

The Oakville Golf Club

90th Anniversary Tribute

By Geoff Godard



The Last Hole

The idea of a golf club on the Sixth Line was conceived “just about April 1, 1921” according to one of its founding members, Banfield Taylor, who recounted its establishment at our club’s sixtieth anniversary celebration in 1981.

That made the Oakville Golf Club ninety years old April 1, 2011.

In 1921, the discovery of insulin was announced. Agnes Macphail would become the first woman elected to Parliament on December 6 when W.L. Mackenzie King won the election with a majority of just one seat.

There were a number of major concerns operating in Oakville. Two jam factories, a cider mill, a winery, a grist mill, two lumber companies, a tannery, a tire and rubber company, a paint company, two automobile

agencies, three coal and ice companies and a basket factory.

The Soldier’s Memorial was unveiled at George’s Square in July that year to “honour and perpetuate the memory of the heroism and sacrifice of those who gave their lives in the Great World War”.

Thirty names are on that memorial. Oakville’s population was 3,289.

Ban elaborated the circumstances that led to the founding of the club. “In November of 1920 I had a severe attack of rheumatic fever which resulted in a heart murmur. When I started to get around, about April 1, 1921, I was told I had



to take things very quietly and do nothing more strenuous than walking for the next three years."

He was devastated. "Until that time I had played tennis very vigorously, mostly with Stuart Brown, who was then one of the top players in Ontario. With the new restrictions on my activities it was suggested that I should take up golf."

April 1 being a Friday that year, he and his friend Stuart would no doubt have got together that weekend to decide how to deal with the news about tennis. Stuart, who had recently begun to practice law in Toronto, lived on Sixth Line, a country lane just past the outskirts of town, not far from the basket factory and the train station on what was then called Dundas Street. His house was on the north side of the Lower Middle Road, an unpaved byway difficult to traverse in spring and after every heavy rain.

The house overlooked a rolling expanse of meadow that was divided by Munn's Creek, named after the family that had settled in 1803 on land to the north on what would become the Dundas Road and eventually Highway 5. They had named it Munn's Corners.

A few red winged blackbirds would have been circling the bullrushes and willows that grew on the bank of the creek and their distinctive cry mingled with that of the robins, both staking out territories for nesting and raising their young.

The pair would have commiserated Ban's fate over whiskies as they eyed the cattle and sheep

that were grazing in the field to the west of the house. In the distance a few pigs were rooting in the earth by the barn.

Smoke from Stuart's cigarette and Ban's pipe swirled around their heads. "You belong to a golf club don't you?" said Ban.

"Yes. Toronto Golf. The one near Port Credit. But getting there along the Lower Middle is not a pleasant journey so I don't use it much. I must say I enjoy the game."

"If I can't play tennis I've got to do something. Much as I like sitting around like this with a few drinks and a good smoke, I never feel as alive as after some exercise. I tried golf myself a few times. I enjoyed it a lot, even though the rules are painful. Why isn't there a golf course here in Oakville?"

Stuart stared out over the meadow. After a long pause, he answered.

"Why? Why not indeed! And, my friend, we're looking at our golf course right now!"

The two looked out at the field before them with new interest.

"Stu, don't want to be a stick in the mud, but there's a problem. Bill Buckle's been grazing his cows and sheep out there for years. That's where he fattens 'em up, and his pigs, too, before he takes 'em down that store of his on Colborne. You know, the one at Dunn where the Queen's Hotel was. I really don't think he'd sell."



“I’m not so sure it matters”, Stu replied. “For one thing, he’s getting on in years. He finally bought that store way back – I think it was maybe '03. But, more important, he doesn’t own the land! Ted Lightbourn’s father does. And Teddy’s a client of mine.”

“Well, well.” said Ban. “Isn’t that interesting? Why don’t we wander over and have a look at our new golf course!”

The two put on winter coats and boots because a cold east wind was blowing up from the lake. While there were a few lingering snowdrifts in places sheltered from the sun, a warm spell the previous week had all but eliminated the rest of the snow and coaxed out the pussy willows along the creek. Snowdrops nodded on its more sheltered banks.

They talked about the unfairness of fate – not being able to play tennis any more – but also of fairways and where to place greens and tees.

“You know, this isn’t really big enough for nine holes,” said Stuart, finally. “But I have another idea. The owner of that field on the other side of the crick told me a while ago he would sell it if he could. It goes all the way to the Sixteen Valley.”

“Gosh! If we could get that we could make his farmhouse our clubhouse” said Ban. “So, what do you think all this’ll cost?”

“I dunno. But I figure if we had \$10,000 we could talk seriously. And I bet there’s lots of people in Oakville that’d give their eye teeth for a golf course here. That road to Toronto Golf is a disgrace. And the members there are so full of

themselves. We could start by asking for subscriptions of, what, \$100? Would that be too much? If we sold 100 we’d have the \$10,000.”

“Stuart, I think we have a plan”, said Ban. The two shook hands and returned to the house to plan the next steps and to toast the new venture over more whiskies.

Their first step was to take the idea to a mutual friend, and neighbour of Stuart, Frank Worrell. He lived north the cemetery, on the Old Mill Road, an extension of the Sixth Line past Leighland that crossed the Lower Middle Road, now the QEW.

