurt that we were drinking some *Peter Hand's Special Reserve* beer. Yet on a late night anytime of year I would likely be found listening to Jay Andres radio program, *Music 'Til Dawn*, as I read a fantasy or SF story, possibly an historical novel, taking a break now and then to work on a floor plan of my devising. Most were of castles or castle-like mansions with secret stairs and rooms. Somewhere around I have part of a multi-sheet one I did when I was around 17.

Admittedly, when we got together and discussed the incredible, horror and science fiction were as popular as fantasy. Not a one of the inner circle of my friends wouldn't have given their eye teeth to be picked up and carried off into distant parts of the galaxy by a space ship, flying saucer, or otherwise. Finding "haunted" places was another prime interest although Tom wasn't eager to encounter the manifestation he was treated to when sleeping in the upper bunk in my bedroom.

This brings us up to the time where my last real escapades as a teenager in Lake Geneva took place. In the following episode you'll read about knife fights and sword duels I experienced just before moving into Chicago on my own.

### *Faux Duels*

My friend John Kohn was built like a gorilla and could climb like nobody else I have ever seen. In gym class he could climb a rope using hands alone, reach the top, and be back down before the next fastest climber using hands and feet had reached the top of the rope. John was also a natural at throwing techniques in wrestling and like fighting. Back in the mid 1950s, martial arts were barely known. Terry Criner had taken some Judo classes, and he gave John Kohn a wide berth. That wasn't because John was aggressive, but because even in fun one risked getting thrown a goodly ways when up against him. Once a carload of four strangers ran John's old Chevy off the road. When John got out of the car two of them were already rushing at him. Without thinking John grabbed the first and sent him flying over the top of Chevy. The second assailant attempted to stop his charge, failed, and followed his fellow to land in the ditch. The other two stayed in the car and drove off in a hurry. John did likewise, as he didn't like to fight, as he couldn't punch well.

One day he asked me to practice with him. He wanted to see how he could do against a knife-armed attacker. I was agreeable, because John was always careful to break my fall when he threw me. So we began a session of me rushing at him with one of my hunting knives held in the crude overhand strike, out-thrust, and low in cut/thrust manner. Each time I was sent over John's shoulder or head to land relatively gently on the ground, although it didn't look that way to an unknowing observer. There were soon several in automobiles stopped and pulled over to the curb so as to see the "fight." It worked so well, we staged several more like "deadly combats" to fool the tourists. Shouts demanding I drop my knife and stop attacking, were the most common sentiments. Cheers for John throwing me were almost as usual. A few twigged to the joke and ended up laughing at those who thought it was a serious business.

That really helped enliven the usual dull routine of life in a small town. So did the swords...

Somewhere Tom Keogh came into possession of a pair of practice dueling sabers—he never did tell any of us where he got them. As he was then assistant manager of the Geneva Theater, he kept them in the downstairs dressing rooms, and after the theater closed he would break them out. Those who helped him tidy up got to do some fencing. By the time summer rolled around several of us had gotten to be fairly adept at putting on a "match" as good as many one might see on screen, with stamping, lunges, rushes, and locked blades with mock blows used to drive one opponent or the other back. We tried such matches in the side yard of my house, but nobody paid much attention, as the matter was clearly two teen-age boys fencing with heavy, blunt-ended, and un-pointed practice swords. That would never do! I suggested a formal duel at dawn as in the movie *Scaramouch*, and from there we worked out the whole plan. Terry Criner and Tom Keogh were to be the duelists. Each wore black trousers and white shirt for the event. John Kohn, John Rasch, John Patrick, and I were to be the seconds, wearing the same color scheme as the duelists with a black coat or jacket over the white shirt. The site of the contest was the far side of the lagoon in what is now the Bigfoot Beach State Park just after sunup... dawn if you will.

We marched out into the open in solemn manner, two separate trios, doing our best to attract as much attention as possible without seeming to do so. The Lake Geneva area being what it is, there were plenty of passing cars, people already pulled over, so we had the audience desired. The opponents faced off, saluted, I dropped a large square of white cloth, and the duel was on. After several minutes Tom was thrust through, we ran to him, and in "binding his wound" wrapped a red-dyed bandage around his chest. Tom's seconds helped him to his feet, but he collapsed, so they then picked him up and carried him off into the trees where Terry and his seconds, John Skinner and I, had hired off into the alley, as if fearing to be caught. Later on, we heard about a swordfight in Button's Bay where someone was stabbed, so the faux duel was a partial success.

