

# The Golf Chronicles

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

Byron Nelson  
RCC Pro  
1937-39



Number 24 • November 11, 2015



An undated photo of the Black Bear Hotel, which had a dance hall and ballroom, a picnic grove and a small zoo.

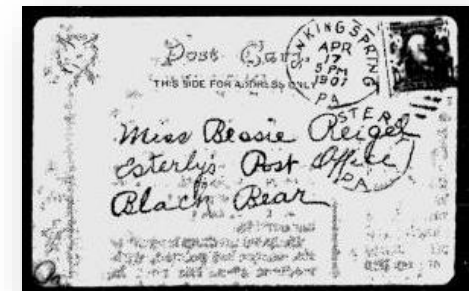


A photo from the Reading Eagle, July 29, 1959, shows the Black Bear just before it was demolished. The building had been converted into apartments.

### What's in a Name?

The name Black Bear most likely alludes to the creatures that prowl the forests. Who first applied the name is not known. It may have been used by native people. Perhaps one of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Europeans who settled in the area killed him a b'ar when he was only three. Or maybe the pioneers befriended a Lenape who went by Chief Black Bear. I'd like to think theirs was a harmonious relationship.

A 1907 post card, from the collection of George M. Meiser IX.



## Down at Black Bear: Tiny, Tony and the Great One

The headline is curious: “Buildings and Golf Course Proposed for Country Club Below Black Bear”.

Curious because the construction of the buildings and golf course was beyond a proposal; the project was well under way when the article appeared.

And curious because of the reference to Black Bear.

The *Reading Eagle* published the headline on October 22, 1922, in a bold, all-caps type font across the broadsheet page. That’s nearly 24 inches of banner headline. That’s big.

The article reported on progress at the new Reading Country Club. But what’s this reference to Black Bear?

Turns out, the area a few miles north of RCC along Perkiomen Avenue was once known as Black Bear, with the Black Bear Hotel a well-known landmark. The hotel was located at the intersection of Perkiomen Avenue and Oley Turnpike Road on the site that now houses European Motors and the Speedway, formerly Hess, gas station.

An article in the *Reading Eagle*, September 9, 2002, reports that an inn at Black Bear existed before the revolutionary war. The hotel was rebuilt in the 1880s by **William Esterly**. The inn served not only food and drink, it served as a postal drop for the area’s residents, with mail addressed “in care of Esterly.” In 1895, a post office was established in the Black Bear and the names Black Bear and Esterly were used to describe the hamlet thereabouts.

From the *Reading Eagle*, July 22, 1894, under the title “Old Berks Taverns”:

“The tract of 100 acres of land connected with the Black Bear inn was part of the manor of Penn’s Mount. **Jacob Maurer, Sr.**, established a tavern there before 1800, when he was already a well-known inn-keeper. Mr. Maurer bought several tracts of different parties, portions of which are now included in the Black Bear farm. In 1787 he purchased a tract from **Philip Durst**, in 1790 another and in 1800 a tract from **Adam Drinkhous**, where a stone building had already been erected. In 1806 Jacob Maurer, Sr., conveyed the property to his son, Jacob, who was the landlord for many years.

“Caleb Harrison, of Union township, executor of **Jacob Maurer, Jr.**, dec’d, sold the Black Bear property to William Masser in 1846 for \$5,420, who conducted the public house himself and in 1849 sold the property to George Hill, who was the well-known landlord of the place for years. After his death, his son, Levi Hill, accepted the property at the appraisal, conducted the place himself and in April 1887, sold out to **Franklin P. Esterly** for \$17,000, who tore down the old 2-story stone building and erected a large and handsome hotel of modern style which has become a favorite summer resort.



The site of the former Black Bear Hotel at Perkiomen Avenue and Oley Turnpike Road.



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Reading Eagle, September 3, 1897

