

HISTORY OF THE BINGHAMTON COUNTRY CLUB

Our Club originated on April 4, 1889 and was first known as the Broome County Country Club. The founders were young men from Binghamton and Broome County; and their connection to the newly introduced game of golf is obscure at best.

At any rate, these men, active in local businesses such as banking, insurance, lumber, paper and chemicals, retailing, tanning, furniture manufacturing, proprietary medicines and cigar making, must have had at least some advanced knowledge of the game of golf in order to start their own club and thus to further its popularity in our area. The names of our founders, Phelps, Kilmer, Weed, Corbitt, Barlow, Bayless, Ross and Strong, etc., ring a bell with anyone familiar with the history of our area and its development.

The BCC is now recognized as approximately the 20th oldest club in the country by the U.S. Golf Association. Its beginnings were humble, with a leased clubhouse and an open area for golf on what is now Floral Avenue located at the western extreme of the City of Binghamton.

By the turn of the last century, a six-hole golf course was constructed and utilized near the present day Union-Endicott High School. In November 1904 the club was reorganized and incorporated under the name "Binghamton Country Club" and its charter was adopted "...to encourage the playing of golf and other games and sports..." At about the same time, 65 acres of the "Davis farm" along the Susquehanna was leased and a nine-hole golf course measuring 2,931 yards was constructed. Soon a clubhouse was also built, south of Main Street in the area then known as Hooper (now Endwell), and south of the current Peppermill Restaurant. In 1905, BCC purchased that property and financed the purchase and clubhouse construction with a mortgage to Alonzo Roberson, founder of Roberson Center. That old clubhouse remains, as a private residence, and remnants of the old golf course can still be recognized.

America's first native-born PGA member, Jack Brett, was soon hired as its first golf professional/greenskeeper/clubmaker.

After World War I, and anticipating the great growth and popularity of golf, American golf courses and country club expansion, the Board of Governors sought the services of A. W. Tillinghast, a fledgling, but renowned American form golf course architect, to help the Board determine a site for either expansion of its existing property or an entirely new course and club facilities. In the Fall of 1920, Tillinghast came to town and rejected a number of locations proposed and favored by the membership. Tillinghast's displeasure with the proposals turned to delight when the present property was discovered and as Tillinghast described it, "...I considered this site one of the very best which it has been my pleasure to examine in a long time..."

Under Tillinghast's hands-on supervision, the course was built and the Spanish style clubhouse, so popular in the 1920s was built, and both opened in August of 1923. This was during national prohibition, of course, but alcohol, however, had been banned from the clubrooms from the very beginning in the Club's Charter.

Because of these facts, the restaurant and dining facilities were quite limited. The club pro, Jack Brett, his wife and young daughter, occupied the apartment located in the rear of the new clubhouse.

The twenties witnessed an era of great popularity and growth of BCC and golf in the country.

With the nationwide depression, came tough times for BCC, as with all other country clubs across the nation. Chester B. Lord, then president of the First National Bank, helped keep the club afloat during that period with his leadership, supervision and contributions. The sale of land between the clubhouse and Country Club Road, and north of the 7th hole was necessary to make ends meet toward the end of the depression. During the war years, during the winter, the clubhouse was rented to IBM which converted it for use as a dormitory for students at the original "IBM School".

Thursday night bingo and slot machines were the main supplement to club income during the '50s. Membership rose to over 400 in all classifications after the "house membership" was adopted in 1946. The original mortgage was paid off in 1947 and various refinancing schemes have continued for the course and facility improvement and reconstruction right up to the present day. Still, the Club remains affordable, and members receive their money's worth.

The golf course has remained essentially the same as Tillie designed it. However, the 2nd hole, originally a 100 yard pitch to a severe back to front sloped green, has been overhauled and redesigned twice, at substantial expense and with questionable results. The number 4 green was enlarged to the rear, lengthening the rather short par 5, but at the same time eliminating the treacherous putting surface of the old green as designed. The present 10 tee is "new" (approximately 50 years); the old tee itself is still visible in the woods short of the 9th green. It was felt that safety required the change of location; but the work did alter its design and the manner in which the hole was meant to be played. The 6th green and, it is believed, the 13th green also have been flattened somewhat, but otherwise, the course remains the same; however, the various tree plantings and tree growth have changed somewhat the design and playability concept of Tillinghast; hopefully tree removal and other restoration will occur in future plans.

A different story exists with the other facilities. The clubhouse has been renovated from the classic Spanish design with arches and stucco to the present day attractive building with a functional and comfortable interior. The terrace dining room addition and doubling of the dining area took place in the '70s. The huge swimming pool and locker area built in the late 1950s just plain wore out, and has been replaced by a smaller pool and locker area; much of the old swim facility was incorporated into a very attractive men and ladies locker room and present day pro shop. The outdoor patio was built in the '70s and has been used to its full extent in season. The club interior and dining areas have been enlarged and modified to meet the changing demands of the membership. The original dining area, only about 15 feet wide, and the former wrap-around bar are now only fond memories of the older members. The ballroom remains essentially the same with various redecorating schemes occurring during the past 75 years.

In the '70s, under the initiative of Jim Brewster and a number of other members, platform tennis was introduced to the Club and has remained a popular cold weather activity for the membership.

The original caddy shack and its numerous replacements has now evolved into a 2-story stucco structure and stores about 75 motorized golf carts, golf bags and modern mechanized hand carts. The wooden storage barn is gone and replaced by an up to date facility and two storage structures; the halfway house has evolved from a cold drink stand to a full-fledged “short order” restaurant as a result of a building program in the late ‘80s.

The early ‘90s also saw the introduction of a practice area and expansion of the parking lot across Robinson Hill Road.

The irrigation system installed in the ‘60s has given way to a state of the art computerized system, put into use in 2001.

Initiation fees, capital assessments and dues remain fair, and the membership enjoys a unique ambience among its members.

BCC prides itself on this esprit de corps and the fact that “you can always get a game” at our Club.

Dick Ringwood

BCC Historian