Late that autumn I moved into Chicago. I was tired of working as a part-time mover and there weren't a lot of prospects for a high-school drop-out in the small town of Lake Geneva. It was time I sought my fortune by venturing into the wide world. Although I didn't know it then, I was on the road to becoming a real gamer.

## Wargaming

I went off to Chicago where I immediately found work...in the supply department of an insurance company. Working in a warehouse filling orders for advertising materials, business forms, supplies, and then shipping them out parcel post of freight was pretty dull. So was collating mass mailings to, running a postal metering machine, and running giant old photostat machine, and developing the pictures filled my days. Luckily, I had a life outside my work, and reading and playing chess were as enjoyable as ever. In a couple of years I got married. When my first child was born I decided it was time to get some relevant education, and I began going to night school to learn basic insurance principles. When the second bairn arrived, I enrolled in junior college, taking night classes. As I was on the Dean's List every semester, and several of my professors wrote letters of recommendation, I was accepted at the University of Chicago, but I never attended school there. I had been offered a job as an underwriter trainee, and I took it. Eventually I became a supervising underwriter, enough of that boring stuff!

Besides playing at the Rodgers Park Chess Club, actually managing a 7-2-1 record against a ranked Expert, I picked up a book on Japanese chess, shogi, and a nice little wooden set at a Japanese gift store located on North Broadway a few blocks from where I lived on Winthrop Avenue. Adding that game helped, but the breakthrough came when I was downtown looking for books in Kroch's & Brentano's. There I discovered my first board wargame, The Avalon Hill Company's **Gettysburg**, which I bought myself for Christmas in 1958. It cost \$4.98, a pretty hefty sum for me back then. That was the best five buck investment I ever made! It set me on the path to becoming a game hobbyist and creator. As it turned out I had a regular opponent in Chicago, a young chap named Mike Magida against whom I often played chess. He took to board wargames as readily as I did, and was an excellent player. My regular opponent in Lake Geneva was Don Kaye. After the first game we picked up every new Avalon Hill offering with eager anticipation. Eventually I broke down, subscribed to their magazine The Avalon Hill *General*, and my first gaming article was printed therein. It was a reprint of a paper I did for college English, "The Battle of Gettysburg, If Heth had gone Forward," for which I had received an A, (I did a lot of research, had 53 footnotes including quotes from the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, the *Official Records*, and *Harpers Magazine*.)

By then I was somewhat known to Avalon Hill's Vice President, Tom Shaw. I was the first person to write to the company and ask if I could buy blank hex sheets. In a personal conversation years later, Tom said they decided on a price of \$1 each. I bought five of them. I still have a letter from Tom to prove I was an Avalon Hill fanboy. When I changed jobs, I was an underwriter working in downtown Chicago, a certain Carl Olson I met told me about the hobby Industry Association of America's annual trade show that was then held in the city. Of course I left work and went there to hang around at the Avalon Hill booth. This I did every year for several years, and soon had a guest badge from "AH," which made me feel important...

Meantime, with several friends I set about making a super complex builder wargame using the blank hex maps, Each of seven of us created our own nation with a name like "Bellum," Guerre,"

"Krieg," etc., some smaller neutral ones, on the world we named "Pax." Not only did we create a cylindrical planet, but the rules were so complex and complicated we scrapped the whole exercise.

I moved back to Lake Geneva in 1964, commuting between there and my job in Chicago until I left insurance in the fall of 1970. I took advantage of the long ride to read much history and do not a little article and game-rule writing too.

As I noted, from the ads in the *General* I got into postal communication with many gamers to play wargames by mail and to enjoy the fellowship. With two such gamers, Bill Speer and Scott Duncan, I co-founded the International Federation of Wargaming (IFW) in 1966. This was a serious association to promote gaming, the first such, and it grew to over 700 members. By this time I was also active in play of Postal *Diplomacy*.

