

The Thirties

Golf and the Midwest Greenkeeper's Association Weather the Great Depression

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 second installment examines the Association's first full decade and the personalities and events that shaped the Depression era. Coming in June: the 1940s.



In 1931, the Empire State Building formally opens with a ceremony including President Hoover. Construction of the skyscraper is hailed as a gesture of confidence during the Depression.

In the 1930s, the game of golf underwent significant change. These changes would not catapult the greenkeeper to the forefront, nor revolutionize golf-course conditioning. As the century progressed, course conditioning and the greenkeeper would play larger roles, but not until the game of golf had advanced beyond its infancy. Yet, even as America was about to enter one of the darker decades in its history, golf did not despair. The game of golf evolved for the better and continued to gain popularity despite the nation's failing economy.

The Great Depression was the reality check American people incurred as the roaring '20s came to an end. It put the tightest of chokeholds on the lifestyles and the abundances of the Roaring Twenties. With the price of goods increasing rapidly, Americans found themselves without life's basic necessities. Children starved to death and many suffered from malnutrition. In the rural areas, farmers were facing dust bowl and drought conditions. Those who were fortunate enough to face favorable growing conditions produced more commodities than could be sold.

Some aspects of American culture, however, seemed unscathed by the Depression. Hollywood flourished, Superman debuted and the Chicago Bears won the NFL's first championship against the Giants. It seems that people were looking to escape, however briefly, from the grim realities they now faced. Golf served as one vehicle that also provided some escape from the hardships people faced.

The Midwest Greenkeeper's Association was experiencing a flush of new members in the early '30s. Association meetings continued at clubs where the greenkeeper was a member. Members who did not golf would walk the course to observe conditions. Winter meetings took place at hotels in Chicago. Bimonthly golf get-togethers were highly competitive; everyone who played submitted scores for the Annual Tournament. The Association donated a cup that served as a trophy for the tournament. A player had to win the cup three times before it became his personal property. Anyone competing for the cup had to complete 36 holes the day of the tournament. The Annual Tournament always had a successful turnout.



In 1930, at the age of 28, Bobby Jones retired from competition after winning the Grand Slam of golf. In a single year he won the U.S. Open and U.S. Amateur and the British Open and British Amateur.

The Sherman Hotel in Chicago played host to the National Convention of 1933; it was the most successful convention yet. Its success was the rewarding result of very active committees. Ed Dearie was the general chairman and the Midwest received highest compliments for its hard work. The National Association of Greenkeepers of America (NAGA) was not immune from the disasters of the Great Depression, though. The NAGA lost its entire nest egg—some \$16,000—when a bank in Cleveland closed its doors.

The Great Depression had a severe impact on golf course construction, which came to a virtual standstill from 1932 until about 1952. During this period, the nation actually experienced a net loss in the number of courses in play. Some courses in Chicago appeared unaffected, though. Bryn Mawr Country Club started the

season of 1934 with a full membership roster and a waiting list.

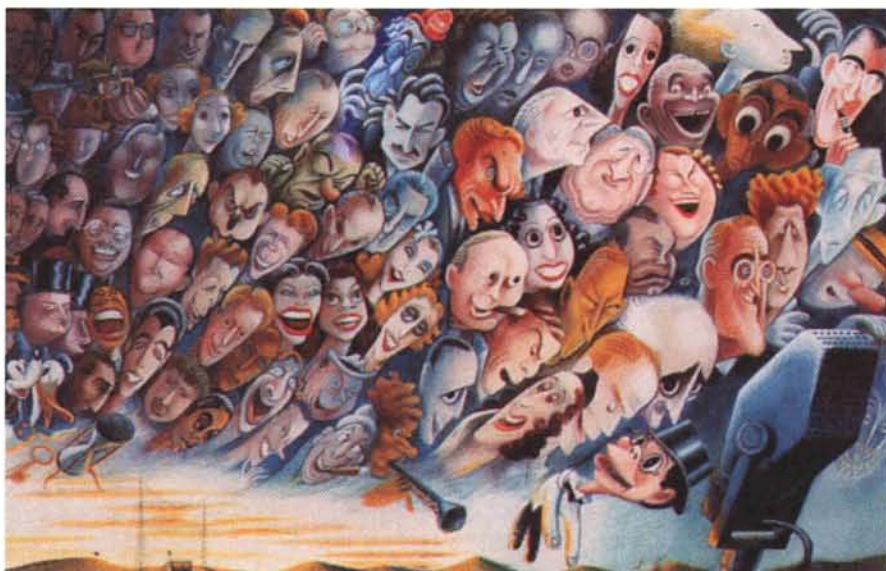
Meanwhile, LaGrange Country Club, Briargate Country Club and Northmoor Country Club had finalized construction plans for the installation of watering systems. The previous hot and dry summers had made apparent the need for water as insurance on their investment in turf and memberships. Sunset Ridge Country Club was also celebrating watered fairways.

