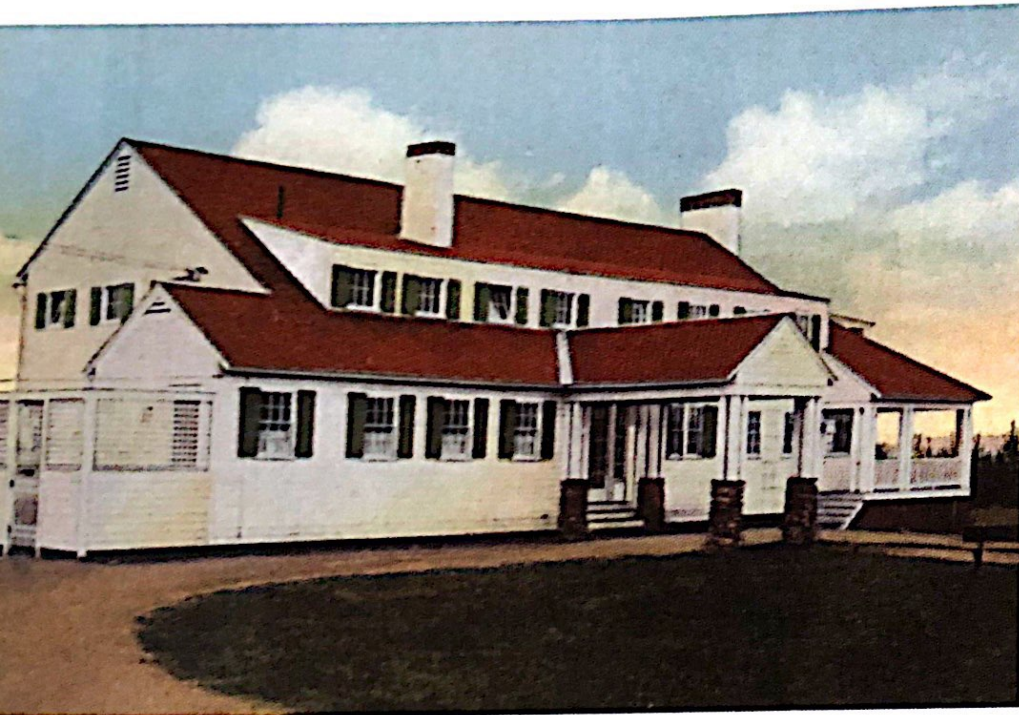


by Arthur Ristau



IN THE 1920S, WHEN THE LAVISH COUNTRY CLUB OF BARRE WAS ESTABLISHED, MANY PLAYERS ABANDONED OTHER CLUBS TO JOIN.

Courtesy of Pat Kennedy

THE INSIDIOUS ALDERS have overwhelmed the once lush greensward. They have devoured the remnants of the long-stilled brook, and they clutch at the intruders' ankles, grudgingly unveiling a severe, leaf-strewn passageway. "Right over there," Frank Wilson whispered, almost reverently as he brushed back the overhead branches. "See? You can still make it out. That was the first tee."

Fittingly, the first tee of the Meadow Brook Country Club borders the northwest boundary of Barre's celebrated Hope Cemetery. The course and the interred nearby are all resting in peace.

Meadow Brook is one of a half-dozen formerly flourishing golf courses within a seven-mile radius of central Vermont's twin cities that, more than

half a century ago, challenged countless numbers of the region's golfers. Most of the courses are now so overgrown that they are indiscernible, and two have yielded to the inroads of urbanization. None are recognizable, and few golfers are still here to tell of these Vermont vestiges. There are just 27 golf holes that one can play in the Barre/Montpelier area today. Seventy-five years ago there were almost three times that many.

Wilson, who is 87, learned the game from his father who, like many of Barre's 19th-century immigrants, learned about both golf and granite in Aberdeen, Scotland. "This certainly wasn't an exclusive club," remembered Wilson, the club's last surviving member, "but most of the

members—and there were around 200—were Scottish. That's because most of the people who played golf around here in those days were of Scottish ancestry."

Wilson pointed again to the path leading from the cemetery. Most of the departed were buried more than 70 years ago. "This was a pauper's field at one time," Wilson said. "My father and I would walk up here on Sundays to play. It was a tough course and he never let me touch the ball. There was a sand pit over there on the other side of the river, and there was one green on top of that plateau, over there. The fairways weren't mowed very often, there were cows graz-



EXTINCTION

ing here and there, and it was awfully hilly. It was nine holes, par 36."

Wilson's most vivid memory is shooting a 36 in 1926 to beat his father, Frank Senior, by a single stroke for the club championship. "I hated to beat my dad," he said.

His second most profound recollection is the flood of 1927. "Gunner Brook (a tributary of the Winooski River) ran right through the course," he said, "you can still see traces of it under the alders. When the flood came, it swept everything away."

But the flood didn't wash away Wilson's still vivid memories as he described the long-gone course, hole by hole. "But after the flood we figured it was time to move," he added.

The new location was just a few hundred yards away, most of it within the limits of one of Vermont's most densely settled communities. "We went up here to the cow pasture," Wilson said, as he trudged the hilly, rock-strewn and now largely overgrown field that marks Barre's northern perimeter.

Meadow Brook II was touted for its dramatic ravines, its commanding views and one 550-yard par-5, the longest hole then and now in central Vermont. But by 1938, the second and final incarnation of Meadow Brook had failed. "There

was just nobody interested in playing there anymore," Wilson said. "They started going to the Barre Country Club."