From such contacts, I got to know quite a number of gamers personally, so in 1967 I invited as many as were near enough to my home to come and spend a weekend playing games. Later I came to call that weekend "**GenCon 0**," and about 15 or 20 persons showed up, half of whom spent the night there in their sleeping bags. We played board wargames, naval miniatures on the living room floor, and everybody but my then-wife loved it. In fact, I was so enthused I told Bill Speer and Scott Duncan that we should have a gaming convention like SF fans did for their hobby. They said, "Go for it," and that I did. In 1968, I ran the first **GenCon** (a play on the Geneva Convention of warfare and the place the event was held) in the Horticultural Hall in Lake Geneva. It was for IFW members, cost \$1 for the single day it ran, and 50 persons paid, that covering the rent for the hall exactly. Gamers from New York, Texas, Oregon, and Canada showed up, so the event was national and international. Most of us played on Sunday too as we were ostensibly cleaning the hall. Thus all agreed that there had to be a **GenCon II**, and it had to be at least two days long.

In the next episode I will reveal how I became "hooked" on military miniatures and got into the "pro" ranks soon thereafter.

## Military Miniatures

While I was reasonably familiar with military miniatures wargaming before GenCon I, in 1968, it was there that I became enamored with them, That was thanks to Jerry white from Portland, Oregon, as I recall, who brought his Hausser Elastolin plastic 40 mm medieval figurines and a castle to the convention. On the Sunday we were supposed to be cleaning up I played "The Siege of Bodenbergr" with Jerry and others, and ever afterwards, I was hooked. That wasn't surprising to me, as my first complete wargame design had been the *Battle of Arsouf*, published in a fan magazine not much before I was introduced to the medieval miniatures game noted.

Being so interested in the 40mm scale figurines, I got together with Don Kaye, and the two of us built a 6' x 10' sand table in my basement in the fall of 1968. I bought an extra plywood sheet, painted it green, to lie on top of the sand when a traditional tabletop was desired. I formed a local group, the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association with miniatures buffs Professor Leon (Lee) Tucker of Chicago and Michael (Mike) Reese of Harvard, Illinois, as principal members with Don Kaye, Rob and Terry Kuntz, and me. We played a lot of WW II and later military

miniatures, some ancients, and a smattering of Napoleonic. There were many weekend-long miniatures battles fought with German forces against Russian or British-American AFVs and troops. At a 1:1 scale, small unit tactics were the main feature, and the *Tractics* rules were play tested thus.

Shortly thereafter I was delighted when Jeff Perren came up to Lake Geneva with his large force of 40 mm Hauser Elastolin figures and a set of rules for medieval warfare on a 1 figure equals 20 men scale. With Jeff's permission I expanded those rules, then in the early months of 1969 added rules for 1 figure equals 1 man scale, jousting rules, and finally a "Fantasy Supplement: to add magic armor and swords, wizards casting spells, and a large number of fantastic creatures—fire-breathing dragons, elementals, giants, trolls, ogre, etc. Jeff kindly sold his collection of 40 mm figurines to me, so they were always on hand for battles in the basement on the sand table. Ranges and damage area for fireball and lightning bolt spells were the same as those for the mundane heavy catapult and cannon. Not a single eyebrow was raised.

While I enjoyed playing virtually any period miniatures, medieval was my favorite, so I formed a special interest group in the International Federation of Wargaming, naming it the "Castle & Crusade Society." I wrote and published a small newsletter for the group of about 20 or 30 members of the C&C Society, calling it *The Doomsday Book* after the Norman record created after William conquered Anglo-Saxon England. Dave Arneson from the Twin cities was an original member of the society. About that time I published the rules Jeff had written and I expanded upon as the LGTSA Medieval Miniatures Rules. By that time the play on the sand table had become almost exclusively fantasy miniatures. Other periods, including medieval, would attract a handful of participants for a weekend game. When word about the fantasy battles got out, we would have a dozen or more players crowding around the table, so we ran games to suit the gamers. We did have dropouts though, notably Dr. Tucker, who quit speaking to me because of my "heresy" Mike Reese, and Jeff Perren, as they were interested in the historical only.

