



# Survival *and* Revival

## *A century of golf in the Rutland region*

BY BILL NOBLE

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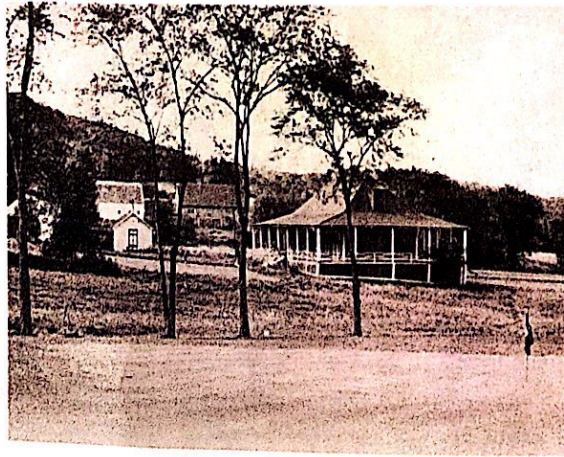
SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE the Wright Brothers made aviation history at Kitty Hawk, a group of visionaries of another kind got together in Rutland and laid out a casual three-hole golf course. It was 1896, and within 12 months this little group had blossomed to 34 players and had become the Rutland Golf Club. Land was leased west of town, and they opened a 1,807-yard, nine-hole golf course with a "bogey" of 38. By 1901, the membership had outgrown the facility, so they purchased the 400-acre Baxter farm north of Rutland and made plans for a new golf course.

At the turn of the century, golf was not widespread in Vermont. Outlying towns such as Poultney, Brandon, Proctor, Bomoseen, Sudbury and Pittsford had few people familiar with the game, and Rutland was where interest was centered. The club contacted George Low, a 26-year-old Scot who had tied for second in the 1899 U.S. Open at the Baltimore (Maryland) Country Club. Low had worked as teaching pro during summers at Ekwanok Country Club in Manchester, and with little prior experience, he agreed to design an initial nine holes on the Baxter farm.

The qualifications for golf course architects in 1901 were not stringent. Those who played the game well and understood its underlying philosophy fit the bill. In this capacity, George Low was certainly qualified, and on July 1, 1901, the Rutland Herald reported that "as soon as the farm crops are harvested, Mr. Low will take a plan of the grounds and will work out the course to be covered by the new links."

Within a year, the club became known as the Rutland

Country Club. It had nine new holes on fairly flat ground, and it joined with five other clubs to establish the Vermont Golf Association. The word "golf" was spreading around the Rutland area, and the call was heeded in Sudbury, approximately a dozen miles northwest.



*Left: Pico Mountain forms part of the scenic backdrop at the Rutland Country Club.*

*Above: Hyde Manor Golf Club, circa 1908.*

There stood Hyde Manor, a hotel-resort that offered hundreds of acres of woodland and meadow. Hyde Manor dated from 1865 and billed itself as "the perfect resort for families and children." By the time golf had found its way to Rutland, a member of the fourth generation of the Hyde family—James Hyde—was running the hotel. Guests came from all over the east, sometimes spending entire summers at the hotel, and James

