

YPSILANTI GLEANINGS

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YPSILANTI HISTORICAL SOCIETY ~ PUBLICATION ~



Ypsilanti Historical Museum
~ 220 N. Huron Street ~

July 1975

A HISTORY OF WASHTENAW COUNTRY CLUB 1899-1974

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1899-1974

PREFACE

I have long thought it would be a nice idea if someone were to take the time and trouble to compile a history of the club. Since this writer has been a member of the club boy and man since 1921, or about half a century, I decided there was no point in sitting around and waiting for someone else to do so and that I might as well undertake the task myself.

I am not a historian and much of this is based on my own recollection and records. Also at times you may find that parts of this seem to be more in the nature of personal opinion, rather than straight historical fact. If that is what may be termed taking literary license, so be it.

DEDICATION

Although some of this history is compiled from personal recollection and records, most of the material for the early and middle part of the club history has been gleaned from scrapbooks kept by Lynn Whitmire. Lynn was a very active member of the club, and was the last surviving charter member, and had kept scrapbooks covering the history of the club from the time of founding in 1899 until she passed away. She bequeathed her scrapbooks to my wife, Doris, and they are among our most treasured possessions.

This history is, therefore, dedicated to the memory of Lynn Whitmire.

The sun dial some of you may have noticed which is located just outside the porch window is in memory of Lynn Whitmire.

Clark M. Greenstreet

EARLY CLUB HISTORY

The most popular myth about Washtenaw Country Club is that it is "The second oldest golf club in Michigan."

You have seen that statement emblazoned on club stationary, the annual club booklet, and other club literature. It is just not true. It is a rumor which began many years ago and has now come to be an accepted fact.

The first golf club in Michigan was the Detroit Country Club, a 9 hole course which was started about 1898. Saginaw Country Club started a course in early 1899. Just a few months later, on July 11, 1899 to be exact, fifteen Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor people met and officially formed the Washtenaw Country Club. I hate to destroy a legend, but after all, being the third oldest club in Michigan is not bad!

A site was sought for the course, and a part of the Rice farm was leased for the purpose, and construction of a course was quickly begun.

The first course consisted of only 3 holes. Dues were \$5.00 a year.

The next step was to build a clubhouse. A bid of \$750 was obtained and accepted. I have a picture of the original clubhouse in my files, and it was really quite a large clubhouse for the money, even considering costs were much lower in those days.

At first the only fairway mowers consisted of a group of sheep. They were kept in a moveable pen, and moved about from spot to spot to keep the fairways mowed. Once in a while an errant golf shot would strike one of the sheep, who would then let out a loud howl or whatever sheep say when hit by a golf ball!

Legend has it that tin cans were used for the first golf cups. I've been trying to find someone who can remember if there even were such a thing as tin cans in 1899, but can't find anyone who can remember. At any rate it is a recorded statement from old files, and if not in fact tin cans, then I assume some other type of makeshift cup.

A ram head was adopted as the first club insignia, and you will note that a ram still appears in the revised present day insignia.

In those days most golfers used what were known as gutta percha golf ball. Apparently it was nothing like our

present day ball and would not go very far. I have an old news clipping which states that a drive of 50 yards was considered to have been the local record in 1899!

Since automobiles were not a mode of transport then, a popular way for most local golfers to reach the club was to hop on the old Detroit Interurban street car, which would its way along Packard Road between Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor.

During the early 1900's golf became a popular local pasttime and the membership rapidly increased, and the club was expanded from 3 holes to 6, and later to 9 holes.

SECOND STAGE OF CLUB HISTORY

In 1922 it was decided to expand the course to 18 holes. At that time Donald Ross was the most famous golf course designer in the world. He was persuaded to inspect the club while on a visit to Ann Arbor. After wlkng over the grounds he is reliably reported to have said "When God created this beautiful rolling land he must have intended it for a golf course."

In order to increase the course to 18 holes, additional land was needed. Developers of a nearby subdivision were persuaded to donate the needed land in order to increase the value of their lots. However, the deed contained what is known as a "reverter clause", that is if the land ever ceases to be used as a golf course, it will revert back to the donors or their heirs. Thus, unless this has been eliminated, care must be taken to see that this clause is not violated. As of a few years ago one of the original donors was still alive and in fact wrote this writer to inquire if the donated land was still being used as a golf course.

