





# A CENTURY OF GOLF IN VERMONT

**F**rom homemade clubs and tomato cans to graphite shafts and videotaped swing analysis, golf has come a long way during its first century in North America.

While Scottish immigrants had played around Montreal earlier in the century, the sport was introduced in the United States by Robert Lockhart, a New York linen merchant who frequently returned on business to his home soil of Dumfermline, Scotland. On one trip, Lockhart brought back six clubs and 20 gutta-percha balls, which he soon shared with John Reid, a Dumfermline boyhood friend who lived in Yonkers-on-Hudson.

The sport caught on instantly. From three holes in a pasture, Reid and his neighbors were soon playing every Sunday on a 30-acre meadow on Palisade Avenue, where they had laid out six holes.

BY  
DAVID  
ROBINSON





"Many a passerby," writes George Peper in *Golf in America*, "would lean across Shott's fence to observe with bemusement the strange band of men, clad in their hobnail shoes, faded suits, and battered derbies, ritually swatting and following little white balls around the yard."

On November 14, 1888, after an afternoon of chasing the "gutties" around the course, the little group met at Reid's house. There, over dinner and drinks, Reid proposed forming a club to fund their continued play on the meadow and formalize the friendship that had grown up among the handful of golfers. The group named the club St. Andrew's (with an apostrophe) "in the hope," says Peper, "that the name might inspire interest in America as effectively as had its namesake St. Andrews (no apostrophe) in Scotland." Thus began the recreation that has beguiled millions of gratefully addicted Americans during the past 104 years.



Mae Murray Jones grew up playing the Rutland C. C. and became the "pride of Vermont and the queen of New England golf" between 1941 and 1962.

be the oldest continually operating golf club in the country. In the absence of a

The home was also used as the first clubhouse.

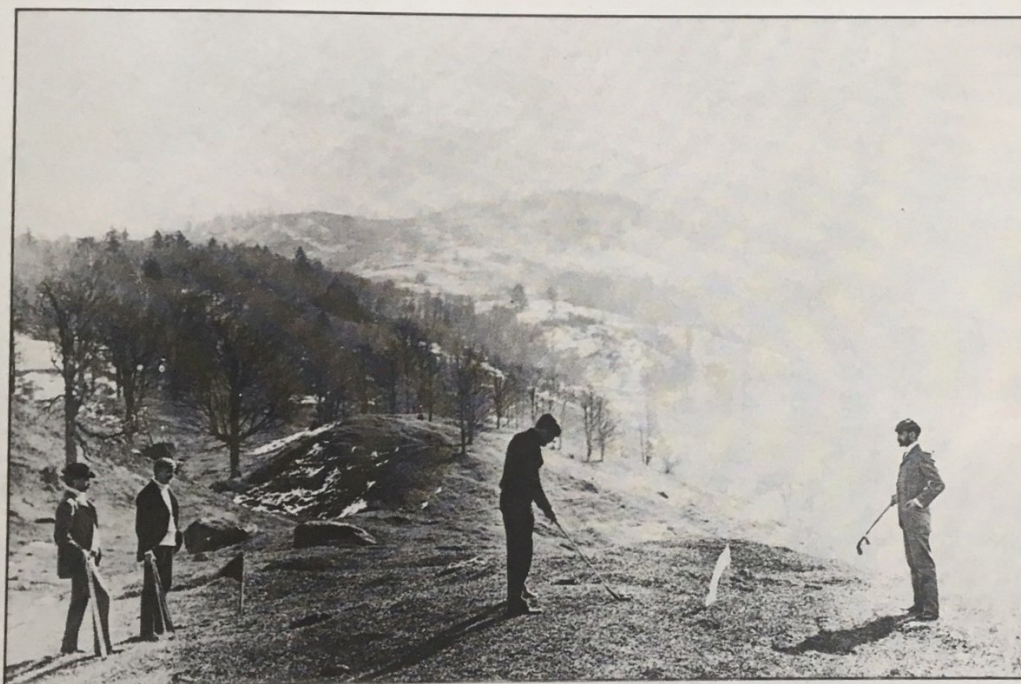
Golf came to neighboring Manchester in 1895 when George A. Orvis began the Hillside Golf club, a short six-hole course laid out on land behind the Equinox House (later to be known as the Equinox Hotel). The course was expanded to nine holes the following year, and in 1899 changed its name to the Equinox Golf Club.