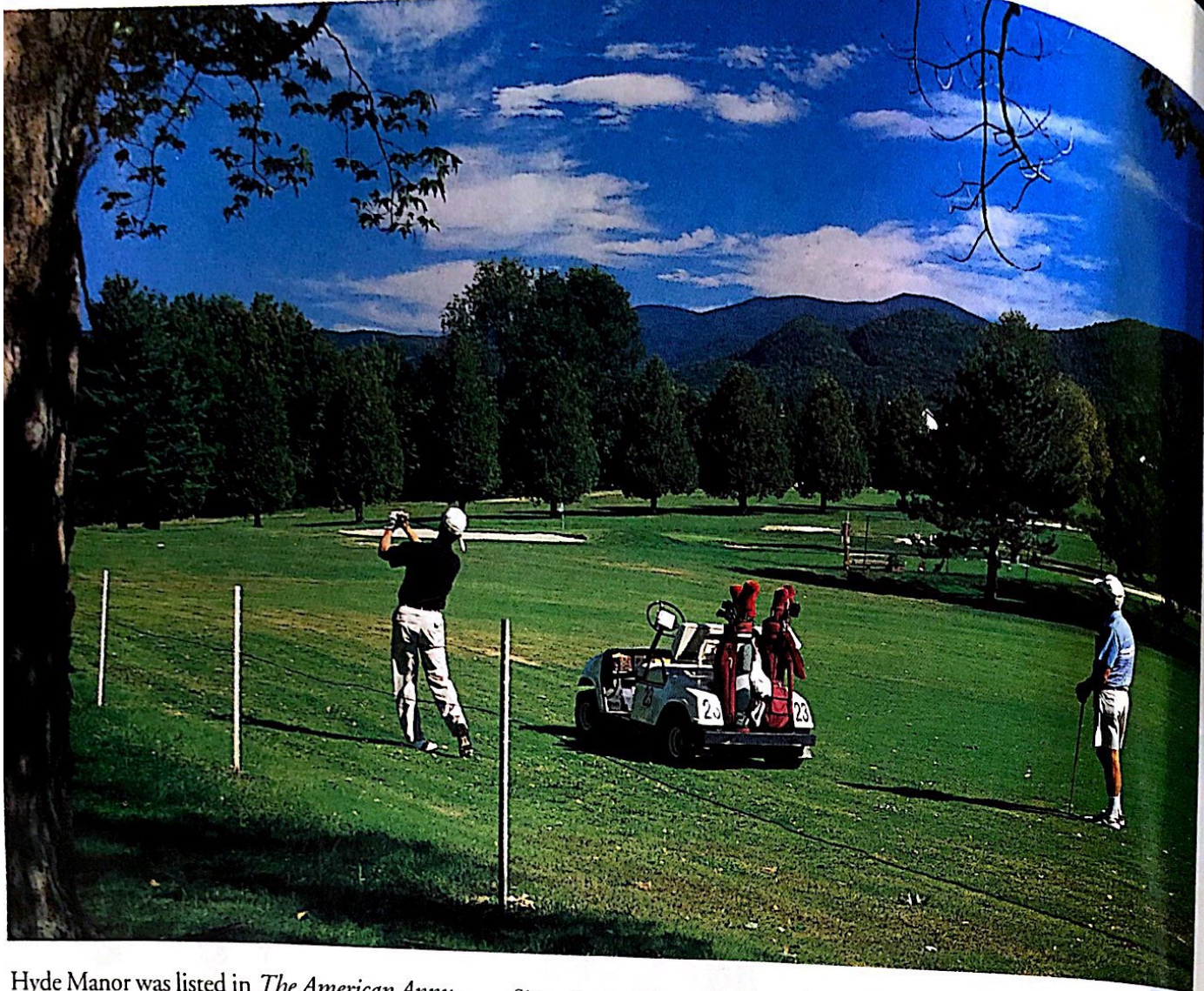
Hyde decided he needed a golf course.

In 1908, he opened a nine-hole course across the road from the hotel. At 3,011 yards, it was longer than most, and the Lemon Fair River flowed along its westerly side. "There was also Uncle Henry's Spring," remembered Bill Steele, who caddied there more than 60 years ago. "It bubbles up and is still used for drinking water."

Uncle Henry's Spring feeds a small brook that meandered through the golf course and gave it character. Bill Steele also recalled a golf house with a porch all around, probably 30 feet square. "The course was well groomed," Steele said. "People were always working on it. It was pretty open, but there were some trees, and they were big ones."

Hyde Manor appealed to Rutland-area families as well as to visitors from far away. "Important people would come," Steele said, "and they would stay all summer. There was everything here for the guests." By 1920, the course at





Hyde Manor was listed in *The American Annual Golf Guide*. A professional, Thomas Linsey, was on staff, and the green fees were \$1 per day.

To the east of Hyde Manor and about 18 miles north of Rutland, people in Brandon also felt the itch to play. On October 4, 1926, articles of association for the Brandon Country Club were filed. Land was leased from Frank Lord, also a member of the new club's board, for \$375 per year plus taxes, and shares of stock were offered to the public. Within a short time, the club had \$10,000 to pay for design and development.

Play began in 1928, and a golf boom, of sorts, seemed to be developing in the Rutland area. The Brandon Country Club course was flat, true to the farmland it once was, but play was active and enthusiastic. A clubhouse was built in 1930, and in a local history it's stated that "a Ladies Association was formed which raised money for furnishing the clubhouse and providing facilities for 100 guests."

