

SUPER -N- SITE

Steven Biehl, Naperville Country Club

Golf Comes to Naperville



Steven Biehl and Tim Anderson

Golf was in its infancy in America in the early 1900's. Very few people knew about golf, and those who did recognized that chasing a little white ball seemed to be a foolish way to spend one's time. The British and Scottish players were still the best. So when the accomplished British players arrived in Boston for the 1913 U.S. Open at The Country Club, few people questioned what the outcome might be. The president of the USGA at that time, Robert Watson, was one who believed otherwise. He put up the entrance fee for Francis Ouimet, an unknown 20-year old and former caddy at The Country Club. Francis and his 10-year-old caddie, who had to skip school, succeeded to create a true David and Goliath story. The newspapers across America ran headlines about the event, Ouimet became something of a folk hero, and the landscape of golf in America began to change very rapidly.

The number of golfers tripled during the 10 years following Ouimet's victory. The game was transitioning to a recreation for the mainstream public rather than a social activity for America's elite. Golf had a fabulous boom in the 1920's, and began expanding from the golfing hubs of New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In his book, *Chicago Golf: The First One Hundred*

In the early days of the club, the fairways were cut with a gang mower pulled by a team of horses. A member would buy hoof sore horses from downtown Chicago at a discount, would work them on the soft ground at the club for a year. After the year was over, and the horse's hooves healed, he sold them back for more than he bought them for!



Years, author Tom Govedarica notes that "120 golf courses were laid out in Chicagoland in the 1920's, an average of one new course every month over the 10 year period." Included in that figure is the site of April's monthly meeting, Naperville Country Club, which is celebrating its 90th Anniversary this year. In addition to wandering the course at the meeting, I thought we could wander through the first 90 years of NCC.

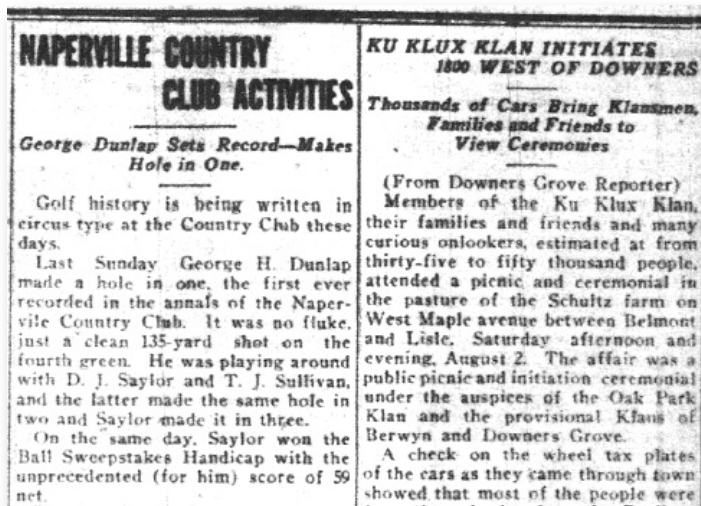
About the time Ouimet was making history, Naperville was laying the foundations that would lead to its popularity among the suburbs of Chicago. The pastoral prairie lifestyle enjoyed by the early families in the area during the mid-1800's, was begin-

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ning to give way to a faster pace of life. The city had made great improvements in the municipal services including water, sewer, sidewalks, paved roads, gas service, electrical service, and public schools. These improvements made an attractive location for homes and businesses.

Govedarica also points out that, the "Roaring 20's found Chicagoland residents eagerly joining the rest of the country in celebrating their newly found prosperity. An age of consumerism dawned, with shorter work hours being introduced and increased recreation time. Nightclubs flourished, Hollywood introduced talking pictures, and dances like the Charleston swept the country."

Naperville was not untouched by the 1920's spree of fast living and rumors about gang activity in the nearby farm country persisted into the 1950's. Stories were told of illegal hooch being stored in barns around Naperville and that Naperville's quarry was a dumping ground for illegal liquor when the Feds got too close for comfort. Even rumors of murdered gang member's bodies being weighted with concrete and deposited in the quarry's depths persisted until 1952 when the quarry was pumped into the adjacent river and revealed only its bare bottom.



