

BURLINGTON'S GHOSTS OF GOLF

BY BOB LABBANCE

It happened in Montpelier, Barre, Hyde Park, Brattleboro, Sudbury, Arlington, Burlington, and about a dozen other towns in Vermont. A golf club sprung up, entertained golfers for as long as forty-five years, and then suddenly one year, disappeared forever.

To those who played these courses of the past, the fond golfing memories will linger for a lifetime.

In Burlington there were two layouts that preceded the Burlington Country Club by as much as thirty years. In the summer of 1897 Henry Holt, a publishing giant whose small family company became worldwide publisher Holt Rhinehart, hosted golfing play on his estate. Holt moved in the societal circles of the Astors, Vanderbilts, and Morgans, and visiting friends could play about on Fairholt, his wooded domain with westerly views to the Adirondacks, and Mt. Mansfield to the east.

Frederick Law Olmstead, the famed architect who planned Central Park in

New York had visited the Holt property in 1890. The design plans he left were artful, and their implementation a continuous process during the following decade. Yet it still took a fun loving Scot to impose a few golf holes, and in April of 1898, during a two-year residence in the Queen City, James Betts of Perth planned a short links. The previous year Betts had done the same in Rutland, helping to establish the Rutland Golf Club. The game was a rage during the summer of 1898 in Burlington, and it quickly became obvious that a more substantial course on additional acreage with an appropriate clubhouse was an immediate need.

On April 2, 1899, taking their name

from Native Americans who had inhabited the region, the Waubanakee Golf Club filed articles of association. The organization was "For the purpose of educating its members in all vigorous and healthful athletics and more especially in the promotion of the royal and ancient game of golf." Before the end of the month, Waubanakee was in full stride, with seventy-five dues-paying members. The Burlington Free Press announced, "The old links as first laid out running over the grounds of A.B. Buell and Henry Holt have been practically abandoned, and the enthusiasts of the club will swing the golf stick upon a leased tract of nearly forty acres just east of the Home for Destitute Children, and comprising a portion of the Pierson estate." Several miles from the Holt estate, the new site was on the east side of Shelburne Road. Today the Outlet Center, Ben Franklin's and WVNY TV 22 occupy the former golfing fields.

According to the Burlington Free Press on May 10, 1899 James Betts "was presented with a silver mug in appreciation of his services as chairman of the greens committee and his interest in the club. Mr Betts had charge of the laying out of the grounds, etc., and has done much to arouse an interest in golf in Burlington." The nine holes he staked measured 2746 yards with a bogey of 40, and in 1902 *Golf* magazine wrote, "The course is naturally somewhat level, but two ravines, one



The original clubhouse of the Waubunakee Golf Club circa 1900.

forty feet deep, form fine natural hazards for four holes; in addition to this there are several artificial hazards, including six bunkers." The layout served the club well, hosting four Vermont Amateur tournaments from the turn of the century until 1922. Today those ravines cradle the I-189 connector highway.

Architect W.R.B. Willcox designed a forty-eight-foot square clubhouse with a ten-foot wide veranda on all sides, and the grand opening was a gala affair attended by many of the Burlington elite on July 19, 1899. Though disguised by alteration and dwarfed by additions over the past century, the clubhouse still stands today. It now houses Bambino's sports bar, and the room closest to Shelburne Road is the original Waubunakee clubhouse. When the facility opened, the ceiling was finished with natural wood and the walls were covered with decorated burlap. Above the cooking fireplace was the club motto, "Welcome grave stranger to

our green retreat, Where health with exercise and freedom meets." Today the wooden walls are covered with mostly baseball, football, and hockey memorabilia, and above the fireplace is an old photograph of Fenway Park.

By the 1920s the membership had surpassed 200, and public play was riding a crest of popularity as well. Tennis courts, croquet, and rogue courts were in constant use. The nine-hole layout was rapidly becoming overcrowded, and Burlington's finer citizens felt the need for a better facility with up-to-date golf design over eighteen holes.

Originally they tried to purchase Oakledge, a lakeside property owned by the Webb family, for a golf and yacht club, but Dr. Webb's daughter, Mrs. Frederica Webb Jones refused to sell. Ironically, golf then returned to its

Burlington roots when Henry Holt sold part of Fairholt for the new country club. Donald Ross designed his double loop links course to encircle the core of Holt's property, and the house has remained separate from the golf club ever since. Today the original Fairholt house is the Edmundite Generalate, a



Sports enthusiasts still gather under the original roof line, but now for different reasons.

Newbury N Haverhill

Lincoln Basin