At about the same time, and only a few miles south of Brandon, the Proctor-Pittsford Country Club was moving from idea to drawing board to actual development. Redfield Proctor, son of the founder of the Vermont Marble Com-

*Since its expansion to eighteen holes, Proctor-Pittsford has become one of the most popular destinations for local golfers.*

pany in nearby Proctor, and several others incorporated the club in 1928 and made several farmland purchases. Henry Collin, one of the original founders and chief engineer at Vermont Marble, offered to design and develop the course, and he went at it with horses and hand-tilling labor. In his early history of the club, F. Ray Keyser Jr. writes: "A great deal of work [on the course] was done over the years by members to pay dues . . . it brings new meaning to the dedication of golfers to their sport."

By 1930, there were about 150 members at Proctor-Pittsford, many of them employed or associated with the Vermont Marble Company. A dues and greens fee structure had been established and money was borrowed from Proctor Trust Company to complete golf-course construction. Within a year, a course superintendent, Joseph Graney from Hoosic Falls, New York, had been hired (he was to work as golf pro on the weekends), a clubhouse had been built and play had begun. With minor exceptions, the original nine holes remained intact for almost half a century, and the Vermont Marble Company connection never wavered.

All this time, the Rutland Country Club, at the epicenter of the area's golf boom, kept developing. Almost two



decades before the Brandon and Proctor-Pittsford clubs were organized, Rutland had hired the area's first full-time greenkeeper (Herb Gillam in 1910), and a decade later, the club hired its first full-time golf professional (Thomas Reilly). Then, in 1927, Rutland Country Club decided to expand, and with 40 day laborers recruited from town, nine new holes, designed by noted golf architect Wayne Stiles, were created. On May 1, 1928, Rutland Country Club officially opened as the area's only 18-hole golf course (and one of only four 18-hole courses in Vermont). At the same time, Rutland hired professional Jim Murray, destined to become one of Vermont's most respected golf teachers.

By 1930, yet another golf club opened in the Rutland region at Lake St. Catherine near Poultney, about a dozen miles southwest. Farmland had been purchased near the lake, and a few local residents along with summer cottage owners decided it was time to develop a golf course. Bob Hicks, a longtime member and nephew of Frank Hicks, one of the club founders, admits the history is a bit sketchy. "I don't know if there was any official design of the course," he said, "but people in Poultney and Granville [New York] bought the farm and worked it out. We still have the same greens and tees as on the original course, though the holes have been changed around."

Frank Hicks lived in Granville, and he could devote time and attention to the new course. Along with Mike Hayes, another local resident, Hicks developed and steered the Lake St. Catherine Country Club through the 1930s. He served as President and Hayes served as golf course superintendent. "These two gents did most of the work on the course," Bob Hicks said.

But it wasn't easy. During the 1930s there were but 70 to 80 club members, no golf professional and modest—at best—course maintenance. "I remember Uncle Frank and Mike Hayes," Bob Hicks recounted. "They would go down the fairway and get rocks out by burning them with something that looked like a flame thrower. They'd get the rocks so hot they'd crack and then they could remove them."

The 1930s, however, was a time of struggle for most courses in the Rutland region. The Depression reduced membership at Brandon, Proctor-Pittsford and Lake St.

Catherine, and for several years the courses teetered on the edge of oblivion. Then came the start of World War II. Proctor-Pittsford's membership dropped to less than 100, though

continued support from the Vermont Marble Company kept it going. But Brandon wasn't so fortunate; in the town's history, it is stated that while the country club was one of Brandon's most outstanding recreational attractions, the "war years intervened and foreclosure was completed December 31, 1943."

Lake St. Catherine, though, remained open, even as the summer cottage population

dwindled. The course, stretching approximately 2,700 yards, had limited play, but its relative openness and gentle rolling terrain made it fairly easy to maintain.

Rutland Country Club continued its prestigious ways through the 1930s and 1940s. It boasted a competitive showcase player in one Tom Pierce, who won his first Vermont State Amateur in 1935 at age 16 and prevailed six more times—still a record—during the next 15 years. His friend and brother-in-law George Smith remembered him as "a free spirit, loose and relaxed, very pleasant. He could mimic anyone's swing, and it probably helped his game a great deal to do that." But regardless of what might have contributed to his game, there was no doubt that Pierce was the finest male golfer in Vermont through the middle of the 20th century.

