

EARLY DEVELOPMENT of GOLF IN RENO

By

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In the year 1917 two important events occurred - the United States entered World War I and the first golf course in Reno, and undoubtedly in Nevada, was opened.

In the latter part of 1916 a Mrs. Gourtley Dunn Webb arrived in Reno, and not finding a golf course here she immediately set about organizing a club. On January 4, 1917, a news item stated:

Reno residents will soon be able to enjoy a few moments after business hours at golf, if the efforts of Mrs. Gourtley Dunn Webb, one of the country's best known golf experts, who is now in Reno, are successful. Mrs. Dunn Webb has gained considerable fame as a golf teacher for women. She came to Reno from Boston about a month ago, where she gained fame both as a player and a teacher of golf. She is the only woman professional golf player in America. She came to this country from England and is a descendant from a long line of noted English golf players. Her first teaching was done on the Princess Golf Club near London. Her mother was a teacher of golf, and her father, the late Thomas Dunn, was acknowledged the greatest golf teacher of his time. Her grandfather and grand-grandfather were golf teachers of note.

On January 10, 1917, the Reno Golf Club with H. M. Hoyt as president, George Spring Beyer as Secretary, and Dr. G. C. Stein Miller as Treasurer was organized at a meeting in the home of T. H. Rhoades.

Mrs. Gourtley Dunn Webb was appointed professional and given full authority to lay out a course and take full charge of the affairs of the club. Membership fees were set at \$20.00 for men and \$10.00 for women, and monthly dues were placed at \$2.00 for men and \$1.00 for women.

March 15, 1917 a news item stated:

Reno has a real live golf club with 60 members and possessing property which is being converted into one of the finest golf links in the country. The organization of the club has been under way for several months under the direction of Mrs. Gourtley Dunn Webb, expert professional golf teacher and one of the foremost golf authorities in the world. Under her guidance the proposition of organizing the club was taken up by several of the most prominent residents of the city, and in the course of 8 weeks nearly \$10,000.00 has been raised to purchase land and build a club house. Eighty acres of land near Moana Springs west of the street car track just before it makes the last turn before running to the Springs has been purchased from Louis Berrum, and the golf links are now being prepared. A five-room cottage is now on the place and will be used temporarily for a club house pending the securing of additional funds to erect a first-class building. The land selected for the links is mostly rolling meadow with some alfalfa and grain land.

Mrs. Gourtley Dunn Webb was not in Reno very long before she became known as just Nora Dunn.

A dance pavilion with lockers was completed, and on June 9, 1917, the Reno Golf Club was officially opened with 105 members, the bills all paid, and money in the bank. There was a big celebration and some 200 people, "many of them women," spent the day on the links. Motion pictures of the event were recorded by Hearst-Pathe motion picture representatives from San Francisco.

The official opening was the occasion for a patriotic demonstration. President Hoyt climbed to the top of the club house and raised an American flag while a phonograph played The Star Spangled Banner. Exhibition matches were played, and a Mrs. Faith, who is credited with being one of the ten best women golfers in the country, gave a creditable performance.

The Armistice in 1918 ended World War I, but the battle of the golfers and the little white ball went on; in January of 1918 they even painted the balls red and were playing in the snow. Cole Harwood was elected as the second president, and members were placed in four classes: life, regular, non-resident, and special. In the latter class were included school teachers and young women employed in offices. Special membership was placed at \$5.00 and the dues for special members at \$1.00 per month. The regular membership fee was placed at \$25.00 with dues at \$2.00 per month.

The street car track referred to in a previous paragraph was a street car line that ran down Virginia St. to California Ave. then west to Plumas St. and out Plumas St. to the intersection of what is now Plumas St. and Moana Lane, then went east to Moana Hot Springs. A golfer could ride the street car to the above intersection and then walk up a lane to the west for a couple hundred yards and be at the club house.

Plumas St. was the east boundary of the original course, the south boundary was what is now Moana Lane, the north boundary would be the north side of the present 13th hole, and the west boundary was the fence as it exists today. The present 13th hole is the same as it was originally, only then it was the 3rd hole; and when the club house was built on the hill where the present burned foundations are, the 3rd hole became the No. 1 hole.

