The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



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**Gene Venzke** in 1936 as a member of the U.S. Olympic team.

#### Racin' 'Round Riverside

Gene Venzke, on June 17, 1941, shot a 91 at Riverside Golf Club. While the 20-overpar score was decidedly unremarkable, his playing time was not. Venzke traversed the 18 holes, covering about 3.5 miles, in 42 minutes, 49 seconds. His round included a par, a birdie 2 on the 3rd hole, 11 bogies, four doubles and a quadruple bogey 8 on the 8th, which consumed about four minutes. He averaged about 2 minutes 20 seconds per hole and about 12 minutes per mile.

**Carl Bauer**, club manager, and **Chick Hart**, Riverside's pro, followed Venzke in a car and handed him his clubs.

Venzke playing speedy golf was no surprise. In his day, Venzke was one of the world's top runners. In 1936, he set indoor world records for the 1500-meter and one-mile runs. He competed collegiately for the University of Pennsylvania.

From 1946 to 1991, Venzke owned a driving range in the area now occupied by Lowes, just up the road from Reading Country Club. He died in 1992.

### **Golf Comes to Berks County**

I came across an article from the *Reading Eagle*, April 9, 1939, that cites a paper about golf in Berks County written by G. Howard Bright, who is described as a Berks County golf enthusiast and historian. Mr. Bright was a founder of Berkshire Country Club in 1897 and was elected the club's first president. The article stated that the paper was in the archives of the Berks Historical Society.

On March 20, 2015, I sent a query to the Henry Janssen Library at the Historical Society, asking if they had Mr. Bright's paper. They did. And now I have it. You can read the article on the following pages.

Although the paper is not dated, there are clues that help place it in time. In describing Reading Country Club, Mr. Bright reports that the "...club is now engaged in building a very large new club house...". RCC opened the clubhouse in May 1931.

The penultimate paragraph describes Manor Golf Club as having been completed "a few years ago." Manor's web site dates the course to 1928. A *Reading Eagle* article of May 17, 1925, describes a new golf course under construction near Fritztown that was expected to open later that year. The golf course wasn't named, but the description fits the Manor to a tee.

So let's say Mr. Bright wrote the paper in 1930.

Findlay overlooked. Mr. Bright has handed down a first-person look at golf in the early days. For some reason, however, he overlooks Alexander Findlay's contributions to Berks County golf. Mr. Findlay designed the Reading Country Club golf course in 1922 (*Reading Eagle*, October 22, 1922), he designed the first nine holes at Galen Hall Golf Club (*Reading Eagle*, October 3, 1913) – Or did he? See below – he consulted on the design of Berkshire Country Club (*Reading Eagle*, November 22, 1920), and he designed the now-defunct Riverside Golf Club (*Reading Eagle*, July 9, 1930), along the Schuylkill River near Leisz's Bridge in Muhlenberg Township, which opened in July 1931. The golf course was built by William R. Luden, the candy magnate. Riverside closed in the mid-1940s, having been condemned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for construction of a silt basin as part of the Schuylkill River clean-up project.

Mr. Bright's statement on page 11 that Galen Hall was opened in 1920 is in error. An article in the *Reading Eagle*, October 3, 1913, reports that guests at the Galen Hall resort were enjoying the 9-hole golf course that opened July 1 of that year. And there is this from the Galen Hall web site: "The fifteenth hole at Galen Hall was designed and built in 1917 by famed golf course architect A.W. Tillinghast when he added nine holes to the existing golf course."

**The real architect.** But there's more. In his column of April 24, 1942, *Reading Eagle* sports editor Bill Reedy wrote a tribute to Alex Findlay, who had died on April 17. His column includes this: "Contrary to general belief, Findlay is not the real architect for the Galen Hall course. He did some designing on the original nine holes, which then consisted of what are now the first eight holes and the 18<sup>th</sup> hole. [Reedy does not name the 'real architect.'] When the course was extended to 18, Findlay was consulted, but Donald Ross, of Pinehurst, did the real work for he had become quite famous as a golf course architect and still is."