Orvis's nine holes were only the beginnings of golf in Manchester. In 1898, James L. Taylor and other summer residents decided they wanted a first-rate 18-hole course in the area, and they wasted no time in getting one. In their book *Vermont Golf Courses: A Players Guide*, Bob Labbance and David Cornwell write, "land on the southeast side of the village was purchased in August 1899 and a crew of 50 began work [on the course] early in the fall. The course was opened in 1900 with 12 holes in play, and by mid-July all 18 were completed."

Such were the beginnings of the exclusive Ekwanok Country Club, one of the finest courses in the United States in the early years of this century. Ekwanok hosted the Vermont Amateur Championship for many years starting in 1902; in 1914, it hosted the U.S. Amateur Championship. Bobby Jones, Francis Ouimet, Jerry Travers, Max Marston, and other early golf greats—as well as President Taft and other celebrities—often played at Ekwanok. Except for some minor modifications to six or seven greens by

Geoffrey Cornish in 1959, the course retains its original layout.

With courses established in Dorset and Manchester, golf blossomed through southern Vermont as well-heeled would-be hackers built courses of their own. By 1895 golfers played on three courses in Bennington, including one located on the James C. Colgate estate. In 1897, Colgate,



The late Arthur Wilder tees off at the old Woodstock course in the late 1890s.

Farther up the Hudson and some miles to the east, Vermont's first-known golf course was the Dorset Field Club, said to have been created in 1886 by A. W. Harrington and 14 other men, "most of whom," writes Jack Mahoney in his *Golf History of New England*, "lived in Troy," New York, and vacationed in Dorset. (Of course, if this date is correct, Dorset would

written record or any minutes of the historic event, however, Dorset's claim remains a matter of dispute. The club's formal register was started only in 1913.) "The course," Mahoney continues, "meandered through the marshes of Dorset," where the players negotiated the soggy fairways with clubs fashioned by Harrington at his Dorset summer home.



Frederic B. Jennings, and others formed the Mt. Anthony Country Club, located first on the Griswold Farm and moved to its present location near the Bennington Battle Monument in 1905.

his American tour; three days of instruction by Park began a Webb family enthusiasm for golf that lasted until Webb's wife, Lila, died in 1936. The family's course was used until the 1940s.

of pasture to create "greens." The farmer who owned the pasture, however, retained grazing rights for his cows, so greens were ringed with barbed wire. One early golf wag coined the cows' ambulatory fairway hazards. Less ambulatory but equally hazardous were the resulting cowpies; Mountain View rules, however, magnanimously allowed a golfer to remove and clean a soiled ball before taking his next shot.

Burlington's Waubunakee Golf Club established nine holes south of the city near what is today's Outlet Center (across from Sears) on Shelburne Road in 1899. This sporty but relatively flat par-36 course was the site of the Vermont Amateur Championship in 1903, 1914, 1917, and 1922. When a hillier course location became available in 1924—the Henry Holt estate on South Prospect Street—a group of Waubunakee members formed the Burlington Country Club and hired Donald Ross to design a new 18-hole course. Ross's layout

remained basically unchanged, though in 1991, the club engaged architect Michael Hurzdan to modify the course to accommodate increased play by women and older players. The original Waubunakee course was used in the 1940s, when it was sold for development.

Woodstock golfers circa 1895, wrote *Vermont Life* in 1954, "picked up the game and started knocking a gutta-percha ball about, using tomato cans for holes and greens marked with field stones." Built on Mt. Peg in 1896, the Woodstock Country Club was moved twice before S. William Tucker set up a permanent course in the Kedron Brook Valley in 1906. The course was later remodeled several times: by Walter Travis in 1912, Wayne Stiles in 1924, Donald Ross in the 1930s, and Robert Trent Jones, Sr., in 1961.

