

## The Roaring Twenties

# The Birth of the Mid-West Greenkeeper's Association

*Editor's Note: One article couldn't possibly do justice to 75 years of history. So, in honor of the Midwest's 75th anniversary, On Course presents a special decade-by-decade retrospective. This first installment examines the Association's founding and the personalities and events that colored its early years. Coming in May: the 1930s.*



*Two of America's doughboys prepare to return home from the war in Europe. On the right is the author's grandfather, Alfred Gurke.*



*The first 60 greenkeepers—a group that included one woman—gather at the Sylvania Country Club in Toledo, Ohio to found what today is the GCSAA.*

### **An Association is Born**

The 1920s were a time of great change worldwide. At the decade's onset, America was enjoying the spoils of victory, as the Great War was over and the victorious troops were coming home to enjoy the post-war boom. By the end of the decade, vast fortunes would be lost as the Stock Market crash of October 1929 sent America reeling into a Great Depression felt throughout the country and the world for the next 10 years. Between these two extremes of plenty and impoverishment, an event that has had an impact on every reader this publication serves—the founding of the Mid-West Greenkeeper's Association—took place on December 24, 1926. This historic date 75 years ago marked the birth of what we know today as the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents.

The story actually begins several months earlier, when, on September 13, 1926, a group of 60 greenkeepers convened at the Sylvania Country Club in Toledo, Ohio and formed the National Association of Greenkeepers of America (NAGA). At that first meeting of the NAGA, officers and directors were chosen to direct the affairs of the fledgling organization. Among these were Colonel John Morley, the association's founding father and first president, and John MacGregor, the greenkeeper of the Chicago Golf Club in Wheaton, Illinois. When Col. Morley asked John MacGregor to convene superintendents in his area for a meeting with the purpose of organizing the district, John and his family spent two weeks getting notices out (with the help of the Frazer Golf Yearbook) to the 500 clubs in the states of Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Indiana. Those 500 invitations attracted 16 interested men to the first meeting, held at the Great Northern Hotel at Jackson and Dearborn Streets in November 1926. Those 16 chose the organization's first officers and decided upon a name. President John MacGregor, vice-president Alex Binnie (Shoreacres), secretary Ed B. Dearie (Ridgemoor C.C. and Oak Park C.C. superintendent who later went on to a successful career in golf course architecture) and treasurer



*Our founding father and first president John MacGregor (L) celebrates his 75th birthday at Ravisloe C.C. in 1960. Next to Mr. MacGregor is another prominent figure in the world of golf who contributed substantially to our Association's growth—John Coghill.*

Fred Sherwood—all charter members of NAGA—along with their 12 comrades chose Mid-West Greenkeeper's Association (MWGA) to be our birth name, and planted the seeds from which our 700-member-plus organization has blossomed and flourished through these past 75 years.

**In the Morning,  
In the Evening,  
Ain't We Got Fun!**

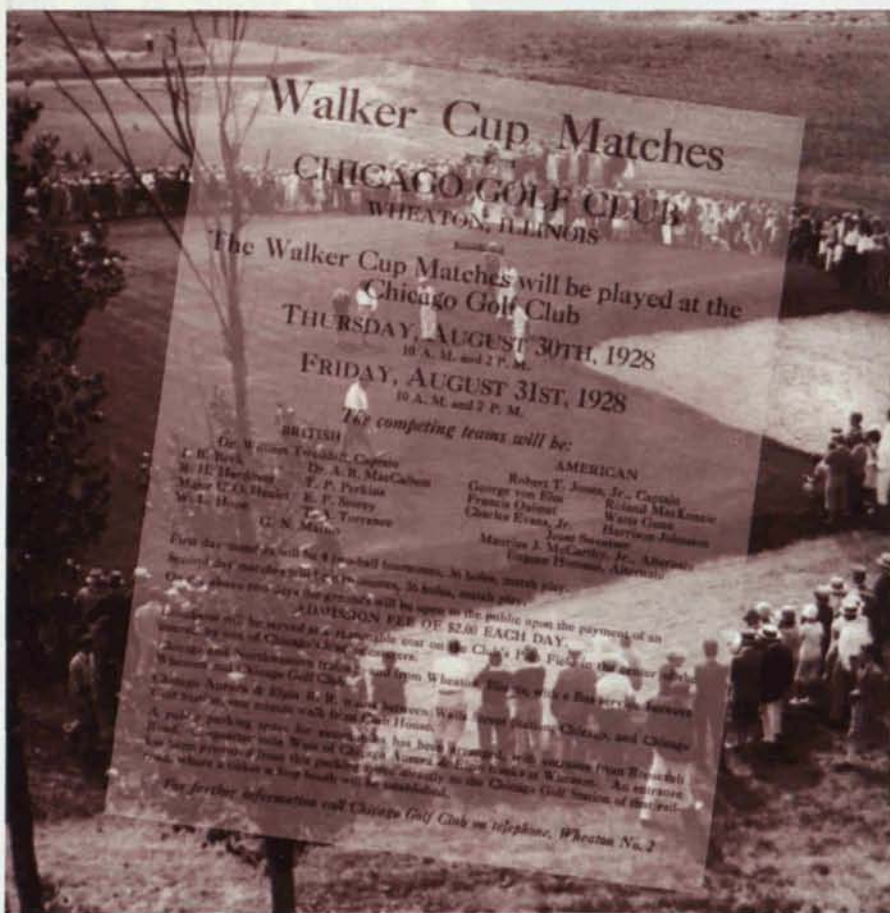
To understand why our profession's forefathers formed these two organizations at this particular time, it is important to know what was taking place in America and around the world. World War I had recently ended, and the brief economic boom that followed produced a nation starved for recreation. January 16, 1920 saw the enactment of Prohibition, which led many of America's law-abiding citizens to seek entertainment in speakeasies, where illegal liquor flowed and