I have been told that the first greens were clay; but when I started caddying there in 1922 all the greens were grass, and they were good greens. The present 11th and 13th greens are the same as on the original course, or at least they are in the same location. The fairways of the old course were not nice grass fairways as we now have but were a mixture of grass, weeds, stubble, rocks, and dirt. Mr. Hermann was the caretaker, and every Monday he would open the gates in the big ditch and flood the fairways the same as any farmer would irrigate. When the weeds and grass grew a little long he would get out the horse and the mower with the side sickle and mow them down. Mr. George Frey owned the adjoining ranch; and he ran a flock of sheep on the course, and this helped to keep the weeds and grass down.

It was almost impossible to play without a caddy because you would spend most of your time looking for your golf ball even if you kept it in the fairway. Caddy fees were \$.35 for nine holes; and a caddy had to be good at finding the ball, or he was not hired a second time. Most of the players gave you \$.50 for the nine holes, but some didn't, and when their car was spotted coming up the lane the caddies quickly disappeared.

Reno was the divorce capitol of the world; and it took six months to get a divorce, so some well known names played on the course. There were not many women players, but some like Mrs. Sam Platt and Margaret Fairchild (Mrs. Charlie Short) and of course Mrs. Dunn were good players. There were some divorcees that played; and although the caddies did not like to caddy for women, when these divorcees were good-looking they didn't have any trouble finding a caddy.

The game then was basically the same as it is now, except now the equipment is much better. The tees then were decomposed granite about 4 ft. x 6 ft. in size, and at each tee there was a two-compartment box with sand on one side and a bucket of water in the other. A player would put his hand in the water and then in the sand so that a pixie could be made to put the ball on. A company soon came out with the Manhattan Tee which was rubber and about 6" long with a riser at one end to put the ball on, which made teeing off much easier and cleaner. One big difference was in the dress of the players - on the old course the players were smartly dressed with the plus four golf knickers, argyle socks, and two-tone shoes.

A player did not ask for a No. 1 wood or a No. 2 or a No. 3 but asked for a Driver, Brassie or Spoon, or an iron such as a Driving Iron, Mid Iron, Mid Mashie, Mashie, Mashie Iron, Mashie Niblic, or a Niblic, and of course the Putter. There were other irons such as the Jigger, Sky Iron/Approaching Clique, etc. The favorite golf ball in the early twenties was the Spalding Kro-Flite which cost \$.75; others like the Dunlop cost \$1.00 and the Silver King, \$1.25, which was a lot of money at that time.

The green for the original 1st hole was on the north-west corner "of the present intersection of Plumas St. -and Moana Lane. If today one walked west from Plumas St. up Moana Lane for approximately 200 yards, on the right there is an old cottonwood tree; just north of this tree was the first club house of the Reno golf course.

The golf bug soon spread to other towns; and Fallen, Lovelock, and Carson City were having golf matches with each other and coming into Reno to play. The other towns did not have golf courses but something was improvised; in Fallen they had some holes laid out on an alkali flat. Elko and Ely were having matches, and even Panaca is mentioned.

In 1923 a loan was negotiated for \$13,000.00 to build a new club house, and on November 10, 1923. the following news item appeared:

On a little knoll adjacent to what is now the third hole on the Reno Golf Club Course, but which will shortly become the first tee, members of the golf club and their families tonight will dedicate the club's new home. The building is a modern club house of the country type, extending for a distance of 120 ft. in length while the depth averages 30 ft. It is located on a hill which permits of a view of virtually the entire nine holes. It is erected on a strong concrete and rock foundation, a stone terrace surrounding the building which faces east. There are seven rooms, the entrance has a lobby, and from this lobby one enters both the locker rooms and lounging hall which is 30 ft. x 40 ft. in size and takes in the entire south wing. A large brick fireplace occupies one end of the lounging room. There are two living rooms, one for the professional and one for the help. The club has its own water, having dug a well to the depth of 160 ft.

The locker rooms occupy the entire north wing, and expansion is provided for on both wings. The building not including the furnishings cost in the neighborhood of \$17,500.00 Fred DeLongchamps was the architect and J. Bernasconi the builder. The club's total investment with the links and building is close to \$40,000.00.