He was a good choice. His roots in Oakville were deep. His grandfather had been the first rector of St. Jude’s Church. And, like Stuart, he commuted to Toronto where he worked for Sun Life. Frank endorsed the idea enthusiastically, and the three set about turning it into reality.

The first hurdle was the land. Stuart was a lawyer whose studies had been interrupted by the recent war. He’d been wounded in 1918 in France while serving with the 3rd Machine Gun Battalion as Captain. He returned to Canada early in 1919, completed his studies and was called to the bar that year.

Stuart went to his friend, E.T. Lightbourn, son of A.H. Lightbourn, the registered owner of the property. Negotiations ensued, and it was agreed that, for \$10,000, a down payment of \$2,500 and assumption of the first mortgage, Mr. Lightbourn would take back a second for the balance, provided his son had a role in the



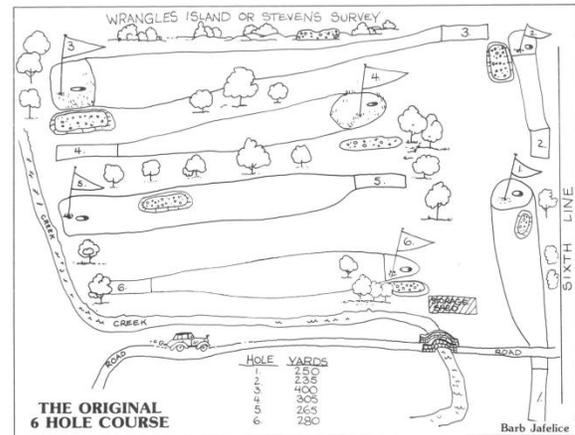
governance of the new club until the mortgage was repaid.

The next hurdle was to raise the funds to close the deal and construct the golf course. Both Stuart and Ted commuted to Toronto every weekday on the 8:03 train and knew a lot of their fellow commuters. Ted was also a member of an impromptu bridge group that gathered most afternoons on the returning train (trains were slower in those days). These early commuters would be their first targets.

They were right about the reception. Within a few weeks, they had more than their goal of 100 subscriptions.

The next problem was design. "I know the pro at Toronto pretty well," said Stuart. "And he knows Stanley Thompson, the guy who designed most of the golf courses around here. Maybe he'd help us out."

George Cummings did agree to help, on the condition he could play a ceremonial first round with some of his pals. He laid out a six hole design that straddled the little valley of Munn's Creek, meandering up and down its gentle slopes to take full advantage of the terrain.



By May 31 they were ready to go. They owned the land and had a design. Construction started immediately and by July the new golf course was ready for that ceremonial first round, to which Cummings had invited William Freeman, Nicol Thompson, and George Lyons.

Freeman and Thompson were pros at the Lambton and Hamilton golf clubs. Lyons was eight times amateur champion of Canada, playing out of Lambton. Unfortunately, there is no record of their scores.

Cummings' son, Lou, then 17, became the first pro, and the club's first president was the duly appointed Ted Lightbourn, a position he held until 1934, probably when the mortgage was paid off. Ted was also a charter member of the Oakville Club and the Oakville Lawn Bowling Club, and later became Sunday School Superintendent at St. Jude's.

Stuart Brown (below) and Ted Lightbourn in later life are part of the rogues' gallery wall in the



Oak room.



Ban Taylor, whose bout of rheumatic fever led to the conversion of a cow pasture into the beautiful golf course we enjoy today, never served in an executive position at the club, but his recovery was complete. This is evidenced by the fact much of the preceding narrative is based on conversations he had over 30 years ago with Fred Oliver, president of the club just prior to its 60th anniversary in 1981. Ban Taylor would have been well into his eighties then. Fred passed away February, 2011 at 87.

As for tennis, the club soon installed two grass courts, in 1923, under the direction of Stuart Brown, probably with the collusion of Ban, but the courts were lost to the parking lot as the automobile became predominant after the Second World War.

Sheep continued to graze the property that summer of 1921 but the land to the west by the Sixteen was acquired in the fall. By 1922, the course was fully laid out. The six holes had become nine and the farmhouse was the new clubhouse.



The upper floor had two bedrooms, occupied in the early years by two women who made sandwiches and served refreshments to the members. They were the aunts of our Cameron Grout, whose grandfather was one of the original subscribers.

That clubhouse is long gone, replaced as the 1975 season was drawing to a close.



Under the direction of the club's then president, J.F. Kennedy, on October 28 that year members voted to construct a new building. The contract was awarded to Pinetree Construction of Oakville for \$265,616.



That structure served the membership well for many years, but time took its toll and in 2007 a major renovation was undertaken – but the bones of the old building remain, hidden under a classical structure that fully complements the beauty of the rest of the Oakville Golf Club - a hidden gem in the heart of the town that grew up around it. Ban Taylor, Stuart Brown, Frank Worrell, Ted Lightbourn and the rest of the subscribers from that far away time would be very pleased with what the club's subsequent stewards have achieved over the intervening nine decades, and there is no doubt they are smiling upon us all from above as we commence our tenth decade.