Besides the hot, dry weather, why the trend toward irrigation? Several realistic irrigation options had come on the scene. By the 1930s, brass pop-up sprinkler heads were common. Brass was the material of choice due to its corrosion-resistance. Leading the pack with advancements in irrigation were two companies, Muellermist and Rainbird. The Muellermist Company formed when two brothers, Daniel and Bernard Wright of Chicago, combined their business with the Mueller Brass Company of Port Huron. In 1932, the Muellermist Company offered a complete underground system with a ball-drive pop-up head. The Rainbird

Company formed around the same time and patented the horizontal impact-drive sprinkler in 1934. This design had fewer moving parts than others, was less expensive and more dependable. One of the first customers of Rainbird was the Los Angeles Country Club.

Apparently, the early 1930s also marks the origin of the golf cart in the United States. The concept was born of a fellow who had a passion for golf but was encumbered by a wooden leg. He gained permission from his local club to develop a vehicle that he envisioned would let him traverse the course without bearing weight on his wooden leg. A Pasadena body shop was responsible for the creation of a three-wheeled vehicle complete with automatic steering and two speeds (one for forward and the other for reverse). A 12-volt battery powered each of the rear wheels; fastened to the front was a rack for toting golf clubs. The proliferation of the golf cart would have to wait, though, as the United States was about to concentrate its industrial efforts on machines of war.

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Radio comes of age, with an average of 6.6 soap operas a day, including "Our Gal Sunday" and "Search For Tomorrow." Other popular shows are "Burns and Allen," "The Jack Benny Show," "The Shadow" and "Captain Midnight."

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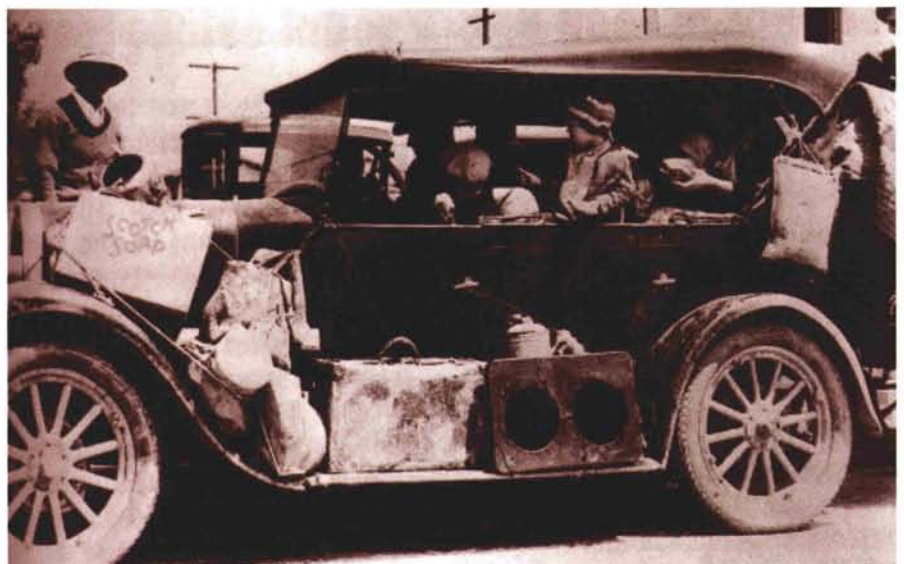
Although construction of new courses slowed considerably, new approaches in golf course architecture nonetheless emerged during the 1930s. One school of thought was to remove extraneous bunkers to reduce and streamline maintenance costs. The hallmark of this philosophy was the creation of Augusta National by Alister Mackenzie and Bobby Jones. Augusta revolutionized golf course architecture by incorporating strategic design. Augusta has few bunkers and other hazards to indicate the correct line of play. Jones and Mackenzie wanted a poorly planned or executed shot to leave a player in an extremely difficult position. They achieved this with greens (and correspondingly, pin positions) that the golfer could safely approach from only one angle. The 445-yard no. 11 two-shotter, and the beginning of "Amen Corner," is a prime example of the strategic philosophy.