In December of 1920, another rumor began to circulate in Naperville that a small group of local golfers had met to discuss the matter of establishing a golf course in Naperville. The group placed an ad in the Naperville Clarion inviting all interested golfers to attend a meeting at the City Hall to see what the support level would be. The turnout was very encouraging. After a lively discussion, several committees were formed to research pertinent areas including acquiring grounds, financing, memberships and timing. There was little debate on the timing. In January of 1921 Naperville Country Club was created. The next step for the ambitious group was acquiring land.

From Prairie to Playing Ground

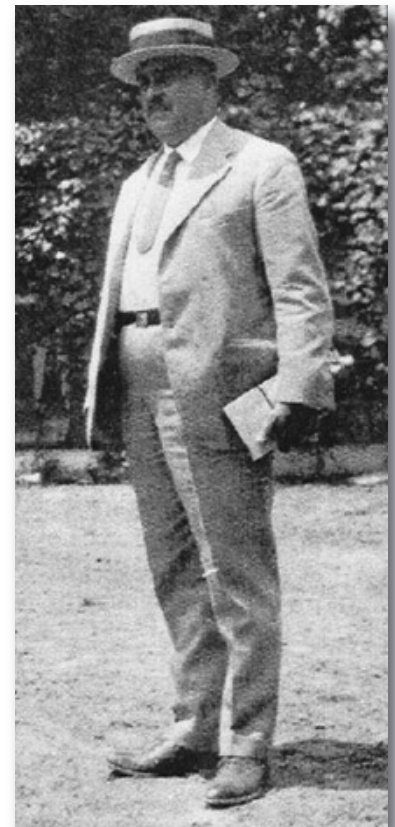
The Naper settlement was visited in 1834 by a traveler and businessman from Hyde Park, New York — a Captain Morris Sleight. When he came to Illinois he was, quite simply, overwhelmed by the beauty of the prairies adjacent to the Naper settlement. His letters to his wife, still in Hyde Park, NY, convey his adoration: "the first view of a Michigan Prairie is delightful after passing the oak openings and thick forest, but the view of an Illinois prairie is sublime. I may almost say awfully grand."

The first hole-in-one was recorded on August 10th, 1924 by George H. Dunlap. It was reported on the front page of the Naperville Clarion on August 14 next to the coverage of a Ku Klux Klan rally in Lisle that initiated 1800 new members.

In 1838 Mr. Sleight's wife, Harriet and their children joined him at their home in the Naper settlement. At the time of her arrival, her husband was functional as a farmer, sheep raiser, land trader and was serving as the first treasurer of the newly formed county government of DuPage. When the Naper settlement became incorporated in 1857 Mr. Sleight became a village trustee and in 1861 and 1862 served as the president of the city. It goes without saying that during Morris Sleight's twenty-eight years of residency in DuPage County he had become a financially and politically powerful individual. Morris Sleight died in 1863, leaving his holdings to his children. In 1864 Delcar Sleight, Morris's son, purchased the real estate holdings that had been inherited by the other heirs of Morris. The names of the streets that were eventually cut through the Sleight's subdivided city plots reflect his affection for his married siblings. They were Julia (Sleight) Loomis, Evelyn (Sleight) Brainard, Ida (Sleight) Wright and Delcar's son, Julian.

Prior to the Civil War, Jacob Brossman, a local farmer, purchased land that would become the site of Naperville Country Club. He paid the government \$1.25 an acre under the Homestead Act. The rolling hills with native Hawthorn and Black Cherry trees were not tillable, but Brossman intended to graze livestock. When the Burlington and Quincy Railroad came to Naperville, it bisected Brossman's land. After the railroad was in place the land proved to be too much strain for Brossman. Brossman sold the piece of land south of the tracks to Delcar Sleight in 1868 for \$1300.

Delcar Sleight's daughter, Delcara Sleight would inherit her father's land after his death in 1902 when she was only 9 months of age. The 130-acre plot that city residents referred to as the "top of the hill," originally owned by Jacob Brossman, would become the interest of the early organizers of the club in 1921. On February 14, 1921 the club purchased the land from



Tom Bendelow

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Delcara, who would be the club's first female member and later be referred to as "The First Lady" of Naperville Country Club, for \$19,500. Delcara was an accomplished golfer as well, winning the Aurora Women's Class A Tournament in 1932.

