



The Game of Golf Comes to Grosse Pointe: The Founding of the Country Club of Detroit

by David Robb

Sometime around 1893, the first game of golf was played in Grosse Pointe, and a short time later the first formal golf course was built on Windmill Point. Then, in 1897, a new course was built on the grounds of the old Grosse Pointe Club, and a new club was formed. Here, David Robb recounts the story of those early days of golf, and the founding of the Country Club of Detroit.

IN 1884, UNDER the leadership of Louis Campau, Detroiters with a fondness for outdoor sports organized the Grosse Pointe Club. Then, in 1886, the members built an impressive clubhouse on property fronting on the lake off of Jefferson Avenue at Fisher Road. Although the beauties of Grosse Pointe were recognized by the original pioneers, this charm was insufficient to offset the terrors of riding a steam launch which made infrequent trips from the city to a dock near the clubhouse, or required a half day or the greater portion of the night on horseback or by carriage over impassable roads. As a result, interest waned and two years after it was opened, the clubhouse was closed. Shortly afterwards, it was reopened as the

Grosse Pointe Casino for summer residents and continued for another five years.

Coincidentally during this time, if you had been a young man who played baseball on Saturday afternoon at Senator James and Philip H. McMillan's property at Hamilton Park, their private race track on property embraced by Touraine-Vendome Roads, you would have been introduced to the mysteries of golf. It was about 1893, when the McMillans returned from a trip to Wales with a desire to play and to interest others in the game. One Saturday morning, they organized a group of farmers to cut the grass and lay down tees and greens for a golf course of either six or nine holes at Hamilton Park. The course was laid out in the morning and

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



Country Club of Detroit (old Grosse Pointe Club building), ca. 1898.
Photograph courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

was played on in the afternoon. This exercise went on for a couple of seasons: golf, with no green fees and no dues, but never on the Sabbath because the McMillans would not have approved.

Finally, in 1895, a group led by the McMillan sons, William C. and Philip H., along with W. Howie Muir, Benjamin S. Warren and Cameron Currie, decided that they could no longer infringe on the hospitality of the McMillans and asked James Foulis, an old school Scots professional at the Chicago Golf Club, to come over and consider land lying south of Jefferson Avenue along Fox Creek (at Alter Road) just inside the city limits of Detroit for a golf course. It was recalled by Ben Warren that when Mr. Foulis arrived, they waded the “course” in hip boots and decided that it might be utilized.

The club was imaginatively and appropriately named the “Wanikan Club” (or “Wanikin”) which is an Indian phrase meaning “Hole-in-the-Ground.” It was a nine hole course which ran from Jefferson Avenue toward Lake St. Clair and back with the so-called clubhouse being a small structure on Jefferson with one dressing room for the men and one for the women. The new club soon had 100 members.

The members played home-and-away matches with golfers from other cities, such as Cleveland and Grand Rapids. They were royally entertained at the clubs in those cities and on the way back from one of these matches in Grand Rapids decided that they should organize, obtain enough land for an 18 hole course, and find a clubhouse. Also, they felt that the proposed club should provide other athletic activities, including horseback riding, yachting, baseball, tennis and football.

Some members of the Detroit business community interested in forming such a country club in Grosse Pointe boarded the Newberry yacht at the Third Street Station in downtown Detroit, breakfasted aboard ship and went to view the Grosse Pointe Casino and property owned by Joseph H. Berry and the McMillan and Newberry estates lying on both sides of Fisher Road, which was available for lease. In addition, there was an old barn at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Fisher, where the Detroit United Railway waiting room was later built, which was available to serve as a stable for the horsemen and horsewomen.¹

A meeting was held at the Detroit Club on October 1, 1897 for incorporation of the Country Club of Detroit. Those who signed the Articles of Association were John H.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT

Avery, Edwin S. Barbour, Joseph H. Berry, Bethune Duffield, Charles F. Hammond, Frank J. Hecker, James H. McMillan, Truman H. Newberry, Henry Russel, Martin S. Smith, John S. Sweeney, J. Harrington Walker, Benjamin S. Warren, William H. Wells and Frank S. Werneken. The articles were filed on October 20th.

Negotiations were entered into with the syndicates composed of those who owned the Grosse Pointe Casino and the 404-foot lakefront property running to the Fisher Road-Jefferson Avenue area, which was purchased. Property that contained 25 acres extending along Fisher Road embracing the area now occupied by Grosse Pointe South High School and the Gabriel Richard Elementary School was also leased. The Casino was converted into a clubhouse and the leased land formed the golf course.