Looks like all three—Findlay, Tillinghast, Ross—touched Galen Hall.

Interestingly, Mr. Bright notes that the name Berkshire Country Club "...was the first time...Berkshire was applied to anything in this section of the country. Previous to this time, Berkshire only meant western Massachusetts." (Page 6.) The name Berks County is from William Penn's home in England, Berkshire.

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

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The Beginning of Golf in Berks County

When Mr. J. Bennett Nolan asked me to write a paper on
"The Beginning of Golf in Berks County", he said that he wanted to get a
record of this matter before we old fellows, who were there at the start,
were dead.

Once upon a time Two Scotchmen were walking home one evening, after their usual eighteenholes. They did not have much to say to each other and their path lead
beside the cemetery. Sandy turned and said, "Jock, that is the last hole".

In assembling this data, I have been materially aided by

Mr. Alexander F. Smith and Mr. George W. Delany, who were kind enough to

give me many facts which I did not have. While my paper is on "Golf in

Berks County", I would like to tell you a little about how golf started in

Historical Society

the United States.

"Golf first began to attract serious attention in the United States sometime during the early and middle '80s when such pioneers as Charles B. MacDonald, Robert Lockhart, T. A. Bell and George Wright carried clubs and balls into the country. The early history of golf in the United States is shrouded in a fog of doubt. Out of this fog, two facts seem well established. One is that the first actual bona fide golf club, organized as such, was the St. Andrews golf club of Yonkers, N. Y., which in 1888 constructed and played over a six-hole course. The other is that the Chicago golf club was the first to construct a full eighteen-hole course. This club, whose course was designed and constructed by Charles B. MacDonald, had eighteen-holes ready for play at Wheaton, Ill. in 1893. In the late '80s, J. Hamilton Gillespie, a young Scotchman heading a land syndicate, made a start at Sarasota, Fla., and about the same time T. A. Bell laid out four holes on a farm belonging to his father in what is now a part of the city

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

of Burlington, Ia. Bell claims to have been the first man to carry golf clubs into the United States. The first competition which assumed the nature of a national championship, was played at Newport, (R. I.) golf club, on Sept. 3-4, 1894. It was a stroke play competition over thirty-six-holes and was won by W. G. Lawrence with a total of 188 strokes, Charles B. MacDon finishing second with 189. In October of the same year a match play meeting was held at the St. Andrews golf club. It was won by L. B. Stoddart, who defeated MacDonald by one hole in the final match. Before the season of 1895 opened, the U. S. Golf Association was formed and held the first formal championship at the Newport golf club in October of that year. It was won by MacDonald, who defeated C. E. Sands of St. Andrews in the final match. Five clubs made up the charter members of the association. They were the Newport golf club, Newport, R. I., the Shinnecock Hills golf club, Southampton, L. I., the Country club, Brookline, Mass., St. Andrews golf clue and the Chicago golf club.

The year 1895 also saw the first open championship as well as the first championship for women. The former was held at the Newport golf club at thirty-six-holes. It was won by Horace Rawlins with a total of 173 strokes. The women's championship was played at the Meadowbrook club, L. I., and was won by Mrs. C. S. Brown, who scored 132 for the eighteen-holes. It is further noteworthy that 1895 saw a marked growth in the number of golf clubs in the country. From about 40 at the beginning of the year, the number had increased to more than 100 by the end.

Naturally enough, in the early days of the game its leading exponents both in administration and playing skill were men and women who had first taken to it in the British Isles. For several players so trained were the successful competitors for championship honours both among amateurs and professionals. But by 1900 Walter J. Travis, who developed his game in the

9\_

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

United States, though an Australian by birth, succeeded in winning the amateur championship. He repeated this triumph in 1901 and 1903, and since that time only once has a foreign-born player won the title, Harold H. Hilton of England winning at the Apawamis club of Rye, N. Y., in 1911. In professional circles, a longer period was required to develop a native-born champion. The first instructors were mostly Scots with a few English, and these dominated the open championship until 1912, when John J. McDermot t became the first American-born player to win the open championship.

