

United States
president.
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by Bob Labbance

Tee for Two

Frank Kennedy's private golf course in Windsor was once a quiet retreat for a golfing president.

In the early years of golf in the United States, when the golf bug bit the upper crust of American society, many wealthy converts who had seen the venerable links of Scotland were dissatisfied with the courses that were formed in this country. They'd lobby club members to expand the layout and to spend more money on upkeep. When it didn't happen, they'd take their ball and tee, retreat to their estate and build their own course. There they could spend as much of their personal fortunes as

they wished to maintain the courses—and many did so lavishly—until the Depression brought that luxury to a halt.

In the modern era, the motivations for constructing personal courses are different. Today, the wealthy golf enthusiasts may not have time to travel to a club and play a five-hour round, may not want the public exposure or simply can't join the exclusive country club they want to. The result is simple—hire an architect to build from one to 45 holes in your backyard—and play

whenever you wish.

"These are people working on their games, to develop their skills," says golf course architect Ron Kirby. "The impetus is not prestige, it's the love of the game," notes fellow architect Rees Jones. And without public play, there's no need to be tied to the traditional concept of nine or 18 holes. "You can make one green play as if it's a number of different holes," says Brian Silva, who designed a par-3 hole with several approaches for one Winged Foot member. "I would kill for

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The personal course concept is not a new one in Vermont, in fact, some of the earliest courses in the state were built for the private use of their owners. By the turn of the century there were more than half-a-dozen private courses in use in the Green Mountains—some designed by the most famous golf course architects of their era.

Willie Park, Jr., two-time winner of the British Open, designed a nine-hole layout for Dr. Seward Webb at Shelburne Farms on Lake Champlain in 1895. Webb and his family had played to a single green

on his "golf court" during the previous summer, but Park plotted a full-length links that stretched over two miles. It was enjoyed by family and friends for nearly 50 years before falling victim to gasoline rationing during World War II.

Tom Bendelow of Chicago, designer of more than 400 layouts in the early years of American golf, visited the Billings Farm in Woodstock in 1899 and plotted a regulation nine-hole track for Mary Billings, the most avid player of the four Billings children. Scorecards were made, loving cups were engraved, lessons were given, tournaments were played, a golf house was constructed and the Beaver Brook Golf Links was played until interest died out around World War I. A second personal course in Woodstock at Togo Hill was owned by the Dana brothers, and featured an 18-hole putting course deemed Little St. Andrews.

Four personal courses in southern Vermont had a shorter life span. Rudyard Kipling enjoyed a personal course at Naulakha, his estate outside of Brattleboro, with play beginning in 1894 and continuing until Kipling abandoned life in Vermont two years later. Three gentlemen in the Bennington area laid courses on their estates in those same years, before pooling their resources and forming the Mt. Anthony Club in 1897.

In Windsor, another very early course was the centerpiece of the 300-acre Buena Vista estate, owned by Frank Kennedy. In 1895 Kennedy sold his Boston-based cracker company to National Biscuit (a business that would eventually become the multi-national Nabisco) and retire to Vermont as a wealthy, active young man. By the following summer he had installed nine greens, a total that would eventually rise along with interest in the playing of the game. "Eventually there were 15 greens with 18 holes—4,707 yards—bordered by the pond where the town swimming beach now is," noted the late Roger Maher, who was married to Kennedy's grand daughter.

Alice Frost, now in her 90s, is

the last survivor from the generation who remember playing on their grandfather's course. Despite the fact that the course didn't have the burden of public play "there were specific times for children to play," according to Martin Frost, Alice's son, "so she played golf very sporadically. Mostly she played tennis and rode horses."

"The course was cut by sheep in the 1890s," recalls Mrs. Frost. "Later on, it was all done manually and mechanically. Frank Kennedy did not play much himself, but was

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Today the lake is named in Kennedy's honor and is used as a public swimming area by residents of Windsor. Back then it was one of the main features of the golf course and several holes played along the water. "The first hole started from the gazebo overlooking the lake and Mount Ascutney," recalls Frost. "The course was quite hilly with numerous sand bunkers, and hedges were used as hazards at the sides and back of greens."

In the summers between 1913 and 1918 one of the most frequent visitors was president Woodrow Wilson, whose summer White House was just across the river in Cornish, New Hampshire. Wilson maintained an office in the Court House in Windsor, but he was more often found on Kennedy's golf course than at his desk. Although not the most proficient chief executive on the links, Wilson was the most avid, playing four or five times a week, year-round. The news of most of the crises during the Wilson presidency reached him while he was engaged in a game of golf, including the German sinking of the Lusitania and the declarations of war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Although Wilson also played at Woodstock and Hanover, he preferred the privacy he found at Buena Vista. "President Wilson came over at least once a week with two secret service agents, although he played alone," notes Frost. Roger Maher added: "Wilson arrived in his electric car, and his chauffeur had it charged at Windsor Electric Light Company (owned by Kennedy) while he played golf."

The local press found little to report while Wilson whiled away the summers on the links of the Upper Valley. One headline in the *Vermont Journal* simply read: President Wilson at Summer Capital-Spends Considerable Time Playing Golf. And, in July, 1913, the Windsor-based paper reported: "It has been pretty slim picking for the big newspapers as the President did little else than play golf, ride in his auto and attend church. He has done well as a golf player."

Wilson suffered a stroke in 1919 and his golfing career came to a close. Kennedy died in 1926 and the course grew smaller until it was abandoned completely in 1937. Today, the Kennedy family maintains a small parcel that was part of the magnificent complex. And presidents travel to other personal courses to enjoy a round in solitude.