**THE BLACK BEAR INN.**

**FRANK P. ESTERLY'S NEW RESORT DOWN IN EXETER TOWNSHIP.**

**The Ancient Hostelry Gives Way to a Modern Hotel.**

"Persons who have been accustomed to drive down the turnpike, past the Black Bear, during this season, have been witnesses of a veritable transformation scene at that place. The old hotel has been torn down, and a new building is now nearing completion on the same site. It will be called the "Black Bear Inn," and for beauty, comfort, healthy location, good water and air, and all the facilities of a first-class hotel, it is equalled but by few similar places in this section. The old Black Bear tavern was, an ancient hostelry, of historic interest, and many happy spirits have whiled the pleasant hours away within its huge stone walls. The old building was erected 117 years ago, and latterly fell into the hands of Frank P. Esterly, proprietor of the Berks County house. He has put up a new hotel, magnificently proportioned, and suited to all the modern demands. It is partially of the Swiss cottage and Queen Anne style of architecture. The plans were made by Architect Mull. The building faces the mountain. There are mountains on three sides of it, while down the other a pleasant view of the prosperous Oley valley can be obtained. It is large and roomy and well ventilated throughout. The building has a frontage of 4½ feet and a depth of 92 feet. It is so arranged that it is equally well adapted to the entertainment of summer boarders or sleighing parties in winter. At the corner, facing the public road, is the bar-room. This is 20x30 feet in size, and it is furnished with a very prettily-designed sideboard with plate glass mirror and bar of white oak, with a solid cherry top. Directly in the rear, also facing the street, are two reception rooms—one for ladies, the other for gentlemen. Then there is an office and the necessary cloak and baggage rooms. Then comes the dining room, 30x32 feet in size. This can be thrown into a ball room in a few minutes' notice, while another large room in the rear can be devoted to serving meals to parties. Adjoining this is the pantry, another commodious apartment, and directly underneath, in the basement, the kitchen, with range and latest improved cooking apparatus. On the second and third floors there are 32 bed rooms for the accommodation of guests. Several groups of rooms are connected with doors and are intended for families. On the second floor there is a large double parlor, which can be thrown into either one or two apartments to suit the convenience of the patrons of the inn. A beautiful view of the surrounding country can be obtained from a tower on top of the building. An attractive portion of the place is its wide verandas, which surround the entire house from the first and second floors. The first floor is furnished with water from a never failing spring nearby, and they are now prospecting for another spring on the mountain opposite to run the water on the upper floors. The hotel has a bath room, refrigerator in the cellar, and gas fixtures. It will be illuminated with gas from a patent plant on the ground. The drainage is perfect. The ground in the immediate vicinity will be terraced. Attached to the place there is a grove of several acres of locust trees. Several fish ponds will be located amidst these pleasant shade trees. Connected with the Black Bear there is 100 acres of excellent farm land. The mechanics who did the work on the building were: Masonry, Adams & Koch; gas fixtures, John Drexel; slating, Geo. Griesemer; plastering, Sponagle Bros; tinning, F. K. Wagonhorst; painting, Gittlerman & Harbach; and Adam Bard furnished the bar. L. H. Focht was the contractor. The outside is painted in various cottage colors all harmonizing very tastefully. The inn will be in charge of James Esterly, brother of the owner, who has had excellent experience in the management of good hotels. Good cooks and polite waiters will be employed.

"Half a century ago the state militia drilled in a field near the inn, and many a rough and tumble fight occurred between "bullies" of Reading and young men of Exeter, the former going down specially to fight. Participants, now aged over 70 years, are living and are fond of relating "how they whipped" a certain "bully" at the Black Bear. **Hugh Lindsay**, a well-known showman 50 years ago, often exhibited "Punch and Judy" and other novelties under canvas near the tavern to large and delighted audiences."

References to Black Bear popped up in the *Reading Eagle* from time to time.

**May 13, 1872** – A two-foot-long blacksnake crawled into the Black Bear Hotel and was found and killed the next morning. That same article reported that the grandchildren of **John Esterly, Esq.**, Exeter Township, found and killed five blacksnakes, one measuring five-feet long, within 200 yards of the Esterly residence. Squire Esterly had industrious grandchildren. The same article reported that they had recently trapped 12 chicken hawks. They baited the traps with a chicken; dead or alive was not indicated.

**June 5, 1872** – A young man, the son of **Obediah Romig**, while on his way home from the milk market, had his horse take fright and run down a four-foot bank in front of the Black Bear Hotel, overturning the wagon. The boy was uninjured and the horse was apprehended before any serious damage was done.

**January 18, 1873** – **Daniel Engle** and **Franklin Grant** were tried for poisoning a horse in a scheme to fix a match race that was hatched at the Black Bear Inn. The men were accused of drugging Maggie, a mare owned by **Hiram Schitler**, Stonersville, so they could win \$500. Maggie raced 500 yards on a straight track against Pet, a mare owned by Grant, on June 14, 1871. Maggie died that same evening. A co-conspirator, **Heisinger Bushauer**, who rode Maggie, administered the fatal dose. The jury found the men guilty after deliberating five hours.

**January 11, 1875** – **Henry Sheetz**, accused of swindling **Mr. Long**, Shartlesville, out of a horse, escaped from the Black Bear Inn while in transit to his trial. Sheetz was captured, tried in Rehrersburg, convicted and sentenced to jail.

