

Rochester Golf & Country Club: A Unique History

By Yvonne Hubmayr

Until 1915, the only golf facility in Rochester was a six-hole course called "Silver Creek Golf Club." The Silver Creek greens, according to Golf Course Superintendent and local golf historian, Jim Gardner, were "hand-trimmed circles" and "the groundscrew consisted of a flock of sheep and a few goats." Avid golfers, no doubt, longed for a more substantial yet consistent challenge.

Their longing was somewhat appeased in the fall of that year when Doctors E. S. Judd and D. C. Balfour bought 100 acres of farmland on the present site of Rochester Golf & Country Club to lease it for use as a golf course. The site was ideal for the purpose because it was close the city and it offered unusual elevations in a relatively flat landscape.

A group of those avid golfers took up the lease and formed an association. In September, 1915, Red Wing course professional, Harry Turple, came to Rochester to lay out a nine-hole golf course at the new site and the Rochester Golf Club was born. A. H. Andrews was hired as the club's first professional. In 1921, James Alves held that position and remained with the club throughout most of the twenties and into the thirties.

A windmill served as the clubhouse until a more substantial building could be erected. Improvements were made, over the years, with the voluntary labor of club members. In the April 27, 1920 edition of Mayo's *The Clinic Bulletin* for example, it was reported that about fifty men put in an eight-hour day leveling ground around the clubhouse, laying a stone driveway, constructing a 15 foot bunker and sodding teeing grounds. It was hard work but not hard enough to suppress the witticisms of certain members. *The Bulletin* reports, "Dr. Lyons is said to have had very good form with the shovel, but Dr. Judd

claims that Dr. Lyons has an advantage in coming from Joliet, Illinois where he must have received excellent training. The latest news says that most of the men have temporarily lost their interest in golf."

The Rochester Golf Club carried on the British tradition of naming each hole. The 9-hole course had names such as "Panorama," "Misery," "Pit-fall," and the 135-yard "Inspiration" which it certainly was to Doctor R. D. Mussey who hit the first hole-in-one of the course on that hole in September, 1922.

By 1926, a ballroom and kitchen had been added to the clubhouse but the members looked toward a more challenging golf facility. Around that time, the club had an incredible stroke of good luck when a Mayo Clinic physician married the daughter of noted golf architect, Albert Warren Tillinghast.

It was good luck for two reasons. Firstly, "Tillie" agreed to design the new 18-hole course for the fee of lifetime memberships for his daughter and son-in-law and, more importantly, he was one of the best golf architects of his era. He had already designed such prestigious courses as the San Francisco Golf Club (1915), the Hermitage C.C. (1916), Richmond, Va., Baltimore C.C. at Five Farms (1921), Baltusrol Golf Club (Upper and Lower, 1922), and Winged Foot Golf Club (1923). Other architects of his era may have designed more courses than he, but his have stood the test of time. At last count, in 1985, his courses had hosted 35 major championships—far more than his contemporary colleagues.

At Tillinghast's recommendation, an additional 35 acres on the east side of the course (the area which is now occupied by the fifteenth and sixteenth holes) was purchased. In the summer of 1926, Rochester Golf Club

became incorporated and changed its name to "Rochester Country Club." Construction began that fall and the course was opened the following summer.

Besides Tillinghast, there was another man who left his indelible stamp on the Rochester Golf & Country Club. Walter D. "Pop" Shelden, M.D. was one of the golf enthusiasts who took out the lease which began the club back in 1915. He became a club champion, winning the state seniors championship several times as well as the American Medical Association's tournament. But it was in Texas that he got the idea which left his mark on the club.

The Rochester course held some oaks and elms but was mostly open, so, when Pop Shelden played on a course near Texarkana which had been virtually cut out of a dense pine forest, he was highly impressed and the light bulb went on. As soon as you tee off at Rochester Golf & Country Club you will recognize Pop Shelden's indelible stamp!

In the early thirties, Pop Shelden bought 5,000 pine seedlings from the University of Minnesota for ten dollars, and started a nursery at the southwest corner of the course. It is estimated that his project grew in number to include 65,000 trees of which about 30,000 were transplanted to the course. Varieties also grew to include spruce, ash, birch, oak, walnut, poplar, flowering crab and flowering plum.

Pop Shelden drew up plans for the proper distribution of the trees and planted many of them with his own hands. Unfortunately, he died in 1946 (age 76) before he could see his project completed. If he could have heard U.S. Open Champion Ken Venturi's comment years later, he would have known his dream had been realized.

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Said Venturi, "How do you play this, Indian file?"

In 1947, the first Walter D. Shelden Memorial Invitational Tournament was held at Rochester Golf & Country Club to honor Pop Shelden's immense contribution to the club. It has been held annually every year since and has been won by such golfing champions as Howie Johnson, Wally Ulrich and Jack Fleck. The latter was a three-time Shelden winner who went on to beat Ben Hogan in the 1955 U.S. Open. A bronze commemorative plaque in the clubhouse foyer explains, "The Walter D. Shelden Memorial Tournament... was conveyed as an enduring tribute to Dr. Shelden's foresight and generous spirit."

In 1946, the same year as Shelden's death, the board approved the placement of a watering system. Drought conditions of the thirties had necessitated the cumbersome transportation of barrels of water to save the trees which Shelden had planted. A watering system seemed to be a reasonable improvement but it was expensive. The board solved that dilemma by installing slot machines (they were legal) in the clubhouse to help with the financing.

In 1962, a new clubhouse was opened but increased membership made renovations necessary within five years. The swimming pool was added in the fifties and paid for by members' contributions. The latest project updated and expanded the clubhouse just three years ago.

The golf course, itself, has remained fairly true to Tillinghast's original design. His plan had included the building of a lake between the ninth and tenth fairways. That lake was never built, but three years ago a lake was dug just east of the 17th hole. At the same time, an additional ten acres were purchased and two new holes were subsequently built. They are now ready for play and replace the old 13th and 14th holes. The lake will provide a water hazard for both. The land opened up by the closing of the

old holes will provide space for development options, the exact nature of which has yet to be decided.

Rochester Golf & C.C. has hosted the following Minnesota Golf Association amateur events: Men's Amateur Championship, 1930, 1956, 1970 and 1989; Men's Four-Ball Championship, 1979; Women's Match Play Amateur Championship, 1938 and 1962; Women's Stroke Play Amateur Championship, 1952 and 1976, and the Junior Girl's State Championship in 1985.

The 1967 Women's Trans-Mississippi was hosted by RGCC. USGA events include the 1993 U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur Championship and many local and sectional Men's U.S. Open qualifying.

On behalf of the staff at RGCC, we look forward to hosting the 1994 MGCSA Garske Scholarship Scramble.

Have a great game.

James D. Gardner

Golf Course Superintendent

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