

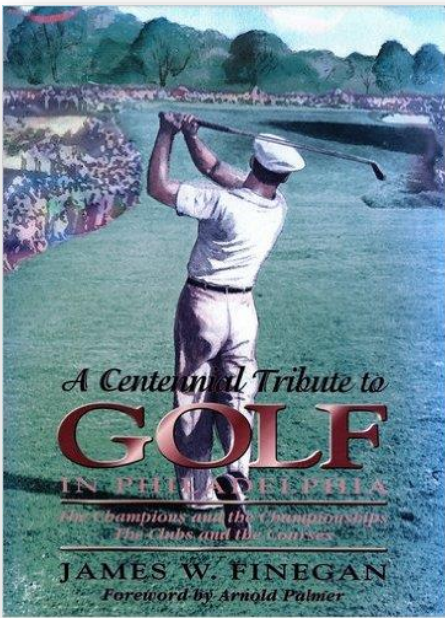


The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 20 • September 28, 2015



James W. Finegan's book on the centennial of golf in Philadelphia, published in 1996, includes an article about Reading Country Club. The book's cover features a likeness of Ben Hogan hitting his 1-iron to the 18th green at Merion Golf Club in the final round of the 1950 U.S. Open. Hogan would make par and win the title the next day, defeating George Fazio and Lloyd Mangrum in a playoff.

Finegan's article includes information about the 1930 clubhouse fire that is not entirely correct and a photo purporting to show the original clubhouse that shows something else entirely. The article also provides a brief summary of RCC's ownership changes up to 1996.

[Click here](#) to read the article.

A Burning Issue

Reading Country Club earned a place in **James W. Finegan's** book *A Centennial Tribute to Golf in Philadelphia*. Published by the Golf Association of Philadelphia in 1996, the book celebrates the champions, the clubs and the courses that make the Philadelphia area one of the world's great centers of golf.

Finegan was no amateur in the game of golf literature. In addition to his *Centennial* book, Finegan wrote the history of Aronimink and Pine Valley golf clubs. His work includes *Where Golf Is Great: The Finest Courses of Scotland and Ireland*, a trilogy of golf travel books about the British Isles. These books earned Mr. Finegan the 2006 United States Golf Association Herbert Warren Wind Book Award. He was also recognized by the Golf Association of Philadelphia with its 2010 Distinguished Service Award.

Pete Trenham considers Finegan Philadelphia's greatest golf historian. Trenham should know. He is the historian of the Philadelphia Section of the PGA and publisher of the web site Trenham Golf History, <http://trenhamgolffhistory.org/>. Pete was also director of golf at RCC for 10 years, beginning in 1995.

Further, Finegan was an accomplished player. He won four club championships at Philadelphia Country Club and the senior club championship at Pine Valley.

All this goes to say that Jim Finegan was respected for his golf and his golf writing. He earned his chops.

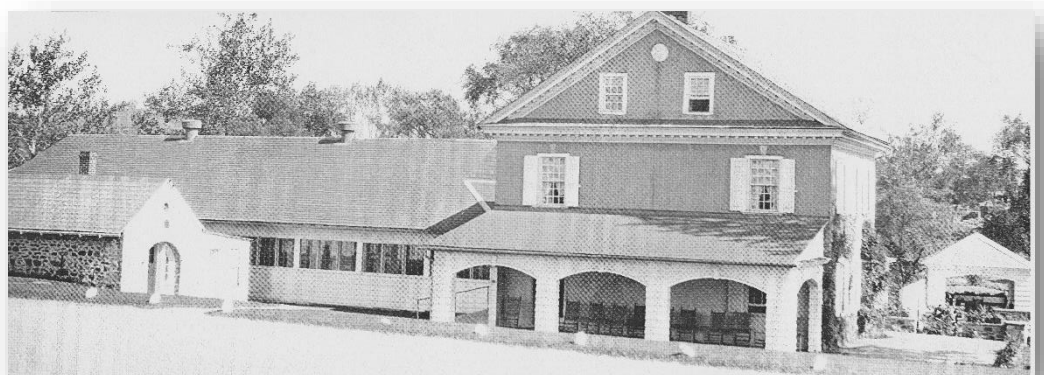
The segment on RCC appears on page 109 of the *Centennial* book. Mr. Finegan writes, "In 1930 the clubhouse burned to the ground. In its place was erected a [new one](#), designed in the Tudor style (after all, Reading is an English name)."

Mr. Finegan provides no attribution for this claim and there is no source in the bibliography. Alas, Mr. Finegan died on March 13, 2015.