The Rutland Country Club was formed in 1897 with a membership of 21. The club was located on Clements Road near Center Rutland until the Baxter Farm was purchased in 1902. George Low, Sr. laid out nine holes there; five are still in use today.

To the north, Dr. Seward Webb created a private nine-hole course at his Shelburne Farms Estate in 1895. Webb invited the first British Open winner, Willie Park, Jr., for a visit to the course during

Greensboro's Mountain View Club, founded by Jane MacKenzie, began with three holes in 1898 and was expanded to nine the following summer. Like most early courses, especially those in small rural towns, Mountain View simply sunk tomato cans into relatively level sections



In 1945, Byron Nelson and Harold "Jug" McSpaden played a golf exhibition at Burlington, against Burlington Country Club's Clifton "Kiki" Price and club pro Charles MacAndrews. Left to right: MacAndrews, McSpaden, Price, and in mid-swing, Nelson. Nelson's 64 became a course record.



Robert Todd Lincoln and the Lincoln foursome at Ekwonok. Left to right: Caddy Jimmy Williams, George H. Thatcher, Robert M. Janney, Horace G. Young, Robert Todd Lincoln.



St. Johnsbury's Old Pine Golf Club opened in 1899, named for a large tree on the highland summit of the Undercllyffe property. Designed by Alex Findley of Boston, the nine-hole course lasted only until World War I. When its successor, the St. Johnsbury Country Club, was established in 1923, its nine-hole course was designed by two-time British Open champion Willie Park, Jr.

The state's turn-of-the-century golf craze hit Brattleboro in 1899, when the Wantastiquet Golf Club built six holes around the town's ski jump hill. Like many early clubs, its clubhouse was a simple bungalow. In 1914, the club was renamed the Brattleboro Country Club and its nine holes were moved to their present location.

The Montpelier Country Club was formed in 1902. It opened its clubhouse and course the following year on the former Sam Smith farm. The Barre-Montpelier area was heavily populated by Scottish stonecutters, whose enthusiasm included a devotion to the purity of the game. Their watchword was "Play the ball where it lies—no exceptions!" Presumably, Montpelier's fairways lacked Greensboro's cow-produced hazards.

Though many turn-of-the-century golfers in Vermont were vacationers from out of state, they were not just the very wealthy. Vermont's golfing strata included businessmen, doctors, lawyers, professors, and others who could afford to get away from the office for a few weeks during the summer.

American golf in its early years was dominated by the Scots and the British—John Duncan Dunn, Walter Travis, Donald Ross, and the ubiquitous Willie Park, Jr., to name a few—whose ranks included most of the top players and the most sought-after course designers. At least one early golf imposter even traded on his Scottish "burr" which it turned out, was his sole credential as a golf course architect.

Another story involving a golfing Scotsman in Vermont—one far more schooled at the game than the imposter architect—was recounted by Burton Stillman in the August 1927 *Golf Il-*

*lustrated*. A Scottish pro, George Sargent, was commissioned to build a course at Hyde Manor Golf Club in Sudbury in 1909. When the National Open championship rolled around, Sargent decided to enter. He belonged to no golf organization in the United States, so he registered his affiliation as the yet-to-be-constructed Hyde Manor Golf Club. When he won the Open with a score of 290, the *New York Herald* trumpeted his triumph with the headline, "Open championship won by an unknown from an unknown golf club in Vermont."

His anonymity fading, Sargent returned to Sudbury, completed his work at Hyde Manor, and moved on to become the pro at the Chevy Chase Country Club in Maryland in 1910. In 1912, he won the Canadian Open. Sargent was one of the founders of the Professional Golfers Association, and served as the organization's president from 1921 to 1926.

### Years of Boom and Bust

As popular as golf was becoming in the early years of the century, its national popularity leaped in 1913, when 20-year-old Francis Ouimet, an amateur from Brookline, Massachusetts, won the U.S. Open, upsetting British favorites Harry Vardon and Ted Ray. Vermont joined the rest of the country in celebrating the first time an American player had reached the top rank of golf in the United States.

