THE DEAN OF CHESS PLAYERS

By WILL BRANAN

MENTALLY alert and vigorous, with a reasoning capacity that challenges the onslaught of time, Judge James McConnell, Sr., who will soon pass the 84-year post, can still give most of the local players odds at chess—and beat them.

Still sound, both of body and mind, the life of this old-time veteran of the royal game belies the charge that chess saps the brain and blows up the body of its victim. He has been playing chess for seventy-odd years, and yet he has the fortitude of mind and the strength of body to withstand the infirmities of old age. His has been a continual battle of brains, an intellectual struggle of the supremest character, and, like any other warrior, he hopes to die with his boots on.

You have read that one chessmaster was stricken with paresis at an early age, that another suffered a mental collapse before he died, and that still another is now an insane—all of which might lead one to believe that chess is a cruel mistress, indeed. But here is the inside of it—chess is a jealous mistress. She brooks no rival. All-sufficient and all-absorbing, she demands absolute fealty from her devotees, and wherever you find the wreck of a chess master you will find that he has not been faithful. Other mistresses lured him from his first love.

It is true that the endless possibilities of chess may tax the strength of the devotee, straining his nervous tension to the breaking point, but the intellect that is capable of the conflict is capable of endurance to the end. Heredity and environment inevitably hasten that end, and it is safe to say that dissipation has done more to dethrone the chessmaster's mind than the most nerve-racking tournaments of chess.

Judge McConnell is not a genius at chess, as was Paul Morphy. There is nothing unfathomable about his mental operations. While he has been true to chess for a longer period than any other man now living, there is nothing neurotic about his devotion—nothing unwholesome. He has been entirely self-possessed in his pursuit of this intellectual game. With him it has been a diversion, a recreation—constructive rather than destructive in its absorption.

Judge McConnell's father was one of Louisiana's most distinguished surgeons. He was a friend of James Bowie, of Alamo fame, and while surgeon of the Charity Hospital in the twenties he was invited and urged by Bowie to join his expedition to Texas in the same capacity. Dr. McConnell was averse to any such course, but he retained the friendship of Bowie throughout the struggles and ascendancy of the Texas Republic.

Born in 1829 of revolutionary stock on a plantation up the river, below Baton Rouge, Judge McConnell moved to New Orleans with his parents in 1840. He was educated at Washington, Pa., and graduated in law at the University of Louisiana, in this city, in 1852. Although a Henry Clay Whig before the war, he served under the flag of the Confederacy for four years as first lieutenant of the First Louisiana Artillery, which was part of the force that defended Vicksburg during the entire siege, and was afterwards stationed at Mobile. For many years Judge McConnell was president of the Law Association of this city. He married Miss Delphine Blanc, a granddaughter of Samuel J. Peters, founder of the New Orleans public school system. For forty-five years Judge McConnell's home has been at the corner of St. Charles and St. Mary.

Aside from his other attainments Judge McConnell achieved particular distinction through his long connection with the Gaines case, the most remarkable case in the history of jurisprudence in the United States. From 1855 to 1879, nearly a quarter of a century, Judge McConnell was the leading counsel for the defense. This suit of Myra Clark Gaines against the city of New Orleans had its beginning 100 years ago. It went before the United States Supreme Court three times during his connection with it, and in 1869 there was such a mass of testimony piled in front of the judges that they could not be seen by members of the bar as they took their seats on the opening of the court. During that quarter of a century Judge McConnell successfully coped in argument with the ablest lawyers of Louisiana and of the United States in state and Federal courts of all grades, and baffled the efforts of the "most energetic, indefatigable, vigilant and able" litigant in America. He not only protected the homes and possessions of hundreds of his fellow-citizens during that time, but he saved New Orleans from liability for demands aggregating many millions of dollars while he was its counsel. Although the case was settled adversely to the city finally, after his connection with it had ceased, the value of the professional service rendered by Judge McConnell was passed upon and determined judicially.