Early Golf at the Club

After securing land in February of 1921, progress was made toward organizing the club's business and preparing the land for a golf course. The original course consisted of 9 holes with sand greens, no bunkers, and fairway turf comprised of the previous pasture being cut to accommodate play. The original 9-hole course played to 3173 yards and was a par 37, with 3 par 5's, and 2 par 3's. The 9-hole course was only a temporary affair until a regulation course could be constructed. Plans for a full 18 holes were in the working stages throughout the first year the course was open. Then in March of 1922, a plan surfaced by Tom Bendelow for a full 18-hole course. The plan appeared in the window of Dieter & Getz Plumbing and Electrical Shop for the community to see. During the one day Bendelow was on the property, he created a plan for 18 holes with grass greens, a new location for the clubhouse, a railroad station, tennis courts, trap shooting, parking lot and a practice area. Bendelow's fee for the days work was \$30. Though no plan for the original 9 holes has been located, it is suspected those nine followed the same path as the first nine holes in the Bendelow plan. The par numbers for the first nine are identical to the original 9-hole scorecard and yardages vary from 50 yards shorter to 45 yards longer.

Golfers on the course around 1pm on August 26th, 1946 no doubt heard one of the worst train wrecks in U.S. history. A train headed for California sped around the Naperville curve, which is adjacent to the club's property, only to see a train stopped at the 5th Avenue station. The collision killed 46 passengers and injured over 100 others.



IS A GOLF COURSE POSSIBLE FOR NAPERVILLE

Project is Being Seriously Considered

Annually during the past ten years the possibility of having out a golf course for Naperville has been discussed more or less seriously. At first the subject received but scant attention but during the past two years it has received more serious consideration.

Formerly a golf course was considered to be a possibility only in large city communities but during the past five years the game has become popular everywhere and the establishment of golf courses has become a matter of general interest in smaller cities.

The idea that the game was a millionaire's pastime, which idea was the natural outgrowth of the elaborate layouts and high membership fees of the first clubs established, has given way to the proven fact that a course is possible which would provide all the pleasures of the game at a cost which was not prohibitive.

In Naperville there are quite a number of golf enthusiasts who are ready to get under a project which will provide a golf course in this vicinity. There are many others who will be boosters after they have had an opportunity to chase the so called "elusive pill" over a nine or eighteen hole course. It is said that the "golf bug" is a hard biter and when once the blood is inoculated there is no cure but "more golf."

It is true that a co-operative effort will be necessary to put over a golf club and course for Naperville. Mere planning and discussion is not sufficient to purchase acreage sufficient for a course and then keeping the course in condition. It will take some money and many members to make a go of the project. Here's hoping the plan will materialize in the near future.

STANGER

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By October of 1922, 4 greens had been grassed and a well had been drilled to produce over 100 gallons per minute, enough to supply all 18 greens when completed. In 1927 the much-anticipated 18 holes could be played.

Following 1927 the course remained largely unchanged for 40 years. The course had minimal fairway bunkering, sloping greens, very few trees and irrigation supplied only at the greens. The trees that were on the property were small hawthorns left over from the original pasture. The tennis courts and skeet shooting range from the Bendelow plan were never carried out.

In the late 20's membership numbers were nearing 170 and the club was doing well until the Depression hit. Nobody was immune to the crash of the stock market in 1929, and the 30's would prove a difficult time for the club. In 1932 only 35 members remained, and the days of Naperville Country Club were numbered. Delcara Sleight still held the mortgage on the property, which was in default for a long period of time, and filed a foreclosure proceeding and a sale date was set. Winfred G. Knoch, a member and judge in DuPage County, advised the members at a special meeting that issuing new bonds at \$100 apiece until the default is covered was the only option for saving the club. In a fortuitous three days the amount needed was raised, the mortgage paid off, and the club was saved. In 1953 the club granted Winfred G. Knoch an honorary Life Membership for his council.

The first major change to the golf course began to take shape in 1966 when the club decided to undertake the installation of an automated irrigation system for the tees and greens, and add irrigation in the fairways. These plans became more serious in May 1967 when the club requested the expertise of golf course architect David Gill. Gill drew a plan for the added irrigation as well as minor routing changes that were deemed necessary for the irrigation system.

After the Gill changes were completed in 1968, the course continued to have small improvements made. But most were of little consequence compared to what the club approved in 2005. The plan included the rerouting of 13 holes, reconstruction of all greens, tees and bunkers, new irrigation system, halfway house, maintenance facility, parking lots, and pond reconstruction. Work began on July 17, 2006. The front nine opened for play on June 30, 2007, with the back nine following on September 1. The grand opening celebration was May 3, 2008.