Meantime, as far back as 1904, Walter J. Travis had won the British amateur championship at Sandwich, a feat which in the early days was the outstanding achievement of American golf. McDermott's victory in 1912 marked another step in the general advance, and the following year another event took place entitled to rank along with the fine performance of Travis. This was the victory of Francis Ouimet, a 20-year-old amateur, in the open championship. Harry Vardon and Ted Ray, famous British professionals, competed in the championship and up until quite near the finish seemed destined to make sure of the title with a tie for first place. But Ouimet, a late starter, finished brilliantly to tie with the two visitors. In the play-off on the following day, under unfavourable conditions dur to rain, he defeated his two competitors, scoring 72 against 77 by Vardon and 78 by Ray. Travis's victory at Sandwich had provided a big stimulus to the growth of the game in 1904 and the succeeding years, but Ouimet's performance added still greater impetus, and the game took on a big expansion in all sections of the country. Its growth was moving by leaps and bounds until the entry of the United States into the World War checked it temporarily. But not, however, until Robert T. Jones, familiarly known throughout the golfing world as "Bobby", made his first entry into big competitions.

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

At the age of 14 Jones entered his first amateur championship at the Merion cricket club in 1916. A preliminary qualifying test of 36 holes was played before match play was begun. On the first eighteen-holes, he led the entire field. His showing on the second round was not so flattering, but he qualified easily, and won his first two matches. His opponent in the second of these was Eben M. Byers, who had held the title in 1906. When beaten in the third match, he bowed to none other than Robert A. Gardner the defending champion. Eight years later Jones returned to Merion to win his first amateur title. A year previous, he had won the open championship at the Inwood Country club in Long Island, and had finished second in defending this title at the Oakland Hills Country club of Detroit, earlier in the summer, before his triumph at Merion. He again won the amateur in 1925, and also tied for the open with Willie MacFarlane, a Scottish-born professional, but lost in the play-off, which went thirty-six-holes, the two still being level at the end of the first eighteen.

In 1926, Jones won the British open championship, and incidentally set up a record for the preliminary qualifying play with rounds of 66 and 68 at the Lytham and St. Anne's club. A few weeks later, he again won the U.S. open at the Scioto Country club of Columbus, O., so that for a brief period he held three national titles at the same time: the British open, the U.S. open and the U.S. amateur. However, he was beaten by George Von Elm in the amtumn of 1926 in defending the last-named title at the Baltusrol golf club, Short Hills, N.J. In 1927, after regaining this, he returned to Scotland and won the British open for the second year in succession - the first time this was done since James Braid won in 1908. Incidentally his total for the seventy-two-holes of play at St. Andrews was 285, six strokes better than the second player, and six strokes better

### Byron Nelson RCC Pro 1937-39

# **The Golf Chronicles**

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

than the best previous title-winning total on the historic course. At the age of 25 Jones had won the U. S. amateur three times, the open twice and the British open twice, and besides had been the runner-up twice in the amateur and twice in the open, a record unequalled in the annals of modern. golf, considering his age and the limited time in which it was compiled.

Owing to the World War there were no national championships during 1917-18, though certain other lesser championships were held. But beginning in 1919, the national events were resumed, and with this resumption came still another very extensive growth of the game and a marked advance in the level of play judged on an international basis."

(Encyclopedia Britannica)

At this time there were about 100 golf clubs in existance in the United States. The Berkshire Country Club was within the first hundred and as many of these clubs are now out of existence, it is fairly safe to say that the Berkshire Country Club is among the first 75 in this country.

The first record I can find of any golf playing in Reading, was on Eckert's lot back of the residence of the late George F. Baer.

Miss Minnie Bossler, of Carlisle, Penna., had brought a set of clubs from England. In the summer of 1896, Miss Bossler and Miss Mary Baer asked some of their friends to come to Eckert's lot and try a few golf shots. Two very crude holes were laid out on this lot and a great deal of amusement and derision was provided for the neighbors.