In 1914, the newly famous Ouimet came to Manchester's Ekwano Club to play in—and win—the U.S. Amateur Championship. Ouimet's visit was a tremendous boost to the vitality of golf in Vermont, and many more towns began to plan golf courses.

Though it slowed the pace, even World War I did not completely halt the growth of golf in Vermont. Courses were built in 1915 at Lake Morey Country Club in Fairlee and Champlain Golf Club near St. Albans, and in 1919 at the Waterbury Inn in Waterbury Center, now the Blush Hill Country Club.

If the turn-of-the-century represents golf's blossoming in Vermont, then the 1920s represent its explosion. New cour-



ses were built throughout the state—the Marble Island Club in Colchester in 1920, Windsor Country Club in 1921, St. Johnsbury Country Club in 1923, the Country Club of Barre in the early 1920s, Burlington Country Club and Bradford Golf Club in 1924, Lake St. Catherine Country Club (Poultney) and Montague Golf Club (Randolph) in 1925, and Orleans Country Club in 1926. In 1927 alone, the Basin Harbor Club (Panton), Northfield Country Club, Bellows Falls Country Club (Rockingham), Equinox

Country Club (Manchester), Newport Country Club, Proctor-Pittsford Country Club, and Williston Golf Club were built. By 1929, there were 35 golf courses sprinkled throughout Vermont. They ranged from scruffy nine-hole courses to immaculate 18-hole championship courses at elite country clubs. Golf was in its golden age in Vermont.

Golf in Vermont held its own during the 1930s, despite the Great Depression; as golf historian Patrick Kennedy has wryly commented, "People didn't have

that much else to do." A few courses were actually built during the Thirties, such as Copley Country Club in Morrisville and Richford Country Club, near the Canadian border. As the Depression dragged on, however, other courses closed.

More serious problems for golf in the state began when most of the golfers departed to fight in World War II. The 1940s finished off many more courses, including the Midway Golf Club in Barre, the Bristol Country Club, the Hampton Golf Course in Fair Haven, Wells-Wood Golf Club, Hardwick Country Club, and Lyndon Golf Club. Also gone by 1950 were the National Life course in Montpelier, the Wilmington course (designed by Ralph Barton), and the Heartwellville course, designed by William Flynn.

### The Champions

As golf in Vermont went through its cycles of boom and bust, the public's interest in competitive golfing—most notably, in the gradual then sudden ascension of American golfers to the ranks of the world's best—grew steadily. While Ouimet's stunning U.S. Open victory and his appearance in Vermont the following year were undoubtedly responsible for a large measure of that popularity, Vermonters had been competing on the links before Ouimet was barely old enough to start swinging his set of junior irons.


The first recorded golf competition in Vermont took place in 1897, when 42 contestants showed up the Rutland Golf Club for a putting contest. Soon, with the proliferation of such contests, a statewide body was needed to promote the sport plus establish and operate the Vermont Amateur Championship tournament. Club representatives met in 1902 and formed the Vermont Golf Association, with charter members Dorset, Ekwanok, Old Pine, Waubanakee, Mt. Anthony, and Rutland. Montpelier and Barre joined and paid their \$10 annual dues the following year, following the amateur championship.

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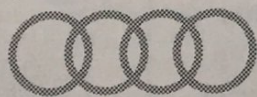
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pionship was held in 1902 and won by Paul Waterman of Ekwanok. The Ekwanok Country Club hosted the event the first year, as well as in 1905, 1908, 1935, and 1937. Rutland, Burlington (Waubanakee), Mt. Anthony, and Dorset field were also frequent sites for the yearly tournament.

The amateur championship has been held every year except war years (1918 and 1942-45), and a select group of golfers stand out as multiple winners: Fred Herreshoff of Ekwanok in 1904 and 1908; another Ekwanok golfer, F.A. Martin, in 1909 and 1912; George McKee of Montpelier in 1922, 1927, and 1931; "Kiki" Price of Burlington in 1933, 1937, 1941, and 1960; Tom Pierce of Rutland in 1935, 1938-40, 1946, 1947, and 1950; Jim Jerome of Mt. Anthony in 1953 and 1958; Shawn Baker of Brattleboro in 1983, 1985-87, and 1989; and Hans Albertsson of Ekwanok in 1988, 1990, and 1991.