At the same time, a female player at Rutland was also gaining attention. Mae Murray, daughter of pro Jim Murray, honed her game with careful precision. The Murrays lived near the second tee at Rutland Country Club, and when a young woman, Mae practiced and practiced and practiced!

"She almost went crazy," George Smith said. "Her father made her chip and putt, hit shots and not play." There was obvious creative tension between father and daughter.

"When she finally got to play, she went right on," George Smith observed, with characteristic New England understatement. Mae Murray won the Vermont Women's Amateur six times, was a finalist in both the Western Women's Amateur and the U.S. Women's Amateur and in 1952 was named to the Curtis Cup team—all of this before her thirtieth birthday.

"Mae was a very shy personality, a sweet girl," George



*The Neshobe River has always been a charming hazard on the 8th hole.*





Smith said, "but the shyness must have covered up her killer instinct. We had no idea she could be such a formidable competitor."

By the mid 1950s, the golf scene in the Rutland region took another jump. To the west, on Lake Bomoseen, a resort course sprouted up in tandem with the redevelopment of an old resort hotel, Prospect House. Charles Baker, a civil engineer, became owner of the hotel and built a golf course to go along with it. During these years, the course never amounted to much because Baker saw it as an add-on to his more important business, the hotel. But the course did run along the edge of the lake, and at the course's highest point, a magnificent view of the surrounding terrain could be had. Maintenance was kept to a minimum, and play was sporadic at best. Yet it was one more golf opportunity in the Rutland area.

By the late 1950s, people in Brandon saw an opportunity to revive local golf. Ever since the Brandon Country Club had closed during the War, the nearest golf was at Proctor-Pittsford. It was inconvenient and crowded. "So we decided we'd build our own course," said Stan English, a founder of what is now known as Neshobe Golf Course, just outside Brandon.

*Prospect Bay adds another recreational option for Lake Bomoseen's summer visitors.*

He and several others created a nine-hole course (2,654 yards, par 34) with a minimum of so-called "professional" help. "Back then we didn't realize what a superintendent was, and I assumed that job," Stan English said with a laugh. "I got three shares of stock for the work I'd done."

When the club started in 1958, there were less than 100 members, but through the years membership blossomed and now stands at almost 500 members. Stan English has stayed in the middle of things. "It's been a labor of love for me, really," he insisted.

Through the 1960s, Rutland-area golf hummed along with the 18-hole Rutland Country Club and the nine-hole courses at Brandon, Lake St. Catherine, Lake Bomoseen and Proctor-Pittsford. The Hyde family gave up on Hyde Manor in 1965, and with it, the golf course. Through three generations, the Hyde Manor course provided golf for out-of-state visitors and area enthusiasts, but fell victim to the hotel's plummet into despair.

Down the road, new life blossomed on Lake Bomoseen. Charles Baker, owner of Prospect House, decided to close the hotel (eventually tearing it down) and devote himself to the golf course. "We really started from scratch," recalled



his widow, Thea Baker. "The hotel was obsolete, cost a fortune and was only open from early June to Labor Day. People could go to Europe cheaper than coming to Lake Bomoseen."

In 1973, Baker redid the golf course, turning it into a par-35 with a length of 2,505 yards. In the center of the course is a knoll, and three holes go up the knoll, three come down and three circle the bottom. "We decided to cater strictly to golf," Thea Baker said, adding that, after more than 20 years, the course is thriving. "Now we open the last week in April, we employ a golf professional and we close around the middle of October."

Through the next decade and a half, the golf scene in the Rutland area changed very little. Rutland Country Club remained the centerpiece, but the other courses—all still nine holes—were gaining members and growing in popularity. The courses undertook capital improvements—clubhouse expansion, installing an underground watering system, purchasing course grooming equipment—as if they intended to be around for a long time.

By the mid-1980s, however, it was apparent that some major changes were needed. No matter how well managed or well cared for, bulging memberships dictated that the concept of a nine-hole golf course needed rethinking. It had been 60 years since Rutland Country Club had built its second nine holes, and it remained the only 18-hole layout in the area.

