

*The past is a foreign country.  
They do things differently there.*

L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Significant elements of the historical record of the Indian River Golf Club, between its founding in 1921 as the Burt Lake Golf Club and 1960, have not survived the crush of one hundred years of living. Perhaps this is only as it should be. These were the generations that survived the Depression, World War II, and the Korean War, and who, nevertheless, created the modern America we know today. It would be fair to say they had other things on their minds.

Evidence for this book has been gathered from many sources: chats with members and staff; a review of the historical record archived in the club's safety deposit box, the Board of Directors' minutes and back issues of the much-missed community newspaper, the *Straitsland Resorter*; Internet searches that connected me with the grandson of the man who designed the 1924 course, Wilfrid Reid; as well as from serendipitous knocks on doors that led, for example, to meeting one of the

daughters of the original Greenskeeper, Carl Goerke.

History is always speaking to us, but we tend to be hard of hearing. What follows is what we know and, where necessary, what we imagine.



*View from the 9<sup>th</sup> tee (now 1<sup>st</sup> tee) over a small pond with a fountain. The tower of the original Methodist Episcopal Church can be seen in the center background. The 9<sup>th</sup> green was at the end of the fairway, near the present pump house. A second green was added on top of the hill to the left (lower half of current 1<sup>st</sup> green) in 1924 to create an 18<sup>th</sup> hole for golfers playing nine holes twice. The sign on the lower left reads: "Please do not play ball out of shrubs or flowers." c1930*

## **The Story of American Golf**

The occasion of the Indian River Golf Club's centennial asks us to look back one hundred years to honor the club's founding and to bring into critical view the events over the years which shaped the club we enjoy today. To appreciate the chronicle of these years, however, we need to peer a bit further back to the origins of golf and its beginnings in America.

The name of the most famous golf course in the world, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, projects two ideas about the game of golf, only one of which is wholly true.

First, golf clearly has its roots in an ancient past, long before selfies might help identify its origins with any specificity. While Holland and Scotland compete for the honor of being the birthplace of golf in the late 1500s, historians favor Scotland. In *The Story of American Golf*, the renowned golf writer, Herbert Warren Wind, dismisses the origins controversy by noting: “No one has ever tried to pin down the person who first writhed to a drum beat and became the world’s first dancer.”

Wind also puts his finger on the inexpressible reason why golf is so popular, regardless of its place of origin:

If you follow the theories of the romantic historians, then the first golfer was a shepherd – place him on a hillside in Greece, Palestine, or Scotland, as suits your taste – who was bored with his work. He started to swing his crook at stones, just to give himself something to do, and then, purely by accident, one of the stones disappeared into a hole and a strange tingling sensation raced up and down his spine.

Now for the second and misleading part of St Andrews’ name.

St Andrews was founded in 1754 under the name “The Society of St Andrews Golfers.” In 1834, King William IV became the club’s patron, and the phrase “Royal and Ancient” was added to the club’s name. The mythical past may conceal golf’s origins in the mists of time, but the original name of the “birthplace of golf” signifies that golf from its inception was a game for the people.

This fact is at the heart of why the game of golf took root in the 1890s in the United States, grew when Francis Quimet

shocked the professional golf world with his improbable victory as an amateur in the 1913 U.S. Open, blossomed with Walter Hagen's homebred showmanship through the 1920s, exploded with Bobbie Jones's Grand Slam in 1930, was sustained through the post-war period by the exploits of Sam Snead, Ben Hogan, and Byron Nelson, and then flowered in the 1960s with the arrival of television coverage of Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. Older than baseball, older than basketball, older than football, the game of golf we all love has been so thoroughly embraced by Americans that it deserves to be called our national sport.