Prior to the Civil War Judge McConnell was a school director, and it was doubtless owing to his efforts in behalf of public education that he was designated by Paul Tulane, who was his friend, as one of the two vice presidents of the board of administrators of the Tulane educational fund. In 1866 he was chosen as a representative from New Orleans in what has since been called the "last white man's Legislature." In 1872 he was elected a member of the McEnery Legislature, which was for three months in almost continuous session. In 1879 he was chosen a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, of which he was chairman of the committee on the bill of rights and a member of the committee on legislative department, on schedule to the Constitution, on elective franchise, on the judiciary and on investigation of the state debt. He was conspicuously opposed to the repudiation of the state debt, to the extension of the charter of the Louisiana State Lottery Company and to the changes in the judiciary system of New Orleans.

At a very early age Judge McConnell showed an interest in chess. When 10 years old he was such an enthusiast that an expert by the name of Mr. Ford presented him with a little book of chess problems, which he mastered from cover to cover. On his return from college in 1849 he matched his wits against the foremost players of New Orleans at that time. They were accustomed to meet on the second floor of the old Postoffice building at No. 18 Royal Street, where there were four chess tables. While there was no chess club in New Orleans, in those days, that appears to have been a favorite rendezvous of the old-time chess players—among them the celebrated Judah P. Benjamin.

In the fifties a group of chess players was accustomed to meet in a little cafe that was then located at the corner of Bienville and Exchange Alley—among them James Grover, Alex Dalsheimer, St. Clair Johns and Charles F. Buck, all of whom are now dead except Mr. Buck. Afterwards there was a little chess club in which the moving spirits were Messrs. Gasquet, Lapeyre and Dunn, who played in a room at the corner of St. Charles and Commercial Alley. Following the return of Paul Morphy from his triumphs in Europe, and the announcement that he had conceived an aversion to chess, there was a decline in the popularity of the royal game until the year 1880, when Mr. Buck and J. D. Seguin hunted up their companion enthusiasts and formed what was to be the nucleus of the New Orleans Chess, Checkers and Whist Club. They first rented rooms on Gravier Street. After one or two changes, they were organized and incorporated and rented the upper floor of Hawkin's saloon, which was located at the corner of Theatre Alley and Common Street—on the site of what is now the Hennen Annex. The club not only prospered socially, but developed some remarkably strong players. By reason of the successes of William Steinitz the popularity of chess revived from the depression that it had suffered from Morphy's aversion, and in the early eighties the local Chess Club was so vital that it felt justified in taking its present quarters at the corner of Canal and Baronne. Through the medium of tournaments the world's chess champions have been brought to this city as guests of the club—notably Steinitz, Zukertort, Mackenzie, Mieses, Tchigorin and Lasker, as well as the Americans, Pillsbury and Marshall, and the Cuban, Capablanca.

Of the charter members of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club only four survive, besides Mr. Buck—Edgar H. Farrar, Judge L. L. Labatt, Lucien A. Ledoux and Andre W. Seguin. Judge Labatt ranks at the top of the most active chess players in the South at the present time.

Professional chess players are as a rule nervous and excitable. This is especially true in the tournament where a game runs for four or five hours, when the loser will sometimes burst into tears and show other signs of nervousness. Many stories are told of the old-time chess players of New Orleans. There was one in particular who always lost his temper when he lost the game. On one occasion, at the conclusion of a long and difficult game, he threw the chair in which he had been sitting across the room, breaking it to pieces against the opposite wall. But he had the true nature of a gentleman, and immediately replaced the chair with another one, apologizing for the outburst.

Those who are acquainted with Judge McConnell's success and attainments as a lawyer need not be told that his skill as a chess player has not been at the sacrifice of his practice. He has always been animated by the amateur's spirit of the game for the game's sake, and has never played for money. While devoted to chess, he has felt that it was by no means the chief business of life—he has employed it as a walking-cane for the exercise of his mentality, rather than a crutch for his sole support.

JUDGE McCONNELL.
In His Young Manhood.

It was on the advice of Judge McConnell that Morphy discontinued those brilliant blindfolded performances that he was giving prior to his departure for England, where he went to play the English chess champion, Staunton. On the first night of the series Morphy played one game blindfolded; on the second two games simultaneously; on the third three games, on the fourth four games, on the fifth five games, and on the sixth six games. At this point Judge McConnell counseled him that he was developing his memory at the sacrifice of his reasoning faculties. Morphy saw the wisdom of this and suspended the memory tests. Stanton avoided meeting him in England in a formal test, and he proceeded to France, where he was wined and dined by the Parisians as one of their very own. The fact that he was of French extraction made the admiring Parisians all the more demonstrative.