flappers danced the nights away. Prohibition also led to the rise of organized crime syndicates in the country's big cities—most notorious of these being Al Capone's North Side gang in Chicago. After many years of intense lobbying, women now had the right to vote with the passing of the 19th Amendment. Four presidents held office during the '20s—Wilson, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover—while Americans were trading in their iceboxes for new electric Frigidaires and enjoying such new products as La Choy Chinese food, Good Humor ice cream suckers, Maxwell House coffee and Baby Ruth bars. Newly-formed Warner Brothers, Columbia Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer were delighting America with the likes of Mae West, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin; by the end of the decade, amazed moviegoers witnessed the first "talkies."

Professional sports were also becoming popular, as the first radio broadcasts of sporting events like as heavyweight prize fights and the World Series made household names of men such as Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney. Golf was among the sports to enjoy huge popularity in the '20s, thanks in large part to characters such as Walter Hagen, winner of four PGA championships (including the 1925 tournament at Olympia Fields C.C., which also hosted the 1928 U.S. Open) and two Western Opens; Gene Sarazen, winner of one U.S. Open (at Skokie Country Club in 1922) and two PGAs; and Bobby Jones, the amateur phenom from Georgia who, from 1920 to 1929, captured the imagination of a country with victories in three U.S. Opens (and second place in four others), four U.S. Amateurs and two British Opens, to name but a few. Jones also led the United States teams to Walker Cup victories throughout the decade, including an 11-1 drubbing of the British team at Chicago Golf Club in 1928 (Bob O' Link Golf Club also submitted

*(continued on page 22)*

*Golf was among the sports to enjoy huge popularity in the '20s, thanks in large part to characters such as Walter Hagen, Gene Sarazen and Bobby Jones.*



The 1928 Walker Cup matches at Chicago Golf Club featured Bobby Jones and Chick Evans, shown on the sixth green with opponents Major Hezlet and W.L. Hope. The American team went on to post an 11-1 victory over Britain.

a bid for the event, but was declined in favor of Chicago G.C.). The “Georgia Peach” culminated his mastery of the game by winning the newly-coined “Grand Slam” of golf in 1930, with victories in the U.S. Open and Amateur and the British Open and Amateur. Chicago-area clubs were popular stops for the young PGA tour, and several of our local club professionals were very successful in competition against formidable opponents like “The Haig” (Hagen) and “The Squire” (Sarazen). Throughout the ’20s, in addition to the U.S. Opens held locally, the Western Open made stops in our neck of the woods in 1920 (Olympia Fields C.C., where Glen View Club’s Jock Hutchison won), in 1924 at Calumet C.C., in 1927 at Olympia Fields and in 1928 at North Shore C.C. Other

local club pros of the era who made an impact on the world of golf included Tommy Armour, the “Silver Scot” from Medinah C.C., Johnny Revolta from Evanston C.C., Harry “Lighthouse” Cooper from Glen Oak C.C. and Horton Smith from Oak Park C.C.

