

# The Historic American Club Provides Perfect Setting for the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club



For those fortunate enough to ever have stayed at the American Club in Kohler, the experience likely was one never to be forgotten. In fact, that is how I have felt each time I have stayed in Wisconsin's only five star hotel. It is a great place to visit, to relax in and to experience service usually reserved for royalty. It is also a great place for an educational event like the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium.

Lots of features set the American Club apart from any other hotel I have visited. Foremost among them is the rich history of the place. Let me tell you what I have learned about it over the years.

Ed Kirchenwitz, sometime before I first spent a night there, told me stories of his personal experiences at The American Club as a result of growing up in the area. The thing I remember most was Ed's description of the bowling alley in the north end of the building which is now occupied by a restaurant. I was dumbfounded.

Former Wisconsin governor Walter Kohler Sr. (1929 - 1931) and Kohler Company president for 35 years came up with the idea of building a place for immigrant workers in the employment of the Kohler Company to live. The three story, 347-foot long building fit in perfectly with the quaint, tidy houses of the Village of Kohler, a community planned by the company.

Governor Kohler said this at the 1918 dedication of the new building: "The name American Club was decided upon as it was thought with high standards of living and clean, healthful recreation it would be a factor in inculcating in the men of



**The American Club on its dedication day, June 23, 1918. The impressive Tudor-style manor was created to serve as a first home in a new world for immigrant workers at Kohler Co.**



**The American Club® today. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is the Midwest's only AAA Five Diamond resort hotel. Internationally recognized for its resort amenities and an award winning conference site, The American Club offers 236 guest rooms and suites, and more than 21,000 square feet of meeting facilities.**

foreign antecedents a love for their adopted country...If this Club, besides providing suitable living conditions, be also an influence in the Americanization of the foreign born and serve as a stimulus for greater love of country and a desire for a higher citizenship then its purpose will have been achieved."

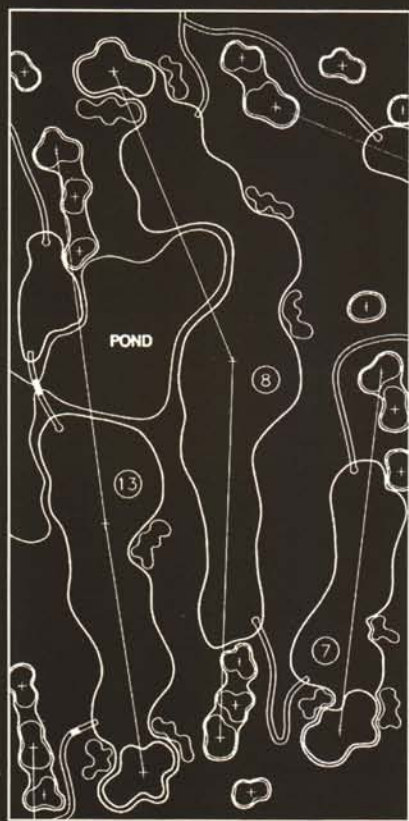
The red brick building, trimmed in white and roofed with green and purple slate, was built with 100 single bedrooms and 15 doubles. Each room was furnished. Lounge areas, reading rooms, a billiards room, a card room and that bowling

alley Ed Kirchenwitz told me about gave residents lots to choose from for leisure activities.

Residents of that time had the rare luxury of hot water and the best bathroom fixtures the Kohler Company could provide. Even today, the rooms of the American Club are a showcase for Kohler's finest products.

In 1918 a resident paid about a quarter of his salary for room and board - \$27.50 - a single room and three meals a day. There was a rule in the dining room like the one there was in the house I grew up in

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The Tap Room within The American Club (pictured circa 1924) was among the amenities available to the building's residents. Built in 1918 by Kohler Co. as a home for its immigrant workers, The American Club provided clean, comfortable lodging, and offered recreations such as bowling and billiards. The antique bar, pictured here, still serves customers in its new location at Kohler's Blackwolf Run golf course clubhouse.



The Horse & Plow, a casual pub with turn-of-the-century ambience, now occupies the space of the former Tap Room at The American Club. The restaurant serves luncheon and dinner daily. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, The American Club® is today an acclaimed resort and conference hotel providing world class services while maintaining the intimacy of a village Inn.

- "clean your plate. Nothing is wasted." The residents ate meals to the sound of a RCA Victrola playing John Phillip Sousa marches. Sousa, in fact, appeared in Kohler twice - 1919 and 1925 - to conduct the Kohler band over the noon hour in a concert on the American Club lawn!

A three-story wing was built on the north end of the American Club in 1924. This added 88 more single rooms and changed the mission to include providing rooms for women as well as men.

Big changes took place in our society between 1918 and 1940. In 1941 and 1942 the American Club was gutted and larger rooms were

built, each with its own bathroom and closets. Guests other than employees were accepted and the American Club evolved from an employee dormitory to a public accommodation. Among the many famous guests of that day was Carl Sandburg. Many do not realize that the great poet, historian, novelist, writer and reporter worked in Wisconsin cities like Sheboygan, Manitowoc and Milwaukee.

The old dining hall became the Wisconsin Room, the bowling alley was moved and the taproom was remodeled. Art work was added; foremost to my eyes were the portraits of famous Wisconsinites that



To its hundreds of immigrant residents, for whom The American Club® was originally built, the dining hall (pictured circa 1918) was a communal place. Hearty food in copious quantity was served family-style at the long refectory tables, and a Victrola played Sousa marches for mealtime entertainment.



The American Club's original dining hall has been transformed into the resort hotel's elegant Wisconsin Room restaurant, serving breakfast and dinner daily. Oak paneling, antique chandeliers and two large Wisconsin-theme tapestries commissioned for the room in the 1940s add to its historic flavor. Etched leaded glass panels above the French doors bear a John Ruskin quote favored by American Club founder, Walter J. Kohler, Sr.: "Life without labor is guilt, labor without art is brutality."

are still in the hallways for viewing. By the late seventies the interior again needed renovation. In 1978 the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in America and Herbert V. Kohler Jr. decided to transform the American Club into a hotel with national recognition. Great attention to detail was given. The overhaul was completed in 1981 and another

wing was added to provide more rooms. In 1993 a third wing was completed and the American Club celebrated its 75th anniversary. The number of rooms stood at 237 and 21,000 square feet of convention space was available to organizations like the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association and our Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium.

It would be difficult to find a better venue anywhere in the country than the one we have had in our backyard for many years.

If you didn't make it to Symposium last year, trust me and make certain you are there in November. And bring your spouse along; she'll love all that there is to do in Kohler, Sheboygan and the American Club. ♣