

Golf course archaeology

Aspen Corp. treads carefully as it unearths a Tillinghast treasure

By Mark Leslie

One day a horseshoe jammed a trencher chain. Another day the work crew found perfectly preserved horseshoe and cart wheel tracks.

By the time Wyoming Valley Country Club in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., was renovated, its members had two things: a lesson in history, and what

USGA Regional Director Stan Zontek called "probably the most pure (A.W.) Tillinghast course in the country."

"This is a fascinating story. In 20 years with the USGA I've never quite come across a story like this," said Zontek, whom Wyoming Valley CC officials had called in to help

with turf problems.

"At the 3rd or 4th hole, under all the overgrowth, the changed bunkers and underbrush, I could see that the designer knew what he was doing. When I asked them who the architect was they said, 'Someone called Tillinghast.'"

Albert Warren Tillinghast, one of America's most revered golf course architects, left behind a legacy of fine creations when he died in 1942. One was Wyoming Valley, nine holes of which were built in 1896 by an unknown architect. They were remodeled when Tillinghast designed a new nine in 1924.

After his inspection, Zontek wrote to the club: "In all candor, this agronomist is excited with the potential your course has. I honestly do not believe the average member truly appreciates what kind of golf course your club has and how good it could become through a plan to basically put your course back to its original design and then to carry through a reasonable golf course maintenance program to improve turf quality and, once renovated, to maintain what you have.

"The end result (of renovation) could be a great, classic Tillinghast course..."

Greens Chairman Dr. Daniel Mazzocco then "got revved up," Zontek said, and began digging into history, into the club's archives, into its attic. And amidst his digging he found Tillinghast's original pen-and-ink drawings.

"I've never seen a Tillinghast drawing anywhere," Zontek said.

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— Stan Zontek, USGA agronomist

Wyoming Valley hired Aspen Corp. of Daniels, W.Va., which had experience in renovation work, to restore Tillinghast's famed deep bunkers.

Zontek had told them: "Many greenside bunkers need work. Specifically, some which are now grass need to have the sod removed and sand replaced. Other bunkers that have grown in over the years need to be edged back to their original design.

"The third stage of the bunker improvement work is more comprehensive. Over the years, a number of your sand bunkers have been so rebuilt that they are not even remotely similar to the way they were designed and the way they should be. Designwise, you should work toward essentially flat sand with grass banks extending down to this sand.

"The potential is there. It just takes the planning and commitment from the club to have a truly great golf course."

After research using the Tillinghast drawings and old parched-paper blueprints and

talking to long-time members, Aspen started the renovation in December 1989 by installing a drainage system. From April to August, Aspen crews worked 80 to 90 hours a week at some of the most precise work ever done on a golf course.

"It was like being an archaeologist, tracing things back layer by layer," said Ronnie Adkins, a certified golf course superintendent and vice president of Aspen Corp.

Buried under many feet of cinder ash, clay and sand, the bunkers were "preserved perfectly and in mint condition," Adkins said.

Dr. Mazzocco attributes the changes made in the bunkers to "some president 50 or 60 years ago who didn't like deep bunkers."

Adkins felt that during the Great Depression, club members decided they couldn't afford to maintain the course, particularly the deep-faced sand bunkers.

"So they filled the bunkers with one to four feet of cinder ash, covered that with six inches to two feet of clay to lessen the se-

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Photos courtesy of Aspen Corp.

An Aspen Corp. backhoe operator uses extraordinary care as he digs out a sand bunker at Wyoming Valley Country Club in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. The inset at top right shows the layers of sand, ash and soil that had been added to the original bunker when A.W. Tillinghast remodeled the original nine holes and added a new nine in 1924.

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verity of the original bunkers. Then sand was laid on that. More sand was added over the years, so that the bunkers had six inches to two feet of sand over the clay," said Adkins.

A few bunkers were altered or added over the years.

Knowing Tillinghast's bunkers were contiguous to the greens, the Aspen crew began the tedious work of feeling their way down into and away from the current bunkers.

"We removed all the sod. We knew existing bunkers most likely covered the original ones," Adkins said. "We removed the layers and found the coal ash had totally preserved the bunkers.

"It was like archaeologists. The original sand was there. The horse tracks and two-wheel cart tracks, too."

Aspen President Donnie Adkins said he or his brother Ronnie were always on site to make sure the operators "used as much precision as possible."

Probes were used to discover how deep each layer was before digging.

"We would probe two feet, then dig two inches at a time until we found the old sand," Donnie said.

The process was the same breadthwise as depthwise.

They used 580K backhoes equipped with three-foot-wide toothless buckets. The four-wheel-

drive machines with 18-foot extenders enabled the backhoes to work at each hole with minimal damage to the turf.

"We thought going in that we would work on three or four traps," said Donnie, but 55 to 60 of the 70 bunkers required renovation.

"We were very interested and excited by this project," said Donnie Adkins. "I enjoy renovation and reconstruction work. Now we're working on a Donald Ross course — Edgewood Country Club — in Pittsburgh."

The price tag for the Wyoming Valley project was more than \$350,000.

Was it worth it? "Essentially they have a brand

helped its members appreciate what they have."

Mazzocco, who "had to go to hell and back" to push the project through the board of directors, said: "Now they're all saying what a great idea it was. Aspen did a magnificent, incredible job.

"People come off the course and say, 'Awesome.'"

He added: "I'd say that now 95 percent of the members would say it was worth it. Actually, we got a bargain. Aspen had given us the \$350,000 quote two years before, and they stuck with that figure. Their concern was that this be done exactly the way Tillinghast designed it."

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