At about this same point in time the Washtenaw Women's Golf Association was formed and it occupies a prominent place in club history. Under the early leadership of Lynn Whitmire it became the strongest such organization in the state. One of its earlier achievements was to spearhead the forming of the Detroit District women's Golf Association.

They also pioneered the excellent Junior Program at Washtenaw, quickly copied, but never equaled, by other clubs in the Detroit area.

For many years Dee Cameron (sister of Lynn Whitmire) and Ruth McLain more or less took turns in winning the women's club title, running up a total of 13 or 14 wins each.

For years the gals had an annual Ruth and Dee day where they divided up into two teams to compete. However, Helen Bjournquist is presenting a modern day challenge to their record number of wins.

I don't think some of the men folks would like to admit it, but the women have done a great deal for them. One year when the club needed improvements, but did not have the cash to do them, the gals set out on a fund raising program. Bridge parties were held, a fashion show was held, a big raffle, and a really huge and super duper rummage sale. A lot of money was raised in all. Where did it go? MOST of it went for needed improvements in the men's locker room! I remember we had only one working shower at the time. Most of the remainder went to screen in the front dining porch (since glassed in).

In 1956 the gals came up with the idea of forming a Michigan Women's Senior Golf Association. Members from all private clubs were invited to attend an initial meeting, but few reservations came in and it looked like the idea would flop. However, on the day of the event, a huge crowd showed up, an organization was formed, and by the second year had a long waiting list. Mary Nelson of Washtenaw was elected the first president.

Somewhere in this recital it is only fair that I give my dear wife, Doris, her due credit. The original idea for the Junior Program and the Michigan Women's Senior organization were both her's. In fact the official booklet of the senior organization published annually gives her such credit.

In 1927 the first major golf tournament was held at the club, the Michigan Amateur Golf Championship. A record field participated, and some participants slept on club benches or elsewhere on the club grounds at night. There were many outstanding amateur golfers in the state at that time. Among these were John Malloy of Ann Arbor, a three time state champ, who was later the pro at the Ann Arbor Golf and Outing Club for many years. Another fine golfer of the time was Dave Ward, Big Rapids. Then I must not forget our own Dan T. Quirk, our best golfer in those days. Some said he had a swing much like that of Bobby Jones. I knew Dan well, played with him many times, and I know he could have become an even more outstanding golfer had he gotten really serious about his game. As it was, he made a fine showing before being eliminated in match play.

In 1929, the membership decided to build the present clubhouse. One of the things I best remember, was that in trying to locate a water supply, they struck a beautiful

flowing artesian well which served the clubs needs for many years. One of the worst mistakes they made in the design, was in facing the dining room to overlook the parking lot, rather than the golf course. This situation has since been remedied, and the original dining room now serves primarily as an overflow dining room and reception center.

What were known as mortgage bonds were sold to finance the erection of the clubhouse. Some of these were purchased by club members, but others were sold to investors not connected with the club.

Unfortunately, as some of you recall, and others have read, we had the great stock market crash in the fall of 1929, and the Depression of the early 1930's ensued.

The club found itself unable to pay off the mortgage bonds and by 1933 badly in debt and flat broke.

That brings us to the next portion of club history, but before proceeding to that I would like to state that I hope we can learn a lesson from history, and that we will never again get ourselves too deeply in debt.

THE WASHTENAW GOLF COMPANY

Many members lost interest in the club when it went broke, but a few decided to see what could be done to save the club as a local institution.

As the club was about to go into bankruptcy or receivership, the Federal Court in Detroit was approached. A plan was approved to form a new corporation, to be called the Washtenaw Golf Company. The mortgage bond holders held first right, and they were awarded shares in the new Washtenaw Golf Company based on the amount of the mortgage bonds each held.

Those to whom the club owed money were also awarded stock in the Washtenaw Golf Company, but in a lesser proportion to amount due than the bond holders.

The members themselves lost their membership entirely.

Nine directors were elected to head the Washtenaw Golf Company, and Joseph Thompson was elected president and held that post for 13 years, otherwise those of us who enjoy membership in the club today might not have had any club to enjoy. Personally, I have never felt he was ever given full credit for his work during those difficult years, and Joe was not even an active golfer!