**November 29, 1888** – More than 600 patrons rode the new East Reading electric railroad to the Black Bear Inn and back. Both cars were running and passed each other on the turnout near the summit. A car started from each end every 20 minutes. The rail line ran from 9<sup>th</sup> and Penn Streets to Black Bear, with a spur line to Stony Creek.

**December 1889** – The board of managers of the Oley Turnpike Company met at the Black Bear Inn. They declared a dividend of two percent and decided to pay of the company's debt of \$1,000.

**August 1892** – The State Sportsmen's Association's second annual shooting tournament came to a close at the Black Bear. The shoot was the biggest and most successful ever held under auspices of the Reading Shooting Association. Some 150 crack shots representing Pennsylvania clubs and those in other states participated.

**September 3, 1897** – The article to the left provides a vivid description of **Frank Esterly's** newly constructed modern hotel. Note the final sentence regarding cooks and waiters.

**May 14, 1924** – **Harry Planer, Jr.**, moved his family into the Black Bear apartments.



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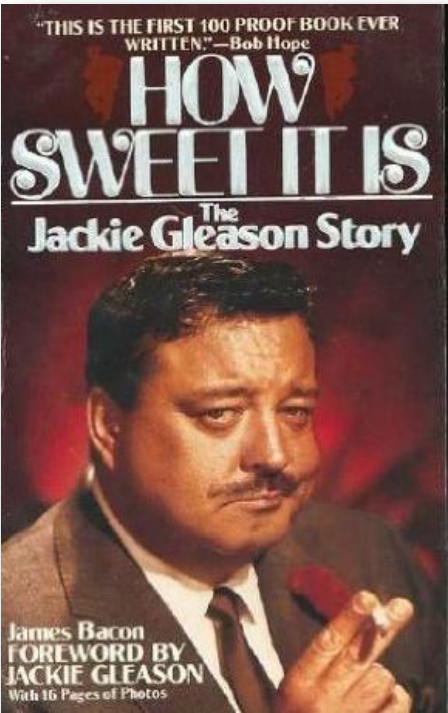
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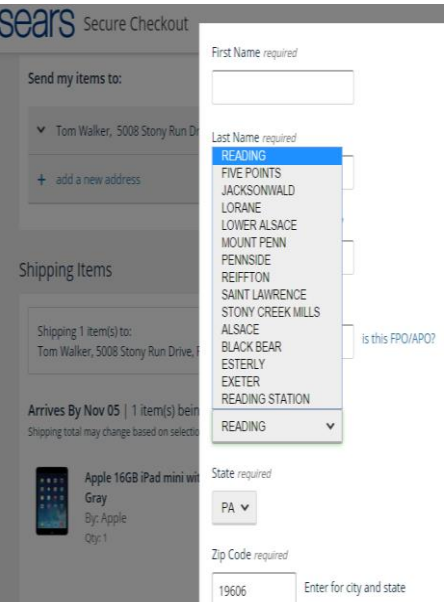
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The Jacksonwald Hotel was on the Oley Turnpike at Boyertown Pike.



Jackie Gleason’s first professional booking was a one-week stay at the Black Bear Hotel in 1935.



The place names Black Bear and Esterly are still with us, as can be seen in this drop-down menu on an e-commerce web site.

**January 24, 1925** – The county commissioners make an offer to purchase Berks’ last toll road, the Oley Turnpike, which extended from Black Bear to present day Rte. 73 at Manatawny, a distance of 10 miles. The original road was laid out in 1755. The Oley Turnpike Company purchased the turnpike in 1867 and collected the first tolls in 1870 following a re-building project. Toll-gates were located at Jacksonwald, (intersection of Rte. 562, Oley Turnpike Road and Shelbourne Road) Oley Line Road, Kieffer’s (at Oley Turnpike Road and Toll Bridge Road) and at the bridge spanning Manatawny Creek. Toll was one, two or two-and-one-half cents per mile, the cost determined by who or what was using the road (e.g., a single-horse team cost less than a double-horse team and driving 20 cattle cost twice as much as 20 sheep or swine).

The commissioners were acting on behalf of farmers in the Oley Valley for whom the Oley Turnpike was the only route for getting their products to market in Reading. Some paid as much as \$100 per year to use the road, a cost that put them at a competitive disadvantage with farmers from other areas of the county. The county purchased the roadway only for \$42,000. The Oley Turnpike Company ceased to exist on April 25, 1925, when its remaining assets, including four toll houses and implements used to maintain the road, were sold at a public auction conducted at the Jacksonwald Hotel, built in 1870 and demolished in March 1967 to make way for the National Penn Bank branch building.