The Clubhouse

The original clubhouse was a small temporary structure, but had a "big porch" attributed to the tireless efforts of the women members. It was written in the Naperville Clarion, "The big porch is complete with swings, easy chairs, hanging baskets, victrolas, and everything the heart could desire. No matter how hot it is in Naperville, there is a cool breeze and a cool spot on the porch." Bendelow's plan from 1922 shows the temporary building sitting between the current first tee and fairway. The temporary structure remained in use until 1926 when the club began planning a permanent building, about the same time they planned to finish the final six holes on the course. The plans required that the temporary structure be moved

The Friday morning of May 6th, 1977 caught the grounds crew by surprise. The club was the victim of vandals who worked under the protection of darkness to cut down 32 trees around the golf course. The club offered \$1,000 for information leading to the conviction of the person involved, however the perpetrators were never apprehended.

approximately 300 feet to the east. The popular porch would remain, but now became enclosed, and a large fireplace would be included in the proposed lounge.

Little else is known about the improvements or modifications that were made to the clubhouse that was finished other than it was remodeled and enlarged no less than four times through 1947. Then, on February 27, 1948 shortly after midnight, a fire leveled the clubhouse to a pile of rubbish. Only a few metal lockers that were located in the basement were salvageable. All records of the club's business up to that point were lost. Almost immediately, the club was making plans for a new clubhouse. On May 15, 1949, the club held the grand opening of the new clubhouse with men's and ladies locker rooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. This building still exists as part of the current clubhouse, but is now masked by the additions that have taken place since. The cause of the fire was determined to be arson when three teens claimed they were testing a new fire extinguisher and the fire got out of hand. The three teens were released on bond, and then arrested again in relation to the thefts of 30 cars around Naperville. The three were sentenced to 1 to 4 years in prison for setting the fire. The only known historic relic to predate the fire is the sign that hangs over the cabinet outside the members grill.

Work has been done to the clubhouse on several occasions since then. Expansions were made in 1961, 1982, and finally in 1991 to bring the clubhouse to its current configuration.

The Pump

When Jacob Brossman sold the 130 acres of land to Delcar Sleight in 1868, Sleight had coveted the land to graze his extensive livestock. The land was perfect – rolling hills, never tilled, with only volunteer Hawthorns to impede his grazing herds. However, Brossman had never drilled a well to water his livestock and Sleight knew this was a must. In late spring 1869 he rode to his newly acquired property with the area's finest diviner. Within an hour Sleight had his site and the next day he began drilling. He ordered a windmill from Chicago and by June cattle and goats drank from the waters pumped by the gentle breezes. Delcar Sleight grazed and watered his herds on the property until his death in 1902. Later, Delcara rented the land to local farmers until it was purchased by Naperville Country Club.

The windmill remained until 1947 when it, deteriorated by age, was deemed unsafe and was dismantled. The Board of Directors saved the pump for the thirsty golfers. Until 1973

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it was the only source of drinking water on the course. The pump was located where the target fronting the Ash tree in the driving range now sits.

The Pump is the first object man put on this property to utilize the land's natural qualities. The well has since been filled, but the pump has been saved. Though it no longer provides water where it stands at the Halfway House, it remains a symbol of the club's bucolic past. -OC

The honey locust tree behind the first green is known as the Kennedy Tree. It was planted the morning of the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

NAPERVILLE COUNTRY CLUB			13
SCORE CARD			
Hole	Length Yards	Par	
1	433	5	
2	425	5	
3	385	4	
4	125	3	
5	555	5	
6	380	4	
7	365	4	
8	170	3	
9	335	4	
Total	3173	37	
LOCAL RULES			
Remember, these rules were made for your benefit. Please help things along by observing them.			
Never drive until players ahead are well out of the way (200 yards).			
Never make an approach shot while players are on the green.			
Always replace turf.			
Do not throw or stick flagpole in green—use care.			
Do not under any circumstances play stray shots from new greens—set ball off green not closer to green underplay.			
Do not lay golf bags on greens.			

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In 1928 the Burlington Railroad purchased five acres of the northern part of the course so the present third rail of track could be installed.

In September of 1936, while trying to film the inaugural run of the Burlington Zephyr high-speed train, a film crew lost control of their plane and crashed on the fifth fairway. All four passengers in the plane died.

NAPERVILLE COUNTRY CLUB

NAPERVILLE ILLINOIS