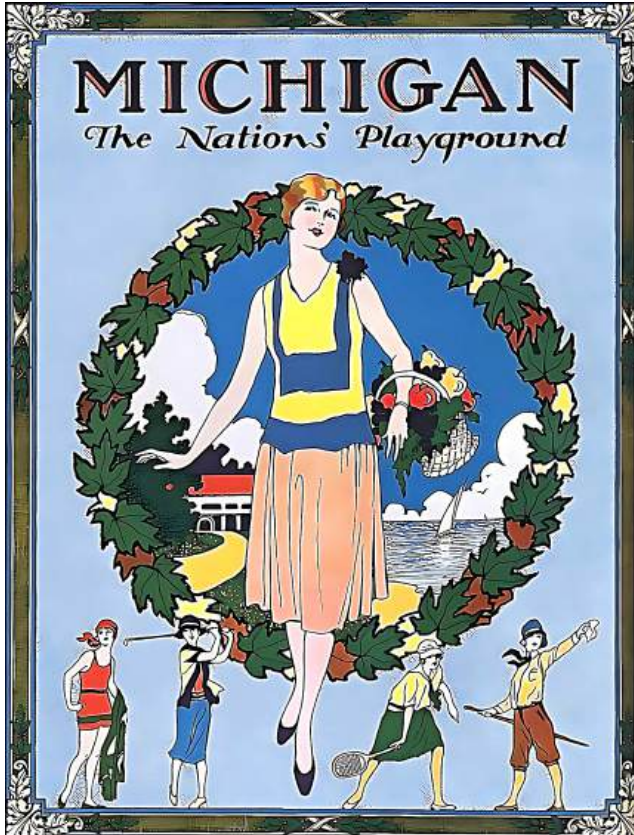
Golf may be a game for everyone, but golf is expensive. In America as elsewhere, it was initially a wealthy person's sport where social and cultural exclusion dictated club membership, and the most challenging courses were reserved for "Members and Guests Only."

Nevertheless, even the ultimate emblem of the private course, the caddy system, so richly satirized in the movie *Caddy Shack*, furthered democratization of the sport. The caddy system not only provided employment for children of working-class families, but it also became the means by which youngsters, such as Francis Quimet, Walter Hagen, and Gene Sarazen, whose parents could not afford to join a club, learned how to play and love the game.

Following the austerity of WWI, the American economy shifted into high gear, and the widened scope of prosperity buoyed leisure activities for all Americans. Between 1916 and 1923, the number of golf courses in the United States nearly tripled from 742 to 1,903.

In the 1920s, the Inland Lakes area was coming into its own as a resort destination as local communities sponsored bond initiatives to improve roads and bridges and extensions of rail routes made it easier to travel north. (In 1928, round trip by rail from Detroit to Indian River was \$15.46.) Whether summer resident or vacationer, men

and women were traveling north with their sticks and expecting to play golf when they arrived.



*1920s Michigan Travel Brochure*

Established in 1896, Harbor Point, Wequetonsing Golf Club, and Charlevoix Country Club share the distinction of being the oldest golf courses in the Inland Lakes area.

Other courses followed over the next two decades, and golfers in the Indian River area soon had their own courses: Topinabee Golf & Country Club (1921), Mullett Lake Golf Course (1921), Cheboygan Golf Club (1922), and the Burt Lake Golf Club (1921) as the Indian River Golf Course was originally named.

## The Age of Mud

To look back one hundred years to the beginning of the Indian River Golf Club, we also need to return to the age of mud, when automobile travel was the exception, and to a time in northern Michigan when horse-drawn carts were the main means of conveyance for both suitcases and vacationers arriving by train.



*Earl Frye delivering suitcases to the Columbus Beach Club. Frye's father, Joel, donated land to create the course, and Earl helped clear the land to build the 1923 course. c1910*

It is a time well remembered by Ed Bigelow, who wrote in his recollection titled "Bits and Pieces from the Good Old Daze" about first arriving in Indian River for the summer:

For this one-time native, and I suspect for many another, one scent and one sight are sufficient to evoke Columbus Beach anywhere on earth.