Let's examine these two statements.

We'll give him a mulligan on the first. There were two fires in the original clubhouse, but the building was not razed. The stone structure stands today at the club entrance. As to the second statement, his assertion that the current clubhouse was built to replace the burned-to-the-ground structure is a whiff.

To find out what happened, we begin at the beginning. The land that now encompasses the fourth and eighth holes and the fifth tee and seventh green was the site of a saw and grist mill established in the 18th century. The owner, John Bishop, was on the Berks Country tax records of 1759. His house standing at the entrance to the country club formed the core of RCC's original clubhouse. This information is from *The Passing Scene*, volume 13, page 205, by **George M. Meiser, IX** and **Gloria Jean Meiser**.



A photo from 1928 shows how the Bishop's house was modified for the country club members. The locker rooms were in the addition to the left.



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The Bishop's house was RCC's first clubhouse. The building dates from the 18th century and is currently in use as a law office.

In disrepair. And there's more. From *The Passing Scene*: "When the new club house was erected a block northwest of the building shown, the old structure fell into disrepair. It was on the verge of demolition when architect and Berks Historical Society trustee Richard Levensgood – fully appreciative of its historical status and intrinsic architectural significance – took steps to have it excised from the club's property and negotiated its purchase for the sake of preservation." The Bishop house is now a law office.

A *Reading Eagle* article from October 22, 1922, included this description of the renovated Bishop's house: "Muhlenberg Brothers, architects, also have charge of the remodeling of the old stone farmhouse and the old fort, dating back to the Indian days, which are to be used as a temporary home for the club until the new house is built. The old house is well worth a visit, being a charming example of the old Pennsylvania colonial style. The changes were all carried out to harmonize with the old work, and the club members and visitors express themselves as being more than pleased with the results attained."

No proof. Interesting, but no evidence of a fire. So on April 1, 2015 – no foolin' – I visited the Janssen Library at the Berks Historic Society in Reading. While there, I asked if the library had fire records. **Lisa Adams**, assistant archivist, summoned Bill, who was working in the vault. She said he might know. Bill is **Bill Rehr**, the retired Reading fire chief. Sometimes you get lucky.

Although events of 1930 were well before his time, Bill had never heard of such a fire. Bill phoned his friend, **Terry Francis**, long-time Exeter Township fire chief. Terry, too, had no knowledge of the RCC clubhouse burning to the ground. Bill said he would check the logs of the Reiffon Fire Company, which would have responded to the conflagration, and would let me know if he found a record of a fire call at Reading Country Club in 1930.

Progress, but still no proof of a fire.

Got it. Then, on July 11, I received this email message from Lisa Adams.

Way back in April you were looking for information about fires at the Reading Country Club. At that time Bill Rehr and I were unable to find any info for you. Bill has remained on the case and finally found what you were looking for. Both these accounts come from the book *History of the Reading Fire Department*, Volume 3, by Anthony Miccicke.

Thank you, Lisa.

To the bat cave! My bat cave is the *Reading Eagle* archive. Sure enough, both fires were reported. The first one occurred on [December 18, 1925](#), the second on [October 19, 1930](#).

As noted, Finegan's statement that "In its [the burned-to-the-ground building] place was erected a new one..." is factual to a point because the new replaced the old. But there is no cause and effect relationship. The new clubhouse, the one currently undergoing a \$1 million renovation, was planned as early as 1922. The original clubhouse was always to be a temporary solution.

The October 1922 *Reading Eagle* article describes the new clubhouse, which opened in May 1931, in great detail. Clearly, a purpose-built clubhouse was in the founder's long-range planning from the onset.

For the story of RCC's clubhouse, read The Golf Chronicles #16: [An Imposing New Home](#).

