

A HISTORY OF THE EATON COUNTRY CLUB

Recollections of William H. Hiestand

September 28, 1983

Lest there be any doubt in your minds, let me confess that I was born in July, 1901, meaning by this that I was of an age to live through the beginnings of the Eaton Country Club. All those happenings are somewhat vivid in my memory. Therefore, at the request of several members, I will jot down for those who might be interested and for posterity some of the facts of the early days of the Eaton Country Club.

The exact dates are somewhat difficult to place, but I cannot be off very far and after all what does a short time back then mean to us now when we generalize about the question "How"?

In about 1912, Walter G. Shannon, who was an insurance agent in Eaton, was called to Chicago by his company to attend a meeting. After a morning session, one of his friends told him that he was going out to play golf that afternoon. He asked Walter to join him. This was the first time Walter had been on a golf course. In playing around, "W. G." as we called him, fell in love with the game. His friend gave him a couple of old clubs and he proudly came home to pursue the game. He lived at 623 East Main Street, where Jake Earley now lives. With a spacious backyard he collected lots of corn cobs with which to practice, because he had no golf balls.

He soon contacted some of his friends, namely: Walter Tyrrell, Fred Filbert, Hugh Gilmore, my father, A. J. Hiestand, and my uncle, Robert Hiestand and told them of the wonders of golf. They suggested they look around for a place where they could put in a couple of holes and play golf. After a search for a location they found the lower field where holes number 5, 6, and 7 now are located.

Some 69 acres composed the entire farm which was owned by Elam Fisher. The ground was very bad having lots of clay in the soil. The lower field was the only tillable ground. I remember when I was young seeing that field planted in corn year after year. At that time the good ground in Preble County was producing 60 bushels of corn per acre but that field would burn out and was lucky to produce 20 bushels per acre. After long dickering an agreement was reached to buy all 69 acres for \$8,000.00 and an option was taken. Then to raise the money.

Recollections of William H. Hiestand

A corporation was formed, stock was issued and townspeople were solicited to buy the stock as a civic project. J. E. Parker, Sr. was active in many ways in the organization. He influenced H. H. (Chuck) Hawkins, who was an employee of J. E. Parker and Co., to take the job of Secretary-Treasurer. He also influenced Elam Fisher to sell the land for the original amount, without an increase in price, by a little chicanery. As the years past, the option was to run out on March 15, 1920. It was getting serious because the purchase price had not been raised. So my father and Griff Rensman came to the rescue. They loaned the Club the \$8,000 at no interest, to pay the option and they took a deed for land as security. This deed was recorded on March 15, 1920. During the next year, the money was raised and the Eaton Country Club Company paid off my father and Griff Rensman. The Eaton Country Club received their deed which is dated February 26, 1921. The first step had been a success. In the meantime, with the option taken, the Eaton Country Club Company was organized and shares of stock were being sold at \$100 per share.

So the Eaton Country Club was organized. They established rules of operation, set the annual dues at \$25 for a couple and all children living at home, and elected officers. Arrangements were made to proceed with the development of the golf course and its operation.

The lower field was disced and grass planted. Grass was planted on other parts of the course. Ab Tyrrell (Walter Tyrrell's brother) was hired as caretaker. Ab Tyrrell had a horse and together with a single small mower, which he hitched to the horse, mowed the fairways by leading the horse around. The greens were formed by using a hand mower which was set very low, right out of the fairway. A hole in the middle of the green was a can which was seldom moved. It was difficult for a man leading a horse with a small mower to cut all the grass. Walter Tyrrell was a stock buyer and he had purchased a large number of sheep. He suggested the sheep be turned loose on the course to keep the grass down. It worked fine, but sheep have no respect for golf greens, but the problem was solved by placing a broom at each green. No one seemed to mind if the green had to be swept before he puttied. There was no such thing as a wooden tee as we have now. At each tee was a wooden box with sand in it. You would get a big pinch of sand and construct it to a point and tee your ball in that manner.

Recollections of William H. Hiestand

It was time to do something about the course. The services of Bill Sime were sought. He was the chief designer of golf clubs for the Crawford-MacGregor Company in Dayton. Bill Sime was a very special person. For many years, I would simply go to his office and he would pick out the clubs I should have; hickory shafts, of course. Number one tee was located opposite the iron bridge, next to the tree by the iron gate. You can still see the small raised tee there. Numbers of problems were overcome. On the present number one fairway north of the gully, you have seen a depression. That was the location of a skeet shooting place. A small building housed a boy who would release the clay birds which broke all over the fairway. It was a problem to clean up the mess, so the club ended the skeet shooting. The present number three and four fairways were in bad shape. A mass of thistles and large weeds along with thousands of rocks were a handicap to golfers. Every Thursday was declared as clean-up day. The membership would turn out for work, donating their time, and some trucks, and would pick up rocks and cut weeds. After some years a good fairway blossomed and their labors were rewarded.