While Judge McConnell's victory over Morphy at chess might well be attributed to the latter's youth at the time they first played together, other world champions have acknowledged defeat at the hands of the judge. At a certain stage in a game which he played with Pillsbury, when the latter was on a visit to New Orleans some years ago, a discussion arose as to the probable outcome of the game. Pillsbury stated that there had been a similar discussion at identically the same stage in a former match game that he had played with Mr. Barry, of Boston, and that both he and his opponent had decided that the outcome would be a draw. But Judge McConnell took exception to this decision, and offered his opinion against that of Pillsbury, that he would win the game—which he did. He is so modest and reticent about his own achievements that you would never get this story out of him. It is related by one of his intimates.

In his own account of Pillsbury's wonderful performances in this city Judge McConnell recalls the blindfolded games under the auspices of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club, when Pillsbury not only played sixteen games of chess simultaneously, but also four games of checkers at the same time, while he beat his opponents at a game of whist. At that time he had a record of twenty-one games of chess blindfolded. To make his performance appear all the more brilliant, and for purposes of impressement, the judge suggested, at the luncheon hour, that Pillsbury resume one of the games where it was left off on his return from the dining-room. Pillsbury not only agreed to this, but offered to resume two games or all of them, if it should be desired, even though the diverting details of an elaborate menu might intervene.

The father and uncle of Paul Morphy were also addicted to chess, and it was through them that the genius was introduced into the circle that foregathered in the old postoffice building. Judge McConnell remembers Paul as a mere boy, who was barely able to reach the top of the chess table—but he soon showed signs of the master hand that was to win for him international renown. In 1849 Judge McConnell beat Morphy one game of chess; but as he was then 20 and Morphy was only 11 he attached less importance to the conquest at that time than he has in later years. Morphy afterwards published the moves of the three games in which he was first victorious over Judge McConnell.

When Judge McConnell was invited by Ernest Morphy in 1849 to the Morphy home to play several games of chess with Paul, he was somewhat skeptical of the prediction, voiced in the Frenchman's broken English: "The leettle boy weell beat you." But Paul's marvelous skill soon caused him to change his mind. They played four games the first evening, and out of these Paul won three. Of the dozen or so games that they played, Judge McConnell won only one, which Morphy referred to in after years—particularly on one occasion in Birmingham, England.

Judge McConnell has always maintained that Morphy was the greatest chess player that the world has produced. Both Lasker and Capablanca are great players, he says, but adds that the man remains to be born who will equal Morphy. While Capablanca may be a more brilliant player than Lasker, who is more careful in his moves, neither can be placed in the same class with Morphy. He deplores the tendency of the modern school of chess players to assert that Morphy was a brilliant player, but not sound, and that if Morphy had played Steinitz the latter would have won. He had occasion to test the soundness of the Steinitz playing, and is satisfied in his own mind that Morphy could have bested Steinitz.

It was while Steinitz and Zukertort were playing in what is now the reading-room of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club, Judge McConnell and Major Hamilton were watching the moves as they were duplicated on the wall. At the conclusion of the game, which was declared a draw, Judge McConnell said to Major Hamilton: "Dr. Zukertort could have taken that bishop of Steinitz. From that point on he might have won the game."

Major Hamilton informed Zukertort of Judge McConnell's statement. Steinitz had already left the room, but Zukertort said brusquely: "Oh, no, no, no!" Whereupon Judge McConnell offered to demonstrate his assertion, and Zukertort played the game that Steinitz had played. Judge McConnell took the bishop and beat the game. It was necessary for him to beat Zukertort three games, with the same moves of the original, before the doctor was assured that the game with Steinitz might have been a victory instead of a draw.

"That demonstrated to my mind," said Judge McConnell, in speaking of the incident, "that Morphy was a greater player than Zukertort, who ranked with Steinitz as one of the champions of that day. From my own knowledge of Morphy's playing I am sure that he would never have overlooked a play of that kind. I also satisfied myself of the fact that Morphy was a greater player than Steinitz."