Ninety eight members of the Wanikin Club joined the new club as did others who belonged to the Detroit Athletic Club and the Detroit Riding Club. The active membership was 200, each of whom would pay a \$50.00 initiation fee and an annual subscription of \$25.00.

The 18 hole course was designed for players to tee off near the clubhouse and play to the first green, located on what is now the Grosse Pointe War Memorial parking lot. The first nine holes terminated near the present-day Gabriel Richard School. Returning toward the clubhouse, players passed over the present-day Grosse Pointe South High School property, through Beverly Road to the 18th green near the southwest corner of the clubhouse. The fairways were like present-day rough and playing length was 4,816 yards. The description of the course contained in the August 1898 issue of *Golf*, the official bulletin of the United States Golf Association, states that the tee for the second hole “is on Mr. Berry’s private ground and members have the privilege of walking through some of the most beautiful gardens in America.”² The course opened for play in June 1898 and had for its first professional W.H. Way, whose British heritage was required for a recently created golf club.

The 1898 issue of *Golf* went on to describe the new Country Club of Detroit as follows:

About eight miles from the City of Detroit, Mich. in the beautiful suburban settlement of Grosse Pointe Farms, has been established one of the handsomest country clubs in the “Middle West.” The clubhouse is on a point jutting out into Lake St. Clair, and its spacious verandas are kept cool by the refreshing lake breezes. At this peaceful spot the choicest spirits in Detroit society adjourn for relaxation, and the club is



Baseball at the turn-of-the-century was one of the most popular activities at the Country Club. Photograph courtesy of the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.



Tennis was a sport enjoyed by both men and women at the Country Club, ca. 1900. Photograph courtesy of the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.



Lining up a putt at the Country Club golf course. Photograph courtesy of the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.

¹ A picture of the DUR waiting room will be found in Tonnancour, Vol 1, p. 116.

² Views of the Berry estate “Edgemere” will be found in Tonnancour, Vol 1, p. 117, 130.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



Country Club of Detroit, side view.
Club house designed by Albert Kahn, 1907.
Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.

reached in thirty minutes from the heart of the city by a special switch that runs the electric cars right into the club grounds.

Within the house itself every care has been taken to afford the seeker of comfort and rest a haven of delight; and under the efficient management of steward Dwight A. Whitney, the club has the reputation of being the most recherché establishment in Michigan.

For the next few years the club flourished as golf became increasingly popular. Yet sailing was also very popular. A bathhouse was built for members and sailboats were purchased. Two cat boat sailing races were held every Saturday afternoon as well as summer races between yachts of club members. On the west side of Fisher Road were riding facilities, including a steeplechase course.

As the activities of the club became more popular, the membership grew to more than 400, and at its annual meeting in October 1904, the Board recommended the erection of a new clubhouse. The Board called attention to the condition of the old building, which was in need of extensive repair. It was estimated that at least \$20,000 was needed for repairs and that so large an outlay on an old building would not be wise. Sketch plans had been prepared by architect Albert Kahn, which were exhibited in advance of the meeting for inspection by the members.

In 1906 the Board retained Kahn to draw up final plans, construction was begun, and on May 30, 1907, the new clubhouse building was christened. This brick clubhouse opened to rave reviews. The following comment by W. Hawkins Ferry comes from his fine book *Buildings of Detroit*:

Considerable perspicacity was shown in the selection of Kahn as architect, for no one but a man of his imaginative endowments could have responded so admirably to the beauty of the surroundings. Without indulging in the pretentious or falsely picturesque, he was able to combine monumental sim-

plicity with formal charm.

The new clubhouse was a truly imposing structure with every detail planned for the comfort of the members. Rooms on the lower floor were furnished tastefully and luxuriously and of large size. This floor included the central hall or lobby, living room, card room, dining room, ladies room and a number of smaller apartments. The dining room, located on the east end of the building, was finished in light colors. Wide glass-enclosed verandas extended the full length of the building and on the west end a recessed porch overlooked the tennis courts and baseball field.

A massive staircase led to the floors above. On the second and third floors were sleeping rooms, twenty single rooms and nearly as many guest rooms. The guest rooms had a bath for every two rooms in a suite. The fourth floor contained accommodations for 40 bachelors. In the basement was a tap room, furnished in Old English style, a games room, heating plant and large kitchen. For the convenience of automobile owners a large garage was constructed on the northwest corner of the grounds.