The Vermont Open Tournament, begun in 1940, had a nomadic existence

during its first decade. After a hiatus in the early fifties, it took on a new life in 1955, when Lake Morey Country Club offered

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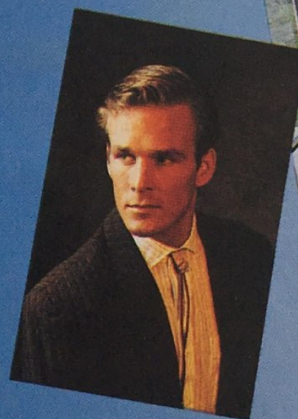
to give the tournament a permanent home. Run by VGA in conjunction with the NEPGA, the championship has been held there every year since.

Ironically, no Vermonter has ever won the Vermont Open, though Bob

Lendzion of Quechee came close in 1989, losing in a playoff to Dana Quigley of Rhode Island who won also in 1986. Past Vermont Open winners include Dutch Harrison, Horton Smith, Bob Toski, and Jim Turnesa. Two men have won the championship three times each—George Kinsman and Jay Dolan, who won first as an amateur in 1961 and twice thereafter as a pro. The 1991 winner, Jeff Lewis of Massachusetts, took home \$6,600 in prize money.

Women, too, from the early days of Lila Webb and Jane MacKenzie, have made significant contributions to competitive golf in Vermont. The Vermont Women's Golf Association was formed in 1930, with 11 member clubs, to promote women's golf. Until then, there had been no women's state, regional, or national tournaments, a situation the organization remedied in 1931 when it held its first tournament at Equinox Links Golf Club.

Vermont's best-known women golfers have been Mae Murray Jones in the 1940s and 1950s, and, more recently, Patty



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Sheehan. Jones grew up playing the Rutland Country Club, where her father, James Murray, was the club pro. She dominated the Vermont Women's Championship, winning six times between 1941 and 1952, and was a finalist in the U.S. Women's Amateur in 1950. In 1952, she played on the American Curtis Cup team and in the British Women's Open. In 1954, she won the Women's Eastern Amateur championship. After she won the New England Women's Championship every year from 1959 to 1962, one writer called Murray "the pride of Vermont and the queen of New England golf."

In the 1970s, another Vermonter followed Jones as a champion golfer—though not in Vermont. Patty Sheehan, who had been born and raised in Middlebury and had left the state in 1966 at age ten, won the Nevada Amateur Championship from 1975-1978. She won the California Amateur Championship in 1979 and 1980, and played on the U.S. Curtis Cup team. As a professional, Sheehan won 21 tournaments in the next decade, including the 1980 Mazda Japan classic and the 1983 and 1984 Ladies Professional Golfers Association titles. She also had five wins in 1990 and one in 1991. *Sports Illustrated* named Sheehan one of its eight "sportsmen of the year" in 1987. Recognizing her success, Middlebury Rotary Club and Middlebury College, and a host of others sponsored the first Sheehan Family Classic tournament at Middlebury College's Ralph Myhre course in August 1991.

### **New Challenges in a New Era**

Perhaps influenced by President Eisenhower's enthusiasm for the game, golf underwent a revitalization during the 1950s. With renewed interest in the sport came a change in the character and location of new courses in Vermont. Tourists were beginning to visit the state during the winter months, converging on the slopes of new ski areas that sprang up along the snowy north-south spine of the Green Mountains. The ski resorts saw their two-season opportunity, and golf courses

spread steadily south, starting at Stowe in 1956, Sugarbush in 1964, Stratton in 1965 and 1986, Tator Hill Resort in 1967, Manchester and Fox Run (near Okemo) in 1969, Mt. Snow in 1970, Quechee Lakes in 1970 and 1975, Killington in 1983, and at Haystack in 1985.