In the summer of 1897, Mr. Alexander F. Smith went to Scotland to take a look at his old home in the Highlands. When there, some of his old friends persuaded him to play golf. He had never played before, although he was born in Scotland, for up to that time, golf was looked upon all over the world as a game for old men only. Mr. Smith brought his clubs home to America and that fall the writer frequently saw Mr. Smith board a trolley

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

car at Fifth & Penn Streets with a few clubs in his hand, bound for the country where he could try out some shots in the open fields.

In October 1897, I called up Mr. Smith on the phone and a sked him if he would assist in organizing a golf club here in Reading. He was very enthusiastic about the matter and we held a meeting in the Board of Trade rooms. Those present were - Messrs. M. B. McKnight, Frank Livingood, J. Lancaster Repplier, George Gross, John Archer, William McIlvain, Wilson Ferguson, Herbert Green, Alexander F. Smith, John J. Kutz and myself.

We organized a golf club and the writer was elected the president.

Herbert Green wrote the by-laws and named the club the Berkshire Country Club.

Incidentally, this was the first time the name Berkshire was applied to anything in this section of the country. Previous to this time, Berkshire only meant western Massachusetts. (Return to page 1.)

I remember well how Mr. Green and I worked on the by-laws; and after the job was finished "dear old Herbert" dictated in his beautiful English, the by-laws and constitution. In finishing, Mr. Green told the young man who took the notes to try to have the copy by the next day. The young man replied, "All right Mr. Green, I will do so after I have put it in good English".

Having organized our club, the next thing to do was get grounds for a golf course, and the Traction Company, through Mr. John Rigg, offered us the use of some land at Carsonia and also the first floor of a stone house adjacen. John Reid, a professional from Atlantic City, laid out the course composed of six-holes. A stream ran through the property and I well remember one particular hole where the water was about forty yards from the tee. Mr. Smith was the only man in our club who could carry this tremendous hazard with the driver. All the rest of us would have to play short and take it on our second shot.

#### Byron Nelson RCC Pro 1937-39

# **The Golf Chronicles**

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

The balls we used were called gutty balls. They were made with a solid rubber core with fine rubber wound around it. Most of us remember having played with these balls, and one of the reasons for the great improvement in scores during the past decade, is due to the new lively ball which, of course, is very much superior to the old gutty.

We stayed at Carsonia one summer only and found the land was not well suited to our purpose on account of numerous streams and marshes, and in the spring of 1899, we made arrangements with the Reading Suburban Real Estate Co. to occupy the vacant land surrounding the suburban town of Wyomissing, where a nine-hole golf course, 2159 yards in length was laid out by

Mr. Alexander Smith and the writer. The first club house was on the Harrisburg Pike, but in 1900 we leased the residence of John B. Mull on the Wyomissing Boulevard and occupied this house for club purposes.

All of us are apt to look back to the days of our youth and think that that was the time we had real fun. We certainly did enjoy the Wyomissing course, and the fact that most of us did not know much about golf, gave rise to many funny incidents. I remember one time playing with a lady who is in this audience tonight. We reached the fourth-hole, which extended to the west, to the boundary of Wyomissing. There was a great deal of clover in the rough, which I am afraid we often reached, and which was infested by many bees. On that day I suddenly felt a terrific pain on my thigh and I said to my partner, "please turn around quickly". The took in the situation and did so. I got the bee all right and we continued our game.

The Charter of the Berkshire Country Club was granted on the 15th day of August 1900 and the signers were - Wilson Ferguson, Wm. Kerper Stevens, Herbert R. Green, F. C. Smink, George F. Baer, G. H. Bright, M. B. McKnight, J. L. Repplier, John M. Archer, William Seyfert, Edwin L. Parvin.

In May 1902, the club purchased from Mr. George F. Baer, 60 acres of

#### Byron Nelson RCC Pro 1937-39

## **The Golf Chronicles**

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

farm land situated in Bern Township near Reading and a nine-hole golf course was laid out by John Reid, whom we then employed as a professional.