The *Detroit News* also reported on the events at the new clubhouse on opening day, May 30, 1907:

Early in the morning automobiles began to arrive and by noon hundreds were lined up in front of the club house. Gay crowds all on pleasure bent filled the grounds and building. Golf, boat racing, tennis, base ball and several other sports were on the list to be participated in by the pleasure seekers. The ball game was a spirited contest, won by the "Blues" under the captaincy of A.I. Lewis, who defeated P.H. McMillan's Reds, 15 to 8. The score would have been different had not several of the outfielders hid behind the automobiles to escape catching flies.

There was to have been a yacht race between four 21-footers,



Lobby with Reading and Card Rooms adjoining.
Country Club of Detroit, 1907.

Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



Country Club of Detroit, front view.
Club house designed by Albert Kahn, 1907. Photograph courtesy of Manning Brothers.



Country Club of Detroit, rear view.
Club house designed by Albert Kahn, 1907. Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



A view along the first floor.
Country Club of Detroit, 1907. Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.



View of the lobby with the stairway to the second floor.
Country Club of Detroit, 1907.
Note the Pewabic tile over the fireplace at right.
Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.



A corner of the parlor.
Country Club of Detroit, 1907.
Photograph courtesy of Albert Kahn Associates.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



Baseball game on the grounds of the Country Club of Detroit, August 27, 1910.
Photograph courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Cleveland of C.Y.C., Otsiketa and Ste. Claire of the Country Club and Borealis, of the Tawas Beach Yachting Association. The race was not pulled off on account of lack of wind but the prize for this race being a box of cigars, Dr. C.G. Jennings, captain of the Otsiketa, flipped a coin with the others and pulled off the championship.

A noticeable feature of the opening was the array of steam yachts among which were *Pastime*, owned by D.H. Walker, *Galatea*, E.S. Ford, *Truant*, T.H. Newberry, and D. Ferguson's *Vita*. R.A. Alger's motor boat *Hunch* was also on hand and its beauty was commended on every side.

During the 1900s the Country Club burgee, with its signature "Fleur de Lis" became a symbol of sailing excellence among the members of the Inter Lakes Yachting Association, and the cat boat races and annual regatta were considered leading events of their kind on the Great Lakes. Some of the fastest boats on fresh water flew Country Club colors, including the Ste. Claire, Borealis, Otsiketa, Gamble, and Shake.

The majestic Kahn designed building and its surroundings became a focal point for Grosse Pointe social and sport activities. Situated on the shores of the lake with an unobstructed view for many miles, the constantly passing procession of members yachts and other vessels, the adjoining tennis courts, baseball field, and golf course only a short distance away, the setting in the summertime was unparalleled. In the winter there were balls, parties and other social activities within, while members' ice boats skimmed across the lake in front of the clubhouse.

Within a short period of time, due to the greater accessi-

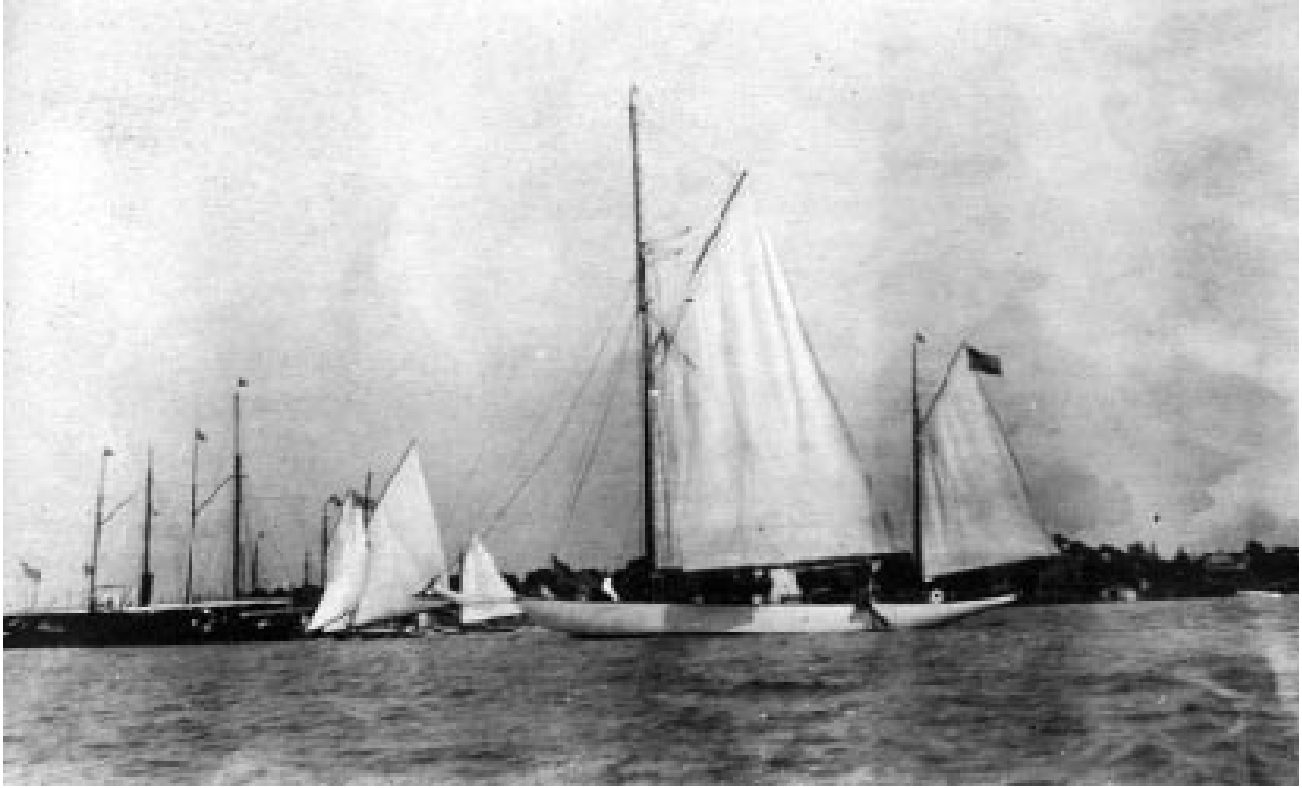
bility of Grosse Pointe and the increase in land values, the golf course, which was on leased land, became too valuable and the club began to look elsewhere. In 1906 the club was unable to renew its lease on the Joseph Berry property (now McKinley Place) through which ran the second hole, and golfing was made more difficult when the first tee was moved to the southeast corner of the present-day Grosse Pointe South High School property.