Yes, golf was the sport of choice for the upper-class, and was now gaining popularity amongst the masses as well. No longer was a suntan the characteristic pock-mark of the working man—it was now the fashionable look of the man of leisure. The USGA finally approved steel-shafted clubs, which became widely available to golf’s new generation. What was lacking were playing venues, and the ’20s saw golf course construction reach astronomical heights—

(continued on page 24)

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especially in the Chicago area. Some of the great architects of the era—Donald Ross, Harry Colt, Charles Blair MacDonal, Charles Hugh Alison, William Boice Langford, Charles Maddox, Albert Warren Tillinghast and Tom Bendelow among them—provided the Midwest with some of its finest and most revered tracks during this decade. The list of area golf courses built during the '20s includes Barrington Hills C.C., Bartlett Hills G.C., Briarwood C.C., Bryn Mawr C.C., Butterfield C.C., Calumet C.C., Edgewood Valley C.C., Knollwood, Medinah C.C., Naperville C.C., Olympia Fields C.C. North Course, St. Charles C.C., Twin Orchard C.C., Sunset Ridge C.C., Shoreacres, Mission Hills C.C., North Shore C.C., Ruth Lake C.C., Silver Lake G.C. North Course, Kishwaukee C.C., Rolling Green G.C. and Villa Olivia G.C. Outside Chicagoland, courses the likes of Seminole, Winged Foot, Olympic Club, Firestone and Pebble Beach took shape. This wave of golf course openings paved the way for the little-known greenkeeper profession to organize and assert itself as one of the game's leading players.

### From the Ashes Rises the Phoenix

John Morley began his career as a vegetable farmer in his native England. Ohio's Youngstown Country Club hired Morley in 1913 to provide fresh vegetables for its new menu, a job that led to him becoming the greenkeeper of that club. He was later commissioned with the honorary rank of Colonel by the governor of Kentucky in 1930 when NAGA held its annual conference and show in Louisville. Col. Morley's directive to John MacGregor and the other charter NAGA members from the Midwest to organize the district was the spark that ignited the founding of our Association. The



When Lucky Lindy touched down in Paris on May 21, 1927, the door to traveling the globe opened to all.

founding fathers of the Mid-West Greenkeeper's Association, with MacGregor at the helm, received commission to arrange the first national convention of NAGA, which took place at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago in March 1927 (this would be the site of four future conferences). Some 80 greenkeepers from around the country came by rail and by road to the Windy City for the inaugural conference, and thanks to the hard work of our predecessors, the show was a great success. John MacGregor, the long-time superintendent of Chicago Golf Club, continued to lead the MWGA

until 1929, when vice president Alex Binnie from Shoreacres was elected to serve the now 90-plus membership.

The world was changing rapidly during our Association's infancy—the Scopes “Monkey Trial” resulted in a ban on teaching the theory of evolution in schools, Ford Motor Company started the 40-hour work week, 19-year-old Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel, Mickey Mouse made his debut in “Steamboat Willie” and Charles “Lucky Lindy” Lindbergh made the his-

toric first trans-Atlantic flight from New York to Paris. The golf maintenance business was changing too, with the debut of USGA's *The Bulletin of the Green Section* in 1921 (forerunner to today's *Green Section Record*) and the first use of a green-speed measuring device in 1929—a pendulum on a tripod called the Arnott Mechanical putter. It is ironic that many of the 1920s revolutionary innovations are still in use today, and many of the agronomic problems faced by greenkeepers back then remain the hot topics in seminars and roundtable discussions to this day. Newfangled power mowers made their debut, and crazy notions such as bentgrass fairways, irrigation systems and Milorganite as a substitute for manure were fodder for debate. Pressing issues discussed among greenkeepers included earthworms, moss on putting greens, brown patch disease, grubs, Japanese beetles, attracting birds to the golf course

and fairway topdressing. The Mid-West Greenkeeper's Association, under its strong and dedicated leadership, was poised to soar with the winds of these changing times.

**All Good Things Must Come to an End . . .**

The end of the '20s marked the end of America's idyllic mood. On October 29, 1929—Black Tuesday—the stock market collapsed, triggering the onset of the Great Depression. Even with this black cloud hanging over the country, golf continued its steady growth, as did the organization of which we are a proud part today. Did the Great Depression stop the growing game of golf in its tracks? How did the onset of World War II affect our industry? Find out the answers to these and other questions next month when Erwin McKone examines the '30s.



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