In telling you about the method of financing, I wish to quote from an article written by Mr. Herbert Green.

"Nor was the Berkshire Club, in its "budhood" days, lacking in either Captains of Industry or Napoleons of Finance. In herently conservative were those residents of Reading who participated in its organization. I can see upon their faces, even now, the look of "aghastness", when, in annual meeting assembled, the Finance and Grounds Committee submitted its startling report: It advocated not only the purchase in fee of a tract of sixty acres of farm land, then totally devoid of transportation facilities, lying to the north and west of the city, skirting the opposite bank of the Schuylkill River, but also the immediate erection of a \$30,000 club-house, with all the accessories for golf, tennis, boating, swimming, and baseball. Floods of criticism and protest threatened to overwhelm the committee and disrupt the club. The unique method of financing consisted of (1) a mortgage of 95 per cent of the purchase price at three per cent, and (2) a debenture coupon bond issue for the full amount of the building requirements and ground improvements, bearing two per cent interest, and payable in twenty years.

An irate, ultra-cautious member promptly "dubbed" the issue as "non-cumulative, deferred adventure bonds", and such in reality were they, as restrictions were imposed requiring the assent, in case of default, of seventy-five per cent of the holders as a prerequisite to their legal enforcement.

Task Titanic surely, but with spirit undismayed, the promoters persevered, perspired, and, what was more to the point, subscribed real signatures. Undoubtedly it was the very audacity of the conception that

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

compassed its ultimate accomplishment. Not that it was done in a week or a month, --moons, many of them, waxed and waned, before the completed edifice frowned triumphantly from its picturesque pinnacle."

During all this time, we promoters of golf were subject to a great deal of ridicule. Whenever we appeared on the street in a pair of golf trousers, all the small boys jeered at us and they called our golf clubs shinny sticks.

It was necessary to campaign for members and we were met with many set-backs. One time I went to see Dr. Wm. F. Muhlenberg and asked him to join our club. He told me that he played tennis every afternoon at 4th & Walnut Streets on a property belonging to Mrs. Nicolla and that he had no use for golf and would never play it. Within a very short time, Dr. Muhlenberg was one of our most enthusiastic and best players and enjoyed the game until his untimely end.

In 1902, Mr. Frank C. Smink was elected president of the club and it was almost entirely due to his untiring efforts, that the club was put in the splendid financial and physical condition in which it still is to-day. Mr. F. C. Smink presented a cup for the men's golf championship which was won by Mr. A. F. Smith the first time, and five times afterwards. His name is inscribed upon the cup and every year the club has a tournament and the winner's name is placed upon this historic trophy.

Mr. George F. Baer presented a silver cup for the women's golf championship. This was first won by Miss Elizabeth Smink and her name appears upon the cup. Miss Smink won the tournament eight times in the first twelve years. The present champion is Miss Edith Quier, who is by far the best golfer ever developed in Berks County. Miss Quier is now in England playing for the women's amateur championship.

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

One of the great advantages of golf is the good fellowship derived from the playing of the game. Our club, as many others, had their humorists and most of us recollect that at the Berkshire Club the late O. M. Weand was that type. One summer afternoon, we were playing a foursome. The course was crowded and the people behind us were frequently driving into us. As we were holing out our puts on the sixth green, somebody drove from the tee and the ball rolled up on the green, disturbing Mr. Weand in his put? He took the offending ball and dropped it in the cup and without saying a word we went on with our game. When we returned to the club house, we found our good friend who had driven into us, celebrating at the nineteenth-hole the fact that for the first time in his life he had made a hole in one. We did not have the heart to tell this gentleman what had happened and I do not think he knows it to this day.

One of the pleasant features of Berks County golf has always been the tournaments we have had with nearby towns. The Central Permsylvania Golf Association was formed and for a number of years a large number of the players have enjoyed these tournaments. The ladies have also played a great many matches with outside cities and it is a matter of record that they have been almost uniformly successful and have carried away the honors. This has not always been the case with the men.