The scent is the clean smell of pine. Going north, you get your first whiff of it as you pass beyond

Clare. But only a whiff. Pine trees there may be all along the way. But the connoisseur will understand that the scent is never sensed to the full until one has left the highway in the village and come down the hill through the gate to the Beach.

To some degree, modern Indian River has lost this fragrant signature. Anyone, however, who sits on a northern deck in the fall will have probably experienced a squirrel sitting atop a nearby red pine tree, bombarding all below with shards of chewed pinecone. Pick up a piece of the pinecone. The scent is, as Bigelow recalled, delicious.

This essence of Indian River was captured perfectly in the club's original logo.

No records exist as to when the pine tree logo was adopted. The presence of the name "Indian River Golf Club" rather

than the club's original name, "The Burt Lake Golf Club," indicates that the logo was adopted at some point after the official change of the club's name in 1959. It was most probably adopted following the expansion of the course to eighteen holes in 1986.

The pine tree logo can still be seen on a sign at the intersection of Spruce Street and Hemlock Street. Like a lone sentry long left behind, still battling a forgotten war, it points one way to access the clubhouse located since 1957 in its present location on Chippewa Beach Road. It points the opposite way to access the maintenance buildings at the top of Spruce Street where the original clubhouse was located in 1923.





The pine tree logo captures something about the course that is worth thinking about carefully. While all golf courses are set in nature, and some like Pebble Beach or Augusta National can lay claim to breathtaking natural settings, the original nine holes of the Indian River Golf Club were carved out of the northern Michigan landscape, slowly, carefully, and even humbly, on what was once

pastureland for F.E. Martin's cows.

While the Columbus Beach Club's role in the golf club has diminished since the expansion of the course to eighteen holes in the 1980s, the ethic that engendered the founding of the golf course endures. It emanates from the landscape of rural northern Michigan and from the people who are drawn to live and vacation in what remains of the wilderness.

In his *The First 80 Years of Columbus Beach*, Austin McElroy expressed the nature of the course as well as anyone:

The golf course has provided a recreational facility that has contributed to the well-being of Columbus Beach and the entire community of Indian River.

McElroy might also have written that the course is a transactional gift -- that whoever sets foot on the course, stands on what other people made from the wilderness and implicitly inherits the obligation passed down to preserve it.

The survival and growth of the club is nothing less than a



northern Michigan success story. Somehow, the club survived the existential challenges of the Depression and World War II. It was then the beneficiary in 1956 of the outrage provoked by the original routing of I-75 which would have taken the interstate through the heart of Indian River and then northeast through the golf course property.

After years of struggle, by the middle of the 1960s, the club's gross income was still just \$10,500 with a net income of \$1,303 and a staff of three. Today, the Indian River Golf Club has an annual budget of over a million dollars, with a net income of just over \$100,000. The club now employs over 50 people, making it one of the largest employers in the area.

Regardless of profession or status, whether full member or daily-pay visitor, we are all beneficiaries of the vision and largess of the early residents of the Columbus Beach Club and the generosity and hard work of club members and staff over the years.

Their dedication has been motivated by three core principles: the natural beauty of the land on which the course sits, the financial and technical ability of its members to contend with the constant headwinds of financial challenges, and, most importantly and impressively, a persevering -- We'll-do-it-ourselves -- approach to preserving and improving the course.

What follows is the story of the Indian River Golf Club, its ups and downs, its challenges and successes, and the people who, despite great odds at times, kept alive "the best kept secret of the north" for the last one hundred years. The story will be told, as much as possible, from the perspective of the present to animate the personal, cultural, and economic forces still at play that affect the wellbeing of the club.

We need look no further afield than a neighboring golf course, the now defunct Little Traverse Bay Golf Club, to

understand that no golf course is guaranteed to thrive or survive. To do so, a club's membership must embrace the connection between themselves and the club.

Current and future members of the Indian River Golf Club must do what past members resolved to do. They must make their membership make a difference.