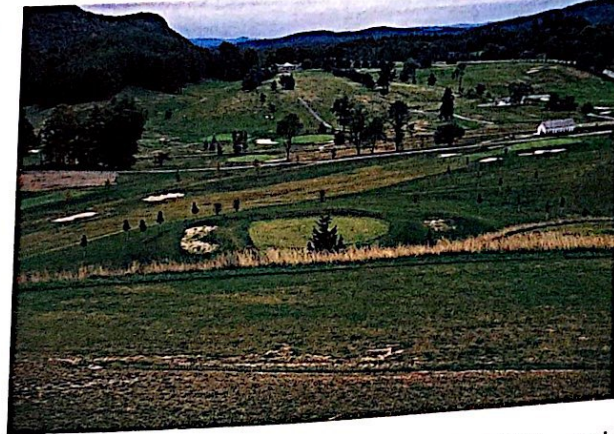
Proctor-Pittsford was the first to take the step. One of its most dedicated members, Ray Keyser, former Vermont governor and later President of the Vermont Marble Company, took a leading role. Sixty acres of pastureland alongside the existing course had become available, and Keyser urged the club to buy it. He had grown intrigued with golf course design.

"It was something I always wanted to do," Keyser said. He studied the work of golf architects, such as Donald Ross, in order to understand how to contour the land without leaving much evidence. He put together a plan that would alter about two thirds of the existing course, yet maintain the same style and shape of greens and fairways.

Planning and construction began in 1987, and the course

reopened in 1988 with nine new holes. Much of the work was done by volunteers from the club, which kept the cost down to about \$500,000, a modest sum by today's standards.

"We had to go through Act 250," said longtime member Dan Gallus, referring to the State of Vermont's comprehensive zoning and land-use regulatory law. "Since Ray Keyser used to be Governor, he knew how we could get approvals and make everything work." And work it did. The 18-hole course now stretches 6,052 yards from the back tees and plays to a par of



*By fall Lake St. Catherine had recovered from the summer drought and was primed for a 1996 opening.*

70. This year it will host the Vermont Amateur Championship.

Perhaps it was proximity or a flare-up of competitive ardor, but as Proctor-Pittsford began to fill out the design of nine new holes, Neshobe Golf Club in Brandon decided that it, too, wanted to expand. Original planning began in 1988; but unlike Proctor-Pittsford, it was a lengthy road from plan to construction to eventual opening. Ultimately, more than 100 acres of adjacent land was purchased in small parcels, a time-consuming process.

When it came to course design, everyone, it seemed, had an idea. Steve Durkee, an engineer from the Killington area and a good amateur golfer, was hired to do major design work, and his patience must have been tested. "We had 13 different plans before we settled on one finally," recalled Stan English, now president of the club. "Steve Durkee had a lot to do with the final design, though we were all involved in it."

The years rolled by as the Neshobe course unfolded, and now, finally, it is ready. Opening day will be scheduled this spring.

What you'll find is a magnificently sculptured layout, using eight of the original holes and ten new ones, the latter on the other side of a ridge that used to form the western barrier of the course. The design has added substantial yardage to the course, and it unfolds over more than 6,500 yards from the back tees, with a par of 71. The new holes tend to be longer than the old ones, and the design has blended well with the existing terrain. Will it support a statewide championship at some point in the future? "That's our plan," English said.

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Keating and Deleo both agree that the Highland course is harder to score on because of the tightness of the layout and the difficulty of the greens. "At Highland you need local knowledge because the greens are so tricky," added Deleo.

Terry Deleo achieved great success in the two big tournaments hosted at the Quechee Club last summer. In the New England Amateur Championships, he finished second to James Driscoll, a teenage phenom from Massachusetts. Driscoll also scored runner-up status in the 1995 U.S. Junior Nationals.

"Driscoll has a great future in golf," said Deleo. "He strikes the ball so well. But what really impressed me about James is his attitude. He's really a nice kid, and his perspective on the game of golf is one not normally seen in a young kid like that."

Deleo was also one of only four amateurs who made the cut for the New England Open, which was won by Jeff Julian of the Quechee Club. Julian lost in a playoff in 1994 and rebounded in 1995 to take the lead on the last hole of the three-day tournament. He hung on and won the title by one stroke over former PGA Tour player Webb Heintzman. "My putting has been the difference this year," said Julian. "Last year I was having trouble and was nowhere near as confident."

The Quechee Club will host the New England Open once again in 1996. You can rest assured that the championship medal will continue to shine brightly at one of New England's finest venues.

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*Alex Kourebanas entertains guests at the Lincoln Inn and slips out to the Williston Country Club, where he holds an 11 handicap and fired a 75 in 1995.*