From time to time the Berkshire Country Club was compelled to purchase more property and in 1920 we bought the Jones field which was between the club house and the Bernville Road. In 1921 enough land was purchased from the Greenfields Development Co. to build four holes on that side of the road. In 1922 a fine eighteen-hole course was built, the length being 6566 yards. Mr. George Philler was at this time chairman of the golf committee and the club owes to him a great debt for the amount of work and time he gave to the construction of this new golf course.

10-

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

Several years ago a tract of land was bought which was part of the old Snyder Farm. This gave the club a very much needed piece of land for the practice of golf. We also, about this time, were fortunate enough to acquire the river front from the Baer Estate. All this land was acquired and a new course was built under the presidency of L. E. Thomas, who for eight years guided the destinies of our club in an able and constructive manner.

In 1929 the club house was practically rebuilt. Due to the initiative of our president, Mr. Heber Parker, we now have one of the finest club houses in the state of Pennsylvania. We own 124.57 acres of land and have 532 members.

As my paper is on golf only, I have not mentioned the other activities of the Berkshire Country Club, but in the old days there was a lot of enjoyme derived from the base ball field. The team was captained by Edward C. Nolan and we played many matches. We had trap shooting for years. The traps were located back of the present fifth green. Swimming was one of our major sport and still is indulged in although the river, by reason of the culm coming down from the coal regions, is not very clean. We have tennis tournaments every year, both club and Berks County tournaments.

After golf had been thoroughly established at the Berkshire Country Club other clubs began to be formed in Berks County. The Galen Hall Hotel laid ou a nine-hole course in 1920 and four years ago they added another nine holes. This is one of the sportiest courses in Berks County. (Return to page 1.)

In June 1922, the Reading Country Club was incorporated and a charter was applied for and signed by the following men - Romanus Esterly,

John J. Knoll, Sr., William H. Albright, Joseph F. Morris, I. Crum Sithens,

Francis F. Seidel, Martin D. Hunter, Aaron B. Stein, Edward J. Morris,

11-

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

Nathan S. Althouse, George W. Mayers, Frank S. Gery, Lewis O. Rothermel, Harry C. Geissler, A. Lincoln Frame, Keyser Fry, William W. Keck, and Heber Ermentrout. At this time the president is A. L. Frame. This club is located on the Philadelphia Pike, four miles south of Reading. The club has 237 acres of land and 600 members.

Their activities comprise golf, tennis, swimming and riding. The riding club has two large stables equipped with all modern conveniences and every spring and every fall, a very fine horse show is given. The club has a fine eighteen-hole course with room for another eighteen-hole course on their own grounds. Frequently the golf players of the Berkshire and Reading Clubs invite each other to their different courses to play matches.

The Reading Country Club is now engaged in building a very large new club house which will be situated on top of a beautiful hill with a back-ground of woods.

The Berkleigh Country Club was organized on the 23rd of November 1925.

A group of men bought the Burr Farm at the head of Moseleum Springs near Kutztown, 227 acres. The club was incorporated in 1926 by

Saul Kaufmann, William Bash, Samuel Sondheim, Leo Sondheim, Sidney Sondheim and few men from Allentown. This club built its own water works, built a beautiful dam where they have fishing, they planted 2,000 evergreen trees and built a fine large club house. The golf course is in good condition and they have 175 members, many of them from Allentown. The president now is Samuel J. Sondheim,

A few years ago another course was built in this county and is situated along the Fritztown Road about two miles beyond Sinking Springs. It is called the Manor. The course is a pay-as-you-play affair and I have been told that on Saturday and Sunday there are a large number of players

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



The Beginning of Golf in Berks County by G. Howard Bright, circa. 1930

making it difficult to get a place on the links.

We do not as yet have a municipal course. This will come, as golf to-day is by far the most popular of any outdoor game. There is more money invested in golf courses in Berks County than in all other sports combined.

Stories - chatterboy. Fost his ball.

Frances Ormet + Tom morris.

John delituan tehole course in one -Fred mullenberg made hole in one of lost the hole.