Classic architecture did not disappear completely however. Colonial Country Club, Crystal Downs and a revision of Shinnecock Hills are all examples of outstanding courses designed in this era. The aforementioned courses would lie in obscurity for

several decades, though, before their appreciation as architectural masterpieces. Local courses that opened in the '30s include (but are not limited to) Kankakee Elks C.C., Orchard Hills C.C., Pistakee G.C., Pottawatomie G.C., Sportsman's C.C., Timber Trails G.C., Waveland G.C. and St. Andrews G.C..

In the meantime, a revolution was taking place in club technology that allowed for the success of strategic architectural design. Steel shafts were gaining popularity. Steel won its first major tournament, the U.S. Open in 1931, when Billy Burke defeated George Von Elm. Hickory would soon see its last major in 1936 at the U.S. Amateur.

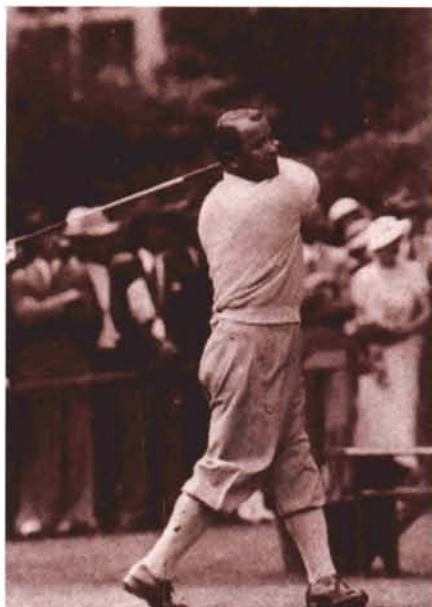
Steel shafts meant consistency and accuracy, which meant that clubs having similar specifications could now be purchased as a set. Clubs with steel shafts also possessed more precisely matching flex, weight and feel. Even the existing terminology for clubs would blow away on the winds of change. No longer would the golfer request his brassie, mashie, niblick, spoon, cleek, baffle, pitching niblick or mid-mashie.



The life of a migrant cotton worker and his family was difficult. Thousands made their way to California via the Southwest to escape the "Dust Bowl."

Numbers would designate the club; the term "wood" or "iron" would follow to complete the description. Moreover, club manufacturers began to make clubs specific for many different situations. It was common for a player to tote several dozen clubs around the golf course. In response, in 1938 the USGA decreed that 14 was the maximum number of clubs to be used in a round; the Royal and Ancient followed suit with a similar ruling a year later.

Steel-shafted clubs paved the way for the modern swing. Hickory's characteristic torque and twist prevented the oneness a player could feel with steel. Maintaining an extension of the left arm with the shaft of the club had dramatic results. No longer saddled with the whipping action of hickory, golfers did not have to depend on timing to square the clubface with the ball. Tempos slowed down, which resulted in a



Gene Sarazen in action.

more controlled shot. These changes allowed the swing to become more upright. Shots would now fly higher and more quickly, allowing golfers on American inland courses to hold shots to the green.

With the opening of Augusta National, the Masters tournament was born. Competing in the 1935 Masters, Gene Sarazen made a double-eagle on the par-5 no. 15 and subsequently, won the tournament. In addition to his on-course conquests, Sarazen contributed to the game with his writings and the invention of the modern sand wedge. Sarazen used to pal around with Howard Hughes and took flying lessons while living in Florida. (Hughes was also a good golfer, boasting about a 3-handicap.) As the story goes, Sarazen was on the runway one day; when he pulled the stick back and the tail went down and the nose went up, he had his "eureka" moment. Hitting out of the sand would never be the same.

The club of choice for playing a ball lying in a bunker used to be a regular niblick. A bunker shot would not be exploded out of the

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sand, but would be chipped instead. One couldn't explode a ball because the front edge of a niblick was sharp and would dig in. Sarazen contacted Wilson Sporting Goods Company, requesting several niblicks; he then purchased all the solder he could find in downtown New Port Richey. Remembering his takeoff and how the tail of the plane went down resulting in the airborne nose, he began to solder. Soldering a flange on the back of a niblick, and spending hundreds of hours practicing shots and adjusting the flange angle, provided a club that could explode the ball out of the sand because the flange would contact the sand first. Getting down from a bunker in two was a reality.