At about the same time and six miles to the northwest, duffers were taking their swings at another golf

course, located entirely within the City of Montpelier and, like Meadow Brook, totally extinguished today, overgrown not by vegetation but by buildings.

"The National Life Golf Course was practically downtown," recalled Peter Giuliani, National Life's retired bond counsel. Greens fees were 50 cents, even on Sunday, and it was part of the old city recreation complex that included an archery range, tennis courts and a football field.

Giuliani, who is 89, enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the Vermont Legislature and began playing golf at National Life in the late 1920s. The course was a three-minute walk from his office.

"The Montpelier Country Club was for the elite," said Giuliani, who was born in northern Italy. "The National Life Course was pretty primitive and quite limited. Today, it would be a six-hole, par-3 course." Instead, it is now the site of Montpelier High School, the Vermont Department of Employment and Training, Green Mountain Power's central Vermont headquarters and the Vermont Department of Liquor Control.

"Sure, we had a clubhouse," Giuliani went on to say, "but it was little more than a shack. The golf course was really an afterthought—kind of

STATE-OF-THE-ART PLAYING SURFACES IN THE HILLS AROUND BARRE, CIRCA 1903. Courtesy of Pat Kennedy

THE SITE OF
THE NATIONAL
LIFE GOLF
COURSE IS NOW
OCCUPIED BY
MONTPELIER
HIGH SCHOOL
AND THE VER-
MONT LIQUOR
CONTROL
BOARD.

Courtesy National
Life of Vermont

a freak, you might say—that was constructed after the other recreational amenities were built. It lasted for about 15 years.”

The 2,600-yard tract incorporated two par fives and three par threes. The only remnant of it evident today is the Montpelier High School football field, which separated the course from the adjoining Winooski River. “When I got back from the war,” said ex-marine Giuliani, “it was gone.”

Halfway between the two cities there sat the aptly named Midway Golf Club, yet another casualty of World War II. Like its neighbors, it offered a modest layout with a modest greens fee. Unlike the others and certainly unlike very few golf courses in the world, many of its patrons arrived and departed via trolley car. The cars and the course have been gone for 50 years, but both are remembered fondly.

“I started playing there in 1934 when I was still in high school,” said Joe George of Barre, who is

80 and who, along with Wilson, still tees it up four or five times a week. “I used to take the trolley. It was a short course (2,279 yards) and only a par 31. We used little mounds of sand for tees. I held the course record with a 29, but somebody had a 28 during the war. I never went back after the war, and it wasn’t long before Midway was gone. But it was a great experience, and we had a lot of fun. It was hilly, and the views were terrific.”

The lower segment of the former Midway site is occupied by a bowling alley and an automobile dealership. The northern section is harsh and rocky and once pastured livestock. Another former patron, Dick Mulcahy of Barre, remembered when the greens were fenced off to prohibit cows from doing what cows are accustomed to doing. Ironically, the entrance to the former Midway course is now occupied by a miniature golf range.

Mulcahy, 83, played most of his golf as a young man at the former Barre Golf Club, the longest,

most difficult and, by many accounts, most interesting of the area's golfing ghosts. Now the site of scattered housing and several expansive cornfields, the Barre Club was laid out on a hillside overlooking the Winooski River Valley, with Sugarbush and Mount Mansfield dominating the spectacular western aspect.

"It was designed around the old Clark farm," said Mulcahy. A publication of that day described the course as featuring "excellent greens . . . wide fairways with good turf."

Mulcahy, who has played all of Barre/Montpelier's golfing ghosts, declared Barre the best. "A lot of Scottish people played there," he added, "and it's the first course I can remember where women played regularly."

In 1902, a local publication proclaimed: "The Barre Golf Club, composed largely of Montpelier young men and women, are to build a clubhouse on its grounds. The expectation is that the house will be completed by August 15 and on that day the club will hold a picnic and tournament and will invite its friends to come in, assist in a house warming, attend the games and have a good time generally—which is all very nice on the part of the club and will meet the approval of the prospective beneficiaries of its courtesies."

But by 1940, the course had vanished from the *Handbook on Vermont Golf*, published by the predecessor of the Vermont Agency of Development and Community Affairs. The course had been in business since 1902 but was apparently unable to compete with the Barre Country Club, founded in 1924, and, like its Montpelier counterpart, patronized by the community's elite. The Barre Country Club, without doubt one of Vermont's finest, is within walking distance of its now extinct neighbor.

Older still and the first to enter the realm of the Barre/Montpelier golfing gone-bys was the course at the capital's Cherryvale Park. *The Vermont Watchman* of July 24, 1901, noted that "local golfers are now patronizing the course at Cherryvale as they claim the grass at the Hubbard Park course has been allowed to get so high as to prevent good play."

No one has any recollection of golf being played in Montpelier other than at the Nation-



al Life and Country Club courses, and the local library could not amplify the *Watchman's* quip. But we do know that the golf there was played on what is now the city's recreational area. "The golf links at Hubbard Park are rapidly being improved," the *Watchman* reported in a subsequent edition. "Several workmen are employed on the putting greens and teeing grounds and the links are being visited daily by large numbers of players."

Attorney Giuliani, whose memory would be the envy of the bar's most diligent stenographer, was skeptical. "Golf at Hubbard Park? I can't believe it," he exclaimed. "It's much too steep up there."

Let sleeping golf ghosts lie.

◆◆◆

THE MANAGEMENT (TOP)
AND THE
FORMER STAFF OF
NATIONAL LIFE.
Courtesy of
National Life of
Vermont (2)