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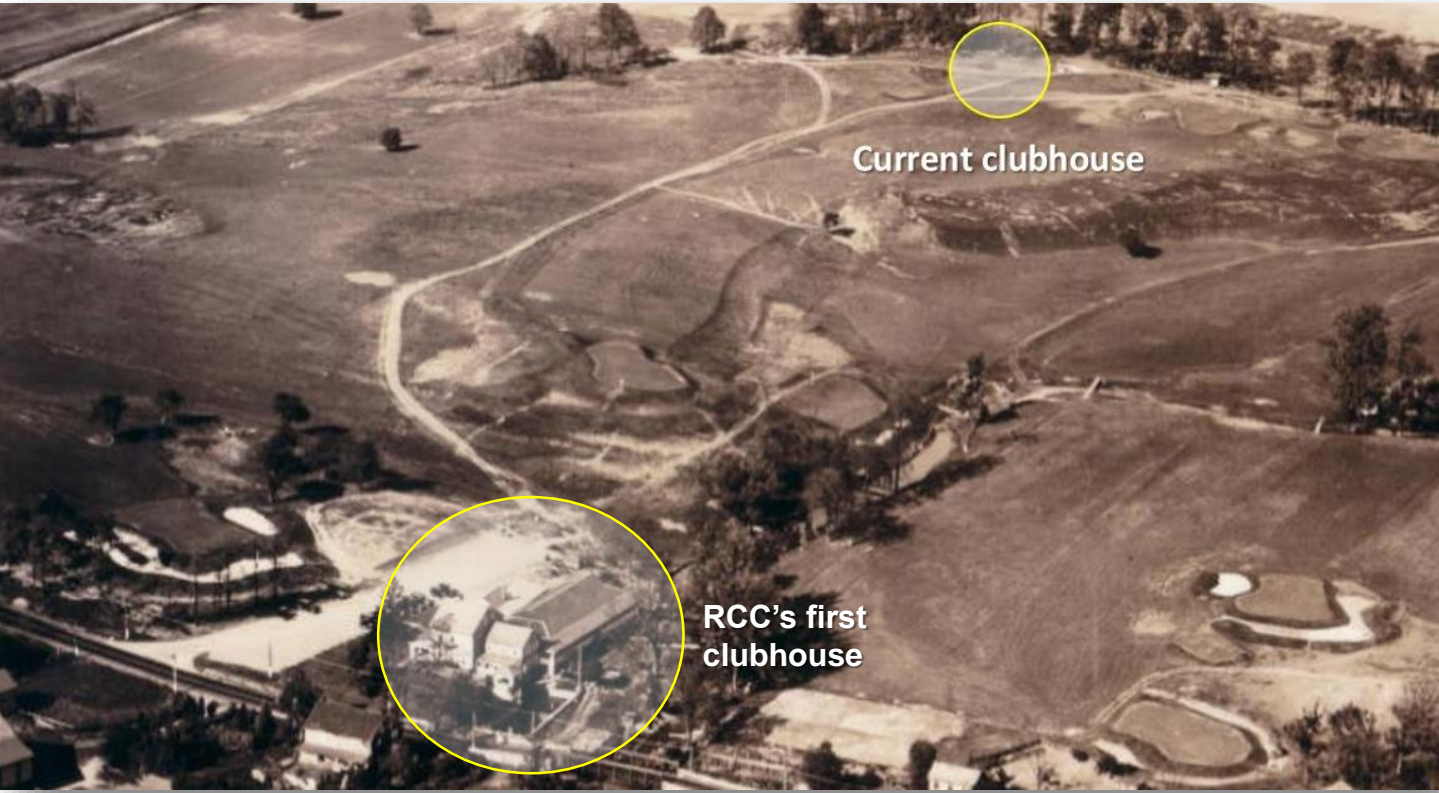
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Byron Nelson
RCC Pro
1937-39



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A Tale of Two Clubhouses



A 1924 aerial photo shows the old clubhouse along Philadelphia Pike with the future clubhouse site noted. The fourth and seventh greens are on the bottom right, the third green on the bottom left.



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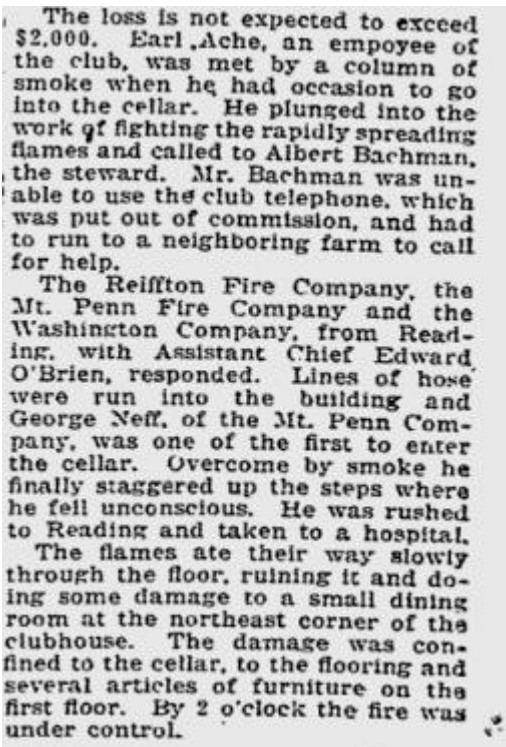
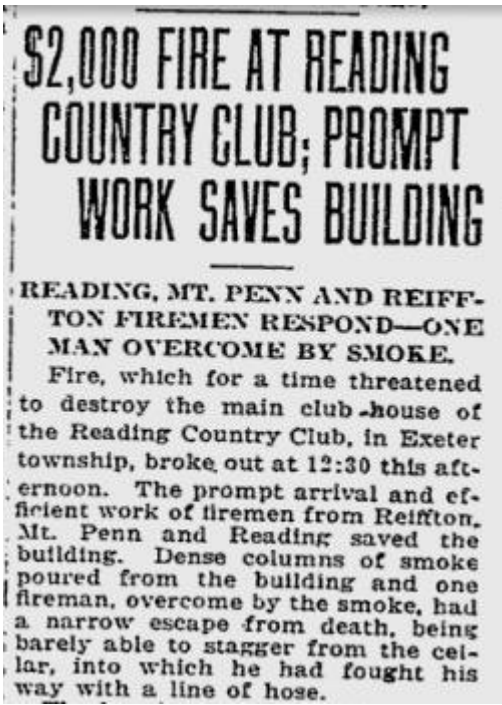