Two and a half years later, on June 3, 1926, at 4 o'clock in the morning a fire broke out and the club house was completely destroyed. Mr. Gus Williams and wife were caretakers, and they barely escaped with their lives. They lost everything including a valuable coach dog named Maggie. There was only \$13,500 worth of insurance on the building and \$2,000.00 on the furnishings, while the furnishings and fixtures were valued at over \$25,000.00. The members personal losses were estimated close to \$4500.00. Most of the members kept their clubs in the caddy house which was separate and was not burned. Workers from the Air-Mail Service saw the flames and saved the piano, some furniture, and a new electric phonograph recently acquired. Golf trophies valued at \$1,000.00 were lost.

This was a tough blow financially for the club, but the board of directors met immediately and made plans for rebuilding. It probably took some high financing, but money was raised and a new club house, on the same site and essentially the same design, was built and opened on New Year's Eve, 1926. The club struggled financially for the next few years until the depression, and in 1932 the directors decided to make it a public course with no dues and green fees of \$3.00 per month for individuals and \$4.00 for families, which included the use of the club house. Bert Cohen was appointed manager.

The club owed \$20,000.00 in mortgages and hoped, by making it a public course, to get out of debt and pay the interest on the mortgage. The depression was too much to fight, and the Reno Golf Club soon came to an end. On March 14, 1933, title to the club house and the 80-acre course was transferred to Harlan Heward.

Harlan Heward was an avid golfer and one of the early members of the Reno Golf Club. In my opinion, it was very fortunate that Mr. Heward became the owner because he wanted golf to continue, and I think that it was largely through his efforts that the county commissioners were persuaded to sponsor the building of the present Washoe County Golf Course. Washoe County owned all of the land north of the Reno Golf Club to Urban Road, which was then the airfield. Harlan Heward offered the county, at no expense, the land they needed from the old golf course, which was about 40 acres; with the land they owned and this gift they had only to purchase from a Mr. Ramelli 54 acres at \$100.00 per acre and work was begun on the present 18-hole course.

This was the time of the depression, and the federal government was anxious to be involved in projects. The government furnished all the labor and part of the materials; and on May 22, 1935, work was to start on the new course under FERA. On Sunday, October 11, 1936, the New Washoe County Golf Course was opened with 100 golfers playing 260 rounds from 6:00 A.M. until dark. The first golfer to tee off was George Turner from Reno. One thousand people visited the club house and course the first day. The 18 holes were designed by one of the outstanding golf architects of the country. Hand labor was employed almost exclusively in building the course, an average of 300 men being employed. The highest number of men in a given month was 700 and lowest 150.

The club house was 58 ft. long by 26 ft. wide. This club house with numerous remodelings was used until it was torndown and the present club house built in 1969•

Ken Johnson was hired as manager for the new course, and Charles Foley from Salt Lake City was hired as the professional. A Mr.Herman Fieldcutter from the Tahoe Tavern course was the greenskeeper,

It has been sixty years since the first golf course was opened in Reno, and during that time there have been very few professionals; Mrs. Dunn was the first, then Hut Martin who came in 1927 and was still there in 1935. When the Washoe County Course was opened, Charles Foley was appointed professional and stayed until 1941 when Hut Martin again became the pro and stayed until March 1949 when Pete Marich was appointed. There have been some other names mentioned by individuals but I have found no record of them as teaching professionals in connection with either course.

Golf has some historical significance in Reno. It was started the same year that the United States entered World War I, and it weathered one of our greatest depressions; and when you golfers are playing the 4th, 5th, 6th, or 7th holes you might stop for a moment and reflect on the thought that you are walking on the same ground that the emigrants on their way to California walked on; the same ground that the Donner Party trudged over heading for their destiny in the mountains; and the same ground that the first air-mail pilots took off on in their DeHaviland planes carrying the air-mail.

One cannot think of golf in Reno without thinking of Vin Burke. He was one of the early members of the Reno Golf Club and contributed many hours of his time to recruiting members and even contributed manual labor to the improvement of the course. As of this writing he is 82 years old and plays golf five days a week.

The golfer of today owes a lot to the Van Burkes and the Harlan Heward's and all these who gave so much of their time and money so that golf became a reality and survived in Reno; it was because of their enthusiasm and the love for the game that a beautiful eighteen-hole course emerged-The Washoe County Golf Course

