

## **THE VALUE OF KNOWING YOUR CLUB'S HISTORY**

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### **A STORY**

Ben and Bob were having a lively discussion concerning their favorite golf courses. Ben was of the minimalist school of course design and possessed a healthy sense of humor. Bob was an earth moving proponent and the totally serious type. Ben asked Bob how he liked the state's newest tract, Missing Links. Bob was quizzical, saying he had not heard of that one. Ben smiled, and said, "you know, the one with the small Donald Ross greens, the Nicklaus heroic carries on six holes over ponds, the St. Andrews pot bunkers, and the railroad ties lining all the waste areas." Bob still looked puzzled. "Come on, the course with the 756 yard, par 6 finishing hole" Ben chided. "Aah," Bob gasped, "you're talking about my course, Fishing Links! Yes, we've just completed a masterful renovation of our classic Seth Raynor design. It took our Green Committee four years to make all the improvements. You should come play it with me sometime." "Thanks," Ben replied, "but I have to get a tooth pulled."

### **THE MORAL**

Yes, the story may be fictitious, but the scenario may be all too familiar. Club presidents, green committee chairmen, and board members certainly are well intentioned, but face it, they haven't gone to school to learn golf course architecture, and they generally don't know much about agronomy either. They probably have played lots of famous golf courses, and to them, improving a golf course means making it harder or adding visual features they've seen elsewhere.

What is a superintendent to do against such forces? Know your club's history!

### **ADVANTAGES OF KNOWING YOUR CLUB'S HISTORY**

A well documented history of your golf course and its design can be a powerful tool against a wave of unwarranted changes. And, if a change is needed, say to solve a drainage problem, knowledge of the course history can avoid repeating old mistakes and assure that the change is consistent with what the original course architect intended. For example, increased cart traffic may make a wet area of the course a constant maintenance problem. An old picture may show that area of the course formerly had marsh grasses. Restoring those grasses will help keep cart traffic off the area. An utterly useless and architecturally inconsistent alternative – dredging the area to form a pond, also may be blocked if original course soil borings are available to show that the area consists of a constantly shifting peat bog.

Of course, serving as a counter balance to the forces of change is not the only reason to know your club's history. A club with a well documented heritage will find it easier to attract and retain loyal employees. And, maintaining that heritage and preserving the course architect's design can be goals used to motivate and inspire not only the green crew members but also all employees. Similarly, members who are made aware of the club's history may place a higher value on the course's conditioning, and thus be more conscientious in repairing ball marks, replacing divots, and raking bunkers. That, in turn, will translate into lower annual maintenance costs.

## **HOW TO FIND YOUR CLUB'S HISTORY**

If your club is fairly new, and if its architect is still live, contact the architect and request the original course design drawings. It is amazing how easily these drawings have disappeared from older clubs built in the 1920's and 1930's. For example, Alister MacKenzie is reputed to have drawn course routings and made sketches or watercolors of green complexes. However, but for a very few of the MacKenzie courses, these treasures have disappeared. Original course plans obviously are an invaluable resource in any renovation project.

Another useful source of historical information will be green committee and board minutes. These often provide a narrative of course changes, including the reasons behind those changes.

Photographs taken by members and employees also can be extremely helpful. They can establish original bunker locations, green shapes, fairway lines, and tree placements. For courses where tree trimming and cutting is resisted by some members, pictures can clearly document the encroachment of vegetation and show how the views and course playability can be improved by aggressive cutting. More importantly, pictures bring the club history to life. They can heighten interest if included in newsletters or if hung on clubhouse walls. In addition to still photos, do not be surprised to find home movies. Despite what some younger generation members may think, movies did not begin with the VCR. Old 8 mm and 16 mm films can be transferred to videotape or CD ROM and even restored or enhanced using computer graphics programs. Also, with computer video capture software, great still pictures often can be obtained from old films.

Interviews of older members and former employees can provide a wealth of historical information, too. Consider video taping or audio taping these interviews, or at least take extensive notes, to preserve the information. These interviews often lead to discovery of other course memorabilia, such as score cards, tournament programs, member rosters, flags, and tee markers. And, just because a member or employee is deceased, do not give up. Children and grandchildren often have vivid memories of their experiences with parents or grandparents at the club and usually will have an abundance of inherited photographs and movies.

Searches outside the club also may turn up valuable information. Cities, counties, or the Army Corps of Engineers may have aerial photographs. Beside contacting local government offices, you may contact either of the following federal agencies to determine whether the course ever has been photographed from the air: U.S. Geological Survey EROS Data Center, Customer Services, Sioux Falls, SD 57198; Tel. (605) 594-6151; [www.custserv.usgs.gov](http://www.custserv.usgs.gov); or National

Archives and Records Administration, Cartographic and Architectural Branch (NNSC), 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001; Tel. (301) 713-7040. The archives of local newspapers or books and magazines at the local library frequently yield important background. Most state or regional golf associations have had golf journals for years, and these are a good source of photographs and statistical data. The local register of deeds office also can provide interesting information about how the real estate for your course was assembled and who the original owners were. There also may be plat maps showing old roads and lot lines. Plat books from the early 1900's often include not only maps but also pictures of historic houses and prominent residents. For courses located in popular resort areas, old postcards may be an important source of information, too.

## **WHAT TO DO WITH HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

Preserve. Preserve. Preserve. Clubhouse fires are notorious for wiping out carefully compiled histories. Also, despite the memories of children and grandchildren (mentioned above), some records inevitably disappear whenever a member or employee dies. Thus, store important records in a fire proof safe or at a bank deposit box. Keep copies at the club, and make sure that a designated person, such as the club historian or secretary, is responsible for listing the items available and knowing their location. Better yet, transfer as much information as possible to CD ROM and keep multiple copies in different locations. Optimally, publish a book on your course's history that members and guests will be proud to purchase. Proceeds from sale of the book can help finance expenses of the historical study.

## **HOW TO USE YOUR CLUB'S HISTORY**

As stated earlier, a club's history can serve as a buffer against unwarranted course changes and also can foster improved employee morale and member participation. However, even the best compiled and documented history does no good sitting in a drawer. It must be used and reused. An annual historical presentation in connection with a club dinner or golf tournament can be an important way to communicate club history. Similarly, a presentation in the spring at an organizational meeting of club employees can promote enthusiasm and help set goals. In the interim, "snipits" of history, along with key photographs, that are included in the club newsletter can keep interest heightened throughout the year. Possibly of greatest importance, though, the club's history should be put firmly and frequently before the club's green committee and board of directors. The superintendent will be wise to incorporate key historical records into any operations or training manuals.

## **ENJOY**

Best of all, collecting the history of your course can be an enjoyable experience. Finding an old picture showing a unique feature of the course that has disappeared with time is like uncovering buried treasure. And, exchanging stories with colleagues about the old days is a great way to unite members and employees. Go digging!