It was decided when the golf company was formed in 1933 that the only feasible way to try to operate the club on a financially sound way, was on a semi-public basis. Persons who wished to buy a "season membership" (really a season ticket) could do so. However, public play would be allowed on a daily fee basis. Those who owned stock in the Washtenaw Golf Company and who bought a season membership were given a discount on the price.

The club not only operated in the black, but managed to buy in 12,000 shares of Washtenaw Golf Company stock to be held as treasury stock. The importance of this was that it laid the basis to make it much easier to convert back to a bona fide private club, as we shall see when we come to that portion of this document labeled Modern Club history.

Rumors began to fly in the 1940's that outside interests had an eye on the Washtenaw ~~situation~~ with a view to buying up the controlling interest in the Washtenaw Golf Company stock so that they might control and use the club for their own purposes. Remember, many of those who owned stock did not belong to the club and had little interest in what happened to it, and would merely like to sell their stock at a good price.

One rumor was that representatives of a certain popular former heavyweight boxing champion were eyeing the club. Had that rumor turned to fact, it is probable that membership would not have been available to the majority of local people.

A more well founded rumor was that certain gamblers from the Mt. Clemons area, where open gambling flourished at that time, were eyeing the club for the primary purpose of operating a gambling casino. However, it is said that when the local Circuit Judge of that time was approached to see if "arrangements" could be made to operate gambling, to his everlasting credit the dear deceased Judge said No Dice!.

I warned you at the outset that this history would turn a bit personal at times, and it was at this point in time that this writer first developed a deep interest in the financial affairs of the club.

I embarked on a program, almost single handedly, to buy up as much of the stock in the Washtenaw Golf Company which was held by non members of the club, as I could get my hands on. My idea was that since my resources were limited, as fast as I could buy the stock I would try to get it into the hands of the members. The incentive for them would be that ownership of 100 shares of stock would give them a discount on their season membership, as above explained, and in a few years the stock would pay for itself.

however, I reached a point where I had accumulated the golf company stock much faster than I could resell it, and I found myself in the unexpected position of being the largest stockholder in the company. With the purchase of one additional block of stock which was available at a low price, and with the co-operation of the second largest stockholder, we could have seized control of the company and operated it as we saw fit. However, that had not been my purpose in acquiring the stock.

In 1944 I was elected as a Director of the Washtenaw Golf Company. In 1945, I persuaded the other directors to give me a shot at a new plan to start the 1946 season, which if successful, would be a giant step toward getting back to a bona fide private club.

The idea was that if we could secure 300 members at \$75 each plus tax, it would give us revenue equal to what we had been obtaining on the semi-public basis of operation, and we would close the course to play of members and their guests only.

Some folks said we were crazy, that it could never be done. We had a deadline of April 1st to sign up 300 members. If we could not do so all deposits would be refunded and we would continue on the former semi-public basis of operation. By April 1st we not only had 300 members signed up and their dues paid, but we also had a waiting list of over 100 names and were refusing to add more names to the waiting list. The idea was mine, but I don't claim sole credit for it's success. I had the support of other Board members. Also, we had a membership drive committee of over 50 persons headed by Jim Hart. Helen Silkworth (Mrs. Jeff Silkworth) alone brought in 35 members!

A couple of years later the Board decided to go a step further. They would require each member to own at least 100 shares of golf company stock. There was some grumbling that this was a stock selling scheme, as this had not been a requirement of the 1946 plan. However, the idea was a good one, that every member should have a part ownership in the club. All members would not own equal shares, in fact some people who still owned stock would not be members, but would have a vote in what went on. Still -- it was one more step in the right direction.

In 1949, we had a week long celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the founding of the club. Different and interesting events were held each day. In my opinion this was the most outstanding even ever held at the Club. Bill Nelson was chairman of the event.

I'd like to tell you what we did each day, but space prevents such a detailed recital, so I'll mention the one day which was most interesting to me.

Four outstanding golfers were invited to play an exhibition round, two men, and two women. One was Al Watrous, well known pro at Oakland Hills, winner of many Michigan P.G.A. and Michigan Open Crowns, a former Canadian Open champion, and once runner up to Bobby Jones in the British Open. The second member was Sam Byrd, a colorful chap, a former New York Yankee baseball player who had succeeded Babe Ruth in the Yankee outfield, but who had turned golf pro and at the time was pro at Plum Hollow. The third member was Margaret Russell, the women's club champ at Oakland Hills, and the leading female golfer in the Detroit District at the time. The fourth member of the foursome was Shirley Spork, a young and up coming golfer who was a student at what is now Eastern Michigan at the time.