Number X • April 30, 2015

The report of the 1925 fire at RCC is from *History of the Reading Fire Department*, Volume 3, by **Anthony Miccicke**.

December 18 - Flames broke out at the Reading Country Club, Exeter Township, sometime around 12:30. The fire was discovered by an employee of the club as he entered the basement. While the employee was busy trying to extinguish the blaze, another employee attempted to use the phone but found it was out of order. An employee then had to run nearly a mile to a farm house and use their phone to call for help. Soon, the Reiffon and Mt. Penn Fire Companies, along with Reading's Assistant Chief Edward O'Brien and the Washington Fire Company, were en route. Heavy clouds of smoke were pushing from nearly every opening of the structure when they arrived. Several chemical lines were stretched into the building and by 14:00, the fire was brought under control. Flames destroyed much of the basement and ate through the ceiling to a dining area in the northeast corner of the club house. One volunteer from Mt. Penn, George Neff, was one of the first to enter the basement. After several minutes of battling the blaze, he came out of the building, staggered, then fell to the ground unconscious. He was rushed to an area hospital where he was treated and released. Owners of the Reading Country Club incurred a loss of \$2,000.

Reading Eagle, page 1
December 18, 1925





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The report of the 1930 fire at RCC is from *History of the Reading Fire Department*, Volume 3, by **Anthony Miccicke**.

October 19 - A motorist driving along the Philadelphia Pike, Exeter Township, discovered the Reading Country Club to be on fire. He quickly drove up to the main building and aroused several sleeping employees, who began to fight the flames. A call was placed to the Mt. Penn, Reiffon, Gibraltar and Stony Creek fire companies shortly after 03:30, and sometime later, the Union and Keystone companies of Reading. Flames fully engulfed the locker room area and were beginning to spread into a dance hall area before being brought under control. The glow of the flames could be seen for miles and attracted several hundred spectators, many of which assisted in fire ground activities. The entire north end of the three-story building was gutted as the loss rose to more than \$10,000. Owners of the country club decided not to rebuild due to the off-season for golfers, and the fact that a newer facility was nearing completion a block away.

Reading Eagle, page 3
October 20, 1930

FIRE DAMAGES COUNTRY CLUB

Blaze in Locker Room of Reading C. C. Causes Loss Estimated at \$10,000

Fire of unknown origin, which for a time threatened to destroy the main building, gutted the locker room at the Reading Country Club, along the Philadelphia pike, early Sunday morning, and caused damage estimated at \$10,000. Included in the fire damage were golf bags, clubs and equipment worth about \$8,000.

The fire was discovered about 3:30 a. m. by passing motorists who roused Albert Bachman, steward. He was sleeping in the main building with several other employees. The entire north section of the locker room was ablaze by that time and the Mt. Penn and Reiffon Fire Companies were summoned. As the flames continued to spread, the Gibraltar and Stony Creek companies were called and the Union and Keystone companies from Reading were sent to the scene.

Prevent Spread of Fire.

By the time the Mt. Penn company arrived at the club, the entire locker room was in flames, and dense smoke and sparks poured through the dance hall toward the main building, a three-story structure. After a battle of about an hour, firemen, with hose lines from the creek which runs by the club house, succeeded in confining the fire to the north structure, and saved the remainder of the building.