In 1910 the Board decided to buy the Weir Farm, a property which ran from what is now Irvine Lane to a point north of Provencal Road and extending from Lake St. Clair to Mack Avenue. On the advice of Harry Colt, a well known English golf architect, the club bought the Lewis Farm for \$55,000, a 106 acre strip which ran from Kercheval Avenue to Mack Avenue and was bounded on the south by present-day County Club Drive. In February 1911 blueprints of the property were sent to Mr Colt, construction was begun, and the course opened for play in 1912.

From 1912 until 1923, the club operated from two locations. While a locker room and pavilion had been built at the golf course and a polo field and stables in the trees beyond the original polo field were constructed (now a maintenance building), the clubhouse on the lake remained the focal point for other social activities, sailing, baseball and tennis. The Polo Team was organized in 1915 and the ponies were stabled at the Grosse Pointe Hunt Club. When matches were held at other cities around the Great Lakes, the ponies were transported aboard D & C boats.

Having social and athletic activities at one site and the golf course located at another proved difficult, and at a meeting of the members of the club on September 16, 1920, authori-

THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY CLUB OF DETROIT



*Sailing and yacht racing were always one of the most popular activities during the early years of the Country Club of Detroit.
Photograph courtesy of the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.*

zation was obtained to issue bonds to “build a suitable clubhouse adapted to the needs of golf, tennis and other sports to be built on the upper property and that the grounds of that property be laid out with a view of concentrating there all sports except water sports.” The bond issue was secured by 450 feet of property on Lake Shore Drive, about 80 acres north of Mack Avenue, and the triangular section adjoining Grosse Pointe Boulevard and the golf course. The plans however did not contemplate the sale of the old clubhouse property (the corner of Fisher Road and Jefferson Avenue). The 450 foot frontage described was located “on the north side of Lake Shore Drive between Provencal Road and Weir Lane.”

In the end, the sailing enthusiasts lost the battle to remain on the lake and the golfers prevailed so that Albert Kahn was again commissioned to design a new clubhouse. The clubhouse property at Fisher Road and Jefferson Avenue was sold to Mrs. Horace Dodge and became the site of her mansion, Rose Terrace. It was reported that after the construction of the clubhouse on the golf course, it was intended that a causeway would be built on the 450 feet of property at the end of Provencal on the lake shore so that yachting, swimming and other aquatic sports which had been removed

from the club program by the sale of the old clubhouse on the lake would be restored. However, such a program was never implemented and the sailing enthusiasts built their own clubhouse on the lake adjacent to the old clubhouse property, and named it the Grosse Pointe Club (“Little Club”), which today enjoys an equally attractive setting, proud heritage, and membership.

In reflection, the move of the Country Club continued a proud architectural and social history, and a legacy of prominence in the affairs of Grosse Pointe. At its time by the lake, the Country Club of Detroit, in whatever season, possessed attractions seldom equalled and never excelled.

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