A huge gallery followed the play. Al Watrous had a fine 67. Sam Byrd had a 73. Margaret Russell had a creditable 81, but our local gal, Shirley Spork, set a course record of 74 for women which still stands to this day. I still have the official score card of that round. Shirley is now a well known women's golf pro. (There are some who say that her round of 74 has since been bettered, but I still regard it as the official women's record).

In 1951 Betty Jane Courtright won the Michigan Women's Amateur the first member from Washtenaw to become a state champion.

In 1955 we held our second major golf event at Washtenaw, the Michigan Open. Your's truly played in the event, but just for the fun of it, and not as a serious contender. I had the pleasure of being paired with two time Masters Champ, Horton Smith, for the first two rounds (at which time tourney officials told me it would be really nice if I would quit). Horton had reputation of being the world's best putter. He never missed any putt from under 10 feet those two rounds, and from 40 feet or so he just laid them up stiff to the cup. Horton, now deceased, was a great credit to the game of golf, and a fine gentleman (he had to be, to put up with me and be so nice for two rounds), Walter Burkemo, who was also the national P.G.A. champ around that time, won the event. Church Koscis, a well known name in Michigan amateur golf for many decades, and a college chum and classmate of mine, was low amateur.

Another very interesting project in the mid-1950's was the building of the present swimming pool. We had no assessment powers in those days, and we did not want to mortgage the

club heavily, so the problem was how to finance it. We came up with a plan where each member voluntarily loaned the club \$100 or more on a note. The idea was that starting the following year the member could redeem his note at the rate of 10% per year in trade at the club. To the credit of many members they never chose to redeem any portion of their note.

MODERN CLUB HISTORY

If I seem to cut this portion a bit short it is only because many of you are already familiar with some of the modern day history, and because I wanted to devote more space to the early and middle years.

In 1957, it was decided to eliminate the Washtenaw Golf Company to which I have devoted so much space, and to form a new club owned entirely by the members, and with each member having one vote.

This project took a lot of work, by a lot of people. The co-operation of the Washtenaw Golf Company was needed, and it was necessary to form a new group to take over from the golf company - Washtenaw Country Club No II so to speak.

By then, as previously related, all members held at least 100 shares of golf company stock. Those persons, why by then consisted of the majority, simply traded their 100 shares of stock in the golf company for one membership in the new Washtenaw Country Club. Those members who still held in excess of 100 shares of golf company stock, were paid in cash for the excess stock they held. Likewise, those persons who still owned stock in the golf company, but were not club members were paid in cash for their stock. If it had not been for the steps taken in prior years to get the majority of the stock into the hands of the membership, the plan would not have been feasible at all.

So once again we had a bona fide private country club! This had been a goal of mine since the early 1940's, and I am sure it had been the hope of others too.

A new regime took over. One member of the former board of the Washtenaw Golf Company had served eight terms, or 24 years. Another had served 21 years. Others, like myself, had gone on and off the golf company board as we felt our services were needed, and had served several three year terms. We had a need for some younger faces, fresh blood, bold minds, and new ideas.

Under recent regimes, many improvements have been made

Also a number of major improvements have been made to the clubhouse. A fine and much needed new equipment shed has been built. More recently the popular ~~an~~ half Way House and the tennis courts have been added.

This has been an abridged history of the club. I had enough material to make it several times as long, but wanted to make it readable at one sitting, and in fact cut down my original version several times before arriving at this end product.

I am very much aware that there are a number of persons whom I have not mentioned that deserve a spot in club history, but it was impossible to give everyone his due in such a condensed history.

I had discussed in a previous section the ~~elaborate~~ week long Golden Anniversary celebration that had been held in 1949. I guess few of us even paused to consider that 1974 was the 75th or Diamond Anniversary of the club, since it was founded in 1899!

This writer does not expect to be around for the 100th anniversary in 1999, but some of you who read this will be, and I hope you plan a glorious celebration.

Other than my own family, Washtenaw Country Club has been the focal point of my life.

I've enjoyed writing this history, and I hope some of you who read it will gain some enjoyment too.

Clark M. Greenstreet

Country Club and Golf Links, Ypsilanti, Mich.