These were mountain courses—designed by architects like Robert Trent Jones, Desmond Muirhead, and Geoffrey Cornish—and offered golfers dramatic vistas, steep terrain, and championship quality. The Cornish-designed Mt. Snow course was the site of the 1984 New England PGA championship. *Golf Digest* counted the Quechee Highland course among the top 1 percent of courses in New England. Vermont players were enthusiastic about the Quechee links, too: "There is more top-quality golf here," rave Labbance and Cornwell in their 1987 player's guide, "than anywhere else in the state." Of Killington, they warned, "The views are beautiful, but the course itself can be extraordinarily treacherous."

But not all the new courses were at resorts. Golfers who preferred less treacherous treks could enjoy new challenges starting in the 1950s at Stanford Valley Golf Course, Crown Point Country Club in Springfield in 1953 (named after the Crown Point Military Road, which in colonial days passed by what is now the tenth tee), Bomoseen in 1953, Rocky Ridge in St. George in 1961, Kwiniaska in Shelburne in 1965, White River Golf Course in Rochester in 1972 (which Labbance and Cornwell call "the most laid-back course in the state"), an additional nine at the college's Ralph Myhre course in Middlebury in 1978, West Bolton in 1983, and at Wolf Run Country Club in Bakersfield in 1987.

To be sure, some courses closed—Quarry Hill in Burlington and Barton Country Club in the 1960s, Hyde Manor in the 1970s, Bonnie Oaks in Fairlee in the 1980s.

Despite periodic closings, the number of courses in Vermont continues to grow. In 1950 there were 36 courses in the state; currently there are 52 split between nine-hole and regulation 18-hole courses.

The growth in the number of courses



throughout the state has reflected the even greater growth in the number of golfers who use them. The number of golfers playing in Vermont leaped between 1980 and 1990, matching the national increase of 55 percent. George Plumb, director of the state's recreation division, estimated in 1990 that 12,000 Vermonters play 365,000 rounds of golf each year—a figure that does not include 30,000 additional golfers who play in the state seasonally. This growth has meant rising greens fees, crowded courses, and, at some country clubs, previously unheard-of waiting lists for membership. “Every region of the state could use one to two more golf courses,” says James Bassett, executive secretary of the Vermont Golf Association. Observers in Chittenden County say even five new courses would not be too many.

As a result, new courses are being planned—at Bolton Valley Resort, Burke Mountain, the Mountain Top Inn, Milton and Underhill, and additions to St. Johnsbury, Montague, Brandon, and other locations—but they face a variety of obstacles. Growing public concern about the environment has resulted in hotly-contested debates between golf courses developers and opponents over prickly land use-issues, water quality, and pesticide use as Paul Truax at Sherman Hollow in Huntington learned when his course proposal (and related projects) faced opposition from nearby residents. The state has tightened its regulations on pesticide use, and the process of securing an Act 250 permit to construct a golf course is a lengthy, involved process. The result is that no new golf courses have actually opened in Vermont since 1990.

(In the late '70s, the Vermont Golf Course Superintendent's Association was formed to address the growing concern about pesticide use by golf courses and develop its own proposals for more organic golf course management. Today the VGCSA has 120 members, 45 of whom are course superintendents.)

To address the problems, state golf organizations, including the VGA, VWGA, the VAGCS, and VPGA, have formed the Golf Industry Policy Committee. The committee works with state legislators, the



state agriculture department, and with outside experts to develop realistic regulations for golf course management.

In the meantime, golf in Vermont is healthy and is flourishing as never before. The number of golfers and the number of rounds played increases every year. Specialty golf shops have opened in Rutland and Burlington. The VGA and the VWGA, each with upwards of 50 member clubs, today run some two dozen yearly events for golf groups of all types.

Gone are the days of cows (and cowpies) in the fairways, barbed wire around the greens, and \$1 per day greens fees; like the rest of our world, golf has become more complex (not to mention expensive). But there are always elements of the game that remain constant—the mechanics of a smooth swing, the flight of the ball as it follows a fairway on a cool June Morning, the agony and the ecstasy of negotiating tricky greens. For those players who take up the exasperating challenge, as one observer remarked, of putting little balls into little holes with implements very ill-suited to the purpose, the royal and ancient game of golf promises to be no less rewarding for those who pursue it. ♦

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