At one time there was a tennis court at the club and they were excellent courts. The courts were located on the present number five fairway some 140 yards south of the present tee. You will notice a flat place in the fairway where they were located. A lot of good tennis was played there, but the young boys like John Parker and myself could only use the courts after we rolled them and marked the lines and until John Dye, Sr., Lee Schlenker, and Joe Wilson and others came and chased us away.

Despite the relative rough conditions of the club, there was a good amount of enthusiastic golf played. The women were active and played regularly. Once a week, Bertha Gilmore, Anna Tyrrell, Mable Hooper, my mother, Nell Hiestand, and my aunt, Lis Hiestand, and others would play nine holes. There would usually be seven women, and they hired me to caddy for them. I would carry four bags and watch seven balls and was paid the grand sum of 35¢.

So the club prospered and interest was high and in 1917 the members talked about a clubhouse. The location created a controversy. Some of the members wanted the clubhouse located on the present site, and some wanted it to be located on the present number eight tee so the clubhouse would be accessible from the iron bridge.

Recollections of William H. Hiestand

The present location won by a very close vote and everyone resolved their differences.

My uncle, Harvey Hiestand, designed the building. John E. Parker agreed to build the fireplace. He collected stones from all over the county for the fireplace. Others contributed time, material, and labor. The club house was quite a contribution to Eaton, and for many years the social activities centered around it. Bridge parties and dances were numerous and added to the social life of Eaton. The Eaton Country Club prospered and became a valued asset to the community.

In 1922 Fred Filbert was President of the Club. He organized a golf tournament to determine the club champion and also donated the cup. It so happened that I played Fred in the finals. He threatened me that if I won he would not donate the cup, but I won nevertheless. In 1933-1934 the financial depression in the country affected the club. Members had a problem paying the \$25 dues. At the annual meeting several had not paid. I made a few remarks to the effect that the club needed the money to operate and if the members did not pay their dues, they should be denied the privileges of membership. So I was elected President which I held for two years. The By-Laws stated the method of payment and I had to enforce them to the extent that several people were denied the privileges of membership. It was a difficult time.

The golf course needed ~~to~~ changes. Nothing had been done to modernize it. Bill Sime was again consulted to recommend the necessary changes. We borrowed about \$4,000 and hired Burns and Curry to do much of the work. Number three green was changed and enlarged to its present size. Number six and eight were also enlarged (as a matter of fact all the greens were enlarged). The hill at number seven was cut back and the ramp built. Previously the hill had extended farther east making a blind shot to the green. I don't know how many of you remember, but at one time there was a caddy shack located beneath the present number one tee. The boys would sit in there and play cards until they got a caddying job.

The pro at Miami Valley Country Club at this time was Nipper Campbell. Nipper had come from Scotland. He also won the U. S. Open Championship. He lived in the house at the far side of number one green at Miami

Recollections of William H. Hiestand

Valley Country Club. Around his house he had a large bed of creeping bent grass. Our board purchased enough of that bent grass to plant on all of our greens. Nipper and his crew prepared the greens and planted the grass. We owe a special thanks to Nipper and his crew for our fine greens. Nipper Campbell also instructed us in the care of the greens, and as problems arose, he would be consulted and advise us on the proper procedures. For a number of years we were plagued with webs on the greens which would collect dew at night, and the hot sun of the next day would burn the green. To correct this, nine of the golfers were assigned to a green. Each morning we would go to our green at 6 a.m. and with a bamboo pole, break the webs. The result--we saved the greens.

During subsequent years many things have transpired at the club. Also many improvements have been added to the course and to the club house. Certainly one of the biggest improvements was the acquisition of the field to the west. It changed number nine hole and added a shag field. The clubhouse was enlarged by enclosing the porch at the south side and building the dining room to the east.

I am happy to write these comments because we should not forget the heritage left to us by those early pioneers for a golf club. Hard times, yes; but they had the vision and determination to create a valued asset for our community. Let us then appreciate what they left us and make it a continued and valued part of living in such a fine place as Eaton, Ohio.

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