On his return home that evening Judge McConnell carefully reviewed the game that he had played with Zukertort, particularly from the point where he had taken the bishop. He finally reached the conclusion that Steinitz might have gotten a draw even after the bishop was taken. So strong was this conclusion in his own mind that he approached Steinitz and Zukertort on the subject the next day. Steinitz, who was not given to many words, was silent and noncommittal; but Zukertort said emphatically: "Oh, no, no, no!" Judge McConnell again offered to back his judgment with a game. In this the situation was reversed, the judge playing in the place of Steinitz. The bishop was taken by his opponent, as he had first declared might be done, and then he proceeded to play the game to a draw. As Steinitz had lost the game after the bishop was taken, this was proof conclusive to the mind of Judge McConnell that he was not in the same class with Paul Morphy.

His familiarity with the famous plays of chess champions enabled Judge McConnell on one occasion to demonstrate his title to a position with the masters. It appears that following the fourteenth move of a match game at Vienna a certain champion and his opponent decided to call the game a draw, dividing the stake equally between them. Judge McConnell remembered every move of the game, and when the champion visited New Orleans the judge ventured the assertion that the game would have been lost by the former had it been played to its conclusion. The champion ridiculed the idea, declaring that both he and his opponent were fully satisfied that it was a draw. Whereupon Judge McConnell offered to play the game from the fourteenth move—and mated the champion in six moves!

Judge McConnell demonstrated his ability to hold his own with the local players in the last series that was played with Judge Labatt and Prof. Dixon, in which his opponents were given odds of a pawn and a move. He has not only beaten the local players time and again, but there has not been a world's champion during the past half century who has not acknowledged defeat at some time or other at the hands of the veteran master. Steinitz, Zukertort, Pillsbury—all realized that they were playing with a master when they were playing with Judge McConnell. And the judge was a greater master than any of them in that he never permitted chess to master him—absorbing as it was, and pleasurable as the playing might be, he never permitted himself to be carried away by the fascination of it to the exclusion of those responsibilities which constituted the greater game of life.

It was originally intended that this should be a story about the old-time chess players of New Orleans, but as Judge McConnell is the dean of them all, the story seemed to gravitate in his direction. Judge McConnell's office is just across the street from the Picayune building, and it was therefore not a difficult matter to find him. But the judge's life has been so full that he was naturally reluctant to have any undue prominence given to his chess activities. He feels that there are other things of greater importance than chess, which is undoubtedly true. But in the judge's case chess has not been unlike the game of life itself. He has played it as a gentleman of the old school—courteous, considerate of the feelings of others, and yet strong in his convictions. That he has survived the "geniuses" of their day shows that he has mastered chess and that chess has never mastered him.

JUDGE McCONNELL'S TRIBUTE TO MORPHY.

At a dinner given several years ago by the Manhattan Chess Club, of New York City, Judge McConnell, who was one of the speakers, devoted a considerable part of his remarks to reminiscences of Paul Morphy. His opinion as to the exact status of the deceased master among the kings of the game attracted a great deal of attention. Judge McConnell declared that, after an experience at chess that covered nearly, if not quite, a half-century, and of personal play with practically every great master of the game famous during that period, he had long since reached the conclusion that not one possessed the remarkable intuitive grasp of the possibilties of the game that Morphy displayed. While Morphy undoubtedly possessed a memory of wonderful power, and so practically never forgot what he deemed worth remembering in relation to the game, whether moves, opening, defenses or even whole games, yet it was this faculty of instant intuitive appreciation of all, or pracically all, that lay in a given position at the chess that most markedly distinguished and differentiated the greatest American master.