Near the close of the year 1969 Don Lowry got in touch with me about publishing games and rules through his small press, Guidon Games. Don was then running a mail order hobby shop, Lowry's, and publishing a semi-pro gaming magazine, *Campaign*. I wanted very much to become a professional author and game designer, of course, insurance being incredibly dull in comparison, even though I was very able as an underwriter and an excellent salesman too. I had wanted to quit my job and strike out as an author, but my then-wife discouraged that. Although she hated gaming and gamers, she was right, as I had four children by then. Nonetheless, I spent much of my free time working on games and game rules.

In the fall of 1970 the company I worked for decided to move its operations from Chicago to San Francisco. I was out of a job, absolutely delighted too! Turning down offers from a couple of large agencies, the first thing I did was to call Don Lowry and accept his offer to become the Editor-in-Chief for Guidon Games. The second major step I took was to acquire shoe repair machinery, get it moved into the basement, Don Kaye inheriting possession of the sand table, his garage becoming its home. Then I was as set as I could manage, the shoe repair would generate a steady if marginal income for the support of the family, my

gaming work augmenting that. I was set to seek my fortune doing what I loved.

## Games Daily

Slipping back a couple years to cover **GenCon**, the second one in August 1969 was for Saturday and Sunday, and as I recall we charged \$5 for both days, \$3 for one-day admission. There were around 150 paid conventioners there, and my family ran the kitchen—hot dogs and soft drinks, they kept the profits therefrom for their labor. At \$.25 and \$.10 nobody accused me of skimming. The income from attendance enabled us to take all the workers out to have a Sunday night pizza and beer fest.

In 1970 **GenCon III** drew around 350 persons. The IFW in the person of Len Lakofka ran it, not me, the site being George Williams College Camp in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. It was spread all over, and even so, it was crowded. I was pushing medieval miniatures play then, but enjoyed a *Don't Give up the Ship* naval miniatures battle that Dave Arneson ran, a recreation of the Battle of the Nile. I was on the winning French team. Everything else was about the same as **GenCon II**.

In 1971 I ran **GenCon IV** on behalf of the LGTSA. Figuring a larger crowd I rented both the Horticultural Hall and the Guild Hall of the Episcopal Church directly across the alley from the Horticultural Hall's side entrance. We had close to 500 attendees, and everyone had a great time. In 1972 the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association was again the sponsor, and that meant I was doing most of the work. I rented the American Legion Hall in addition to the others, anticipating more growth. That was good as **GenCon V** drew in excess of 600 paying attendees. We were up to a three-day event then, and if I recall rightly, it was \$20 for all three days, \$10 per day otherwise. The "Choice hot Dogs" ads for **GenCon** drew as many groans as they did cheers. The workers loved it, though, as the LGTSA paid for a nice dinner at a nearby restaurant. It was at this point that I decided to make the dinner open to conventioners willing to pay their own way, so that they could rub elbows with the "names" who attended the "banquet" to be held Saturday night.

So 1971 and 72 were banner years for my gaming, a miserable one for earning a livelihood. Guidon Games published *Tractics*, *Chainmail*, *Don't Give up the Ship*, and *Tricolor* military miniatures rules as well as my *Alexander the Great* and *Dunkirk* board wargames. I even did "fill-in" typing of manuscripts, using an IBM and ending each line with a whole word and slashes thereafter for type spacing to add more gaming income to the royalty income. In all it was barely sufficient to make ends meet. Even though I was doing more game play and creation than ever before, the financial rewards were marginal. That discouraged me not in the least! What was disturbing to me was the way that Guidon Games, Lowry's hobbies, and *Campaign* magazine were being managed. The operation had moved to Maine, and service was getting terrible. Don Lowry asked me to move out to Belfast, Maine, and work with them. I declined politely. I foresaw trouble brewing and wanted to start my own gaming company.

I told Don Kaye that that was my aim, and while he liked the idea, he was dubious about the potential even if I picked up all the game work I had done for Guidon. Then in the late fall of 1972 Dave Arneson and Dave Megary came down to Lake Geneva for a gaming weekend and Don became more enthused.