Sarazen's iron was not the first created for sand; it was actually the second sand iron. In 1932, the concave-faced wedge was banned. Bobby Jones had used the concave club to win the Grand Slam and four big tournaments in 1930. The problem with the concave face was that the ball was actually struck twice. When the USGA and Royal and Ancient discovered this, they barred the iron. At the time of Sarazen's invention, however, everyone was coming out with irons featuring flanges, so they couldn't ban Sarazen's club or they would have to ban all irons. Unfortunately for Sarazen, Wilson had some fine print on the contract that said all ideas were property of Wilson; hence, Sarazen never received a dime for his creation. Sarazen was also a victim of the market crash; the securities he purchased with winnings from the '20s were worthless in the '30s.

The upshot is, golf balls were being smacked all over the world and everyone was in on the action. The longest drive ever in a Major Championship occurred on the

Old Course's fifth hole in the 1933 British Open, as Craig Wood recorded a 430-yard drive. 1933 also saw the first corporate title sponsor of a professional tournament with the introduction of the Hershey Open. 1936 tour purses totaled \$100,000 and Horton Smith, the leading money winner, earned \$7,682. Women began turning professional; Helen Hicks was the first when she went to work for Wilson and its fine print. Women greats such as Patty Berg and Babe Zaharias became celebrities.




Al Capone was finally imprisoned, as tax dodger.

Golf balls themselves were changing. In 1931, the USGA parted with the Royal and Ancient's golf ball conforming standards. The new ball restrictions lowered the approved weight from 1.62 ounces to 1.55 ounces and increased the diameter from 1.62 inches to 1.68. The new ball was a failure; it would not hold its line in the wind. In 1932, the USGA changed the minimum weight back to the original 1.62 ounces but the diameter remained the same. The Royal and Ancient would maintain the 1.62/1.62 ruling, but the smaller ball eventually fell out of favor.

The '30s brought today's largest purveyor of golf balls, Titleist, into being. Phil Young, a decent amateur golfer and owner of a rubber-parts company, became frustrated at the erratic performance of his golf balls. With the help of a golfing partner who happened to be a dentist, Young set out to investigate the phenomenon. Upon X-ray examination, Young noticed the centers of golf balls to be out-of-round, improperly positioned and of varying size. Young and a fellow engineer devised a method of creating wound-rubber balls with consistently round, properly positioned centers. Titleist was born and golf balls joined steel shafts as items of consistency and precision.

Although the spirit of competition was intense even then, the format of events and tournaments was quite different in composition than today. The Western Open, held at Olympia Fields, conducted no qualifying event. Whoever cared to pay the nominal fee could tee it up. Some years, more than 250 hopefuls played away. The 1933 Western Open saw local Vincent Gebhardi fire a 13-over-par 83 the first round. He would be 1-under through six holes the second day when his game began to crumble. Gebhardi was approached on the seventh green by Lieutenant Frank McGillen and seven Chicago and Cook County police officers; they were there to serve an arrest warrant. The warrant was served to alias "Machine Gun Jack McGurn." McGurn was one of the gunmen who cut down the Moran gang on Capone's behalf in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. McGurn asked to finish the round, doubled the seventh, and took a seven-over-par 11 on no. 8. Machine Gun Jack missed the cut by 14 strokes, but he would be busy for the third round anyway.

The '30s were a tough time for many Americans, but golf never acknowledged the despair felt by the nation; instead, the sport endured. Yet during this decade, golf experienced changes that would characterize the game entering its modern era. Technology was changing the strategy behind and techniques of playing golf, while course conditioning was just beginning to see revolutions like the irrigation system. Stay tuned for next month's installment: an examination of the 1940s and America's entry into World War II. 

A Century of Golf, Tim Cronin
The Guinness Book of Golf, Smith and Mackie
The Architects of Golf, Cornish and Whitten
Golfdom magazine, January 2001 issue

Bull Sheet newsletter
2000 GCSAA Membership Directory and Source Book
Chicago Golf Club Diamond Jubilee publication
USGA Green Section Record, 1921-1929

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The History of the PGA, Al Barkow



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