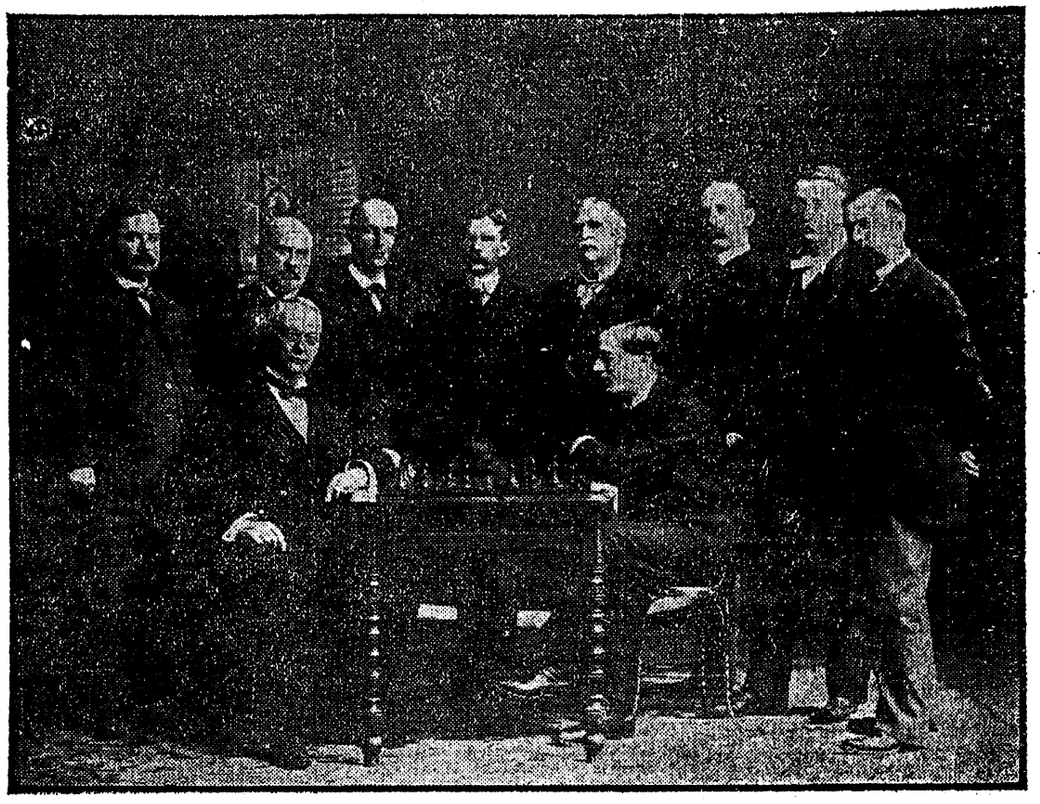
In illustration of this point, Judge McConnell related an anecdote of his own first meeting with Morphy, in the latter part of the forties, when the latter was a lad only about 11 or 12 years old. Judge McConnell was even at that time one of the leading players of New Orleans, and having heard much from Ernest Morphy, Eugene Rosseau and other local chessists of the strength of "the Little Paul," he determined to take no risks in the game nor to treat his adversary with any lightness.

After a long struggle, by a rather neat combination of his own (as he thought), Judge McConnell had succeeded in winning a clear piece, when, suddenly, in more minutely examining the position, he discovered that, by a most recondite line of play, some seven or eight moves deep, following a move with which he was obliged to conclude his combination, his youthful adversary might turn seeming defeat into victory. Somewhat disconcerted, he, however, succeeded in concealing his emotion over the discovery, and, thinking that it was almost impossible that so young a player as his antagonist could have penetrated so deeply into the position, he proceeded, with seeming unconcern, to make his move. Imagine his consternation when, almost before his hand had quitted his piece, his young opponent not only instantly made the coup juste in reply, but followed it up with the whole series of winning moves without the slightest hesitation.

A FAMOUS GAME OF CHESS BETWEEN C. A. MAURIN, FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE CHESS, CHECKERS AND WHIST CLUB, AND STEINITZ.

Top Row (left to right)—Judge L. L. Labatt, J. G. Blanchard, James D. Seguin, Chas. F. Buck, Fernand Claiborne, M. F. Dunn.

Sitting—Left, Chas. A. Maurian, first president of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club; right, Steinitz.



JUDGE McCONNELL PLAYING CHESS WITH PILLSBURY AT THE CHESS, CHECKERS AND WHIST CLUB.

Top Row (left to right)—C. O. Wilcox, Fernand Claiborne, James McConnell, Jr., Robert Moore, Major E. J. Hamilton, Judge L. L. Labatt, Prof. B. V. B. Dixon, James D. Seguin.

Sitting—Left, Judge James McConnell, Sr.; right, Pillsbury.