The flames cast reflection in the sky visible for miles. Firemen seeing it was impossible to save the locker room, played streams of water on the auditorium and main club building. At one point, the dance hall is less than five feet from the club house. Passing motorists stopped and aided the firemen in their battle.

A meeting of the Governing Board of the club was held at 1:30 this afternoon at the city office, 30 North Sixth street, at which time it was decided not to rebuild the locker room, but to make such arrangements as necessary to care for golfers temporarily until the new building is opened next Spring. It is possible that the upper floors of the club house will be utilized for that purpose. An investigation is being made to determine the cause. Insurance men, accompanied by club officials, are making an appraisal of the damage.

A new club house is being built several blocks north of the present structure and is expected to be completed about Feb. 1. It will be a fire-proof building. In the new home the locker rooms will be in the basement instead of in a separate building.

Among the contents of the building destroyed were the quarters of the club professional, containing a bag rack, tools, polishing machinery and clothing, golf clubs and the contents of 125 members' lockers which held clubs, clothing, bags and other paraphernalia.

"Our estimated damage of \$10,000 is about the best we can arrive at," said Mr. Giles. "How the fire started we do not know. An inspection was made of the building at 12:45 a. m., and everything seemed to be alright at that time."

Firemen were complimented for the work in confining the fire to the blazing locker room.





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The RCC Story

Reading Country Club is included on pages 109 and 110 of **James W. Finegan's** book *A Centennial Tribute to Golf in Philadelphia*, published by the Golf Association of Philadelphia in 1996. The account of the 1930 fire is not accurate and the photo purporting to show the original clubhouse is from another golf club.

The description of Alex Findlay's work is also inaccurate. Findlay's design was for an 18-hole golf course. The front 9 opened in 1924 as the back 9 was under construction. RCC's second club championship was played on the 18-hole course in 1925.

The article print-out is courtesy of the Temple University Library.

Reading Country Club

Reading Country Club was formed in 1923. It was owned by its members, who paid \$200 per share for an equity position. Alex Findlay, the worldwide ambassador of the game (he played 2,400 courses during his lifetime, held the record at a number of them, and at one time belonged to 229 clubs) was called in to lay out nine holes,



Reading's original clubhouse, which burned to the ground in 1930.

which opened later in 1923. By 1927 the club had a full eighteen, with each of the two nines a mixture of the original and the newer holes. Behind the 12th green were the club's stables. Horses were available to the members for riding on trails around the perimeter of the course, or, when a fox hunt was in progress, right through the very heart of it. At one time the club owned 288 acres.

In 1930 the clubhouse burned to the ground. In its place was erected a new one, designed in the Tudor style (after all, Reading is an English name).

A couple of young Texans who'd grown up caddieing together in Fort Worth applied for the professional's post in 1937. Byron Nelson got the job, but Ben Hogan soon landed a similar spot at Hershey Country Club. Nelson, who was now playing the PGA Tour, stayed at Reading for only a couple of years before moving on to Toledo's



Byron Nelson instructs Buddy Lutz on the practice tee at Reading in 1938.

Inverness Club. But what years they were—in 1937 he won the first of his two Masters and in 1939 his only U.S. Open.

Henry Clay Poe succeeded Nelson and established an excellent reputation as a teacher (a very young Betsy King was one of his pupils). He served the club until 1965, moving south shortly thereafter. In 1975 he was elected president of the PGA of America for a two-year term.

The Depression and World War II combined to force the club into bankruptcy, though golf continued to be played. In 1944 a group of 20 local businessmen—among them J. Elmer Lutz, Otto Bechtel, Harvey J. Golden, A.W. Golden, Oscar A. Funke, William H. Schaefer, Ray Wallace, Andrew Maier, Theodore Z. Kramer, Pierce B. Hettinger, Ira O. Fisher, Harry J. Becker, Paul Guldin, David J. Wentling, Dr. Michael Pents, and Walter J. Hansen—bought the club for \$80,000. Each of the 20 put up \$5,000, which left \$20,000 to improve the condition of the course and strengthen its playing characteristics.

One result of the new ownership and management was the club's hosting the 1949 Reading Open. Sam Snead and Cary Middlecoff dueled down the stretch, and a brief account of this tournament appears in Chapter 13.

The years that followed would see the property sold, in whole or in part, on three separate occasions: in 1969 to Judge Francis J. Catania, John Bosacco, and Dale Reese (all 288 acres); in 1979 to the Filippini family (142 acres, with Reese retaining 146 acres); and in 1987, when Bob Thatcher, former Aronimink head professional, and Joe Dahl acquired the course and clubhouse.