**May 16, 1947** – The Russell M. Butterweck Detachment, Marine Corps League, leased the Black Bear Hotel as its permanent headquarters. **W. Gordon Hawthorne**, detachment adjutant, acting on behalf of the League, leased the property from its owner, **Robert Yerger**, Pottstown. Plans called for renovating the former hostelry to include an auditorium, meeting hall, offices, dance floor, recreation room, bar and possibly bowling alleys.

**July 29, 1959** – **Walter J. Moore**, a Reading diner owner, and **Eli Skaist**, a Reading realtor, purchased the Black Bear Inn from **Misak K. Boyajian**, Philadelphia. The sale price was not disclosed. They planned to raze the three-story frame structure “as soon as possible” to clear the way for a service station, a diner and possibly a motel. The old hotel had been converted into 11 apartments. The seven-acre tract included the Black Bear Ballroom, a separate building that was in disrepair.

**Tiny and The Great One.** Writing in the *Reading Eagle* on June 15, 1986, correspondent **Paula Flippin** recounted a story from “How Sweet It Is” by **James Bacon**. The book, a biography of **Jackie Gleason**, devotes several pages to Gleason’ first professional job, a booking at Tiny’s Chateau, the Black Bear’s night club. The 19-year-old was paid \$19 for a week of stand-up comedy.

Correspondent Flippin chatted with **Fred Carlance** of Al Kline’s Paddock restaurant, concerning his memories of the Black Bear. “I remember Gleason performing at the Black Bear,” he said. “I was a young man then. The Black Bear was the place to go.” Gleason, one of television’s first stars, was known as “The Great One” long before **Wayne Gretzky**.

**Harold Hoffner**, the Tiny of Tiny’s Chateau, was a well-known boxer in Berks, Lancaster, Lebanon and Lehigh counties and at 6’2” and 235 pounds, he was far from tiny. He was also a tightrope walker, in the sense that he had frequent run-ins with the law over infractions such as selling liquor on a Sunday, possessing slot machines and running an illegal horse-betting operation. In 1934, he pledged “no more slot machines” after state police confiscated two at the Chateau. Hoffner paid a \$14 fine. Interestingly, he ran for county sheriff in 1935, finishing 7<sup>th</sup> out of 12 candidates in the Democratic primary.



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**Tony Moran**, left, and **Johnny Wittig** are shown together. Moran was born **Anthony Mirena** in 1902 in Tunis. He was raised in Sicily, came to Reading in 1920 and became a U.S. citizen. His businesses included bootlegging, gambling and prostitution. He also owned a flower shop at 538 Franklin Street.



**Harold Hoffner** in 1945 at the Moran murder inquest. In 1954, he moved to Las Vegas, working in casinos. He then went to casinos in Haiti and Aruba. He left in 1965 following a revolution in the Dominican Republic. "I figured it was time to get out when the bullets began whizzing," he said. Hoffner died at 74 in 1979 while a patient in Leader Nursing Home, West Reading. He resided on Franklin Street.



An ad from 1935. Tiny's Chateau was described as "the place to go."

He was also the star witness to a notorious Reading murder.

On March 23, 1945, Hoffner testified at a coroner's inquest into the March 21 murder of **Tony Moran**, age 42, at 529 Penn Street, a gambling parlor. According to the article, Hoffner entered the premises shortly after midnight. Soon thereafter, he and Moran talked for about five minutes. Moran was no ordinary gambler; he was considered Reading's top crime boss.

"**Johnny Wittig** came up and said 'Excuse me, I want to talk with Tony.'" Hoffner told the jury. He walked to the front of the room where he watched a card game. He looked back and saw Moran and Wittig talking. Their conversation was not loud, he said. Hoffner continued to watch the card game until he "heard sounds like shots." He said he stood and watched in bewilderment.

"Watched the card game?" asked **Dr. George K. Stark**, the county coroner.

Hoffner answered, "No, the shooting."

"Did you see the shooting?" said Dr. Stark.

"I saw flashes," replied Hoffner.

In answer to Dr. Stark's questions, Hoffner said Wittig held a gun. Dr. Stark pointed to Wittig in the inquest room and asked Hoffner, "Is that the man who had the gun?" Hoffner said yes. On advice of his attorney, Wittig did not testify.

Moran was shot three or four times at close range and Hoffner said no one was within 15 feet of Moran and Wittig. After the shooting, Hoffner said Wittig "put something in his right coat pocket". Hoffner related that he and **Louis "Sweet Louie" Armao**, the doorman, went to Moran's side and everyone else vacated the premises. Louie suggested calling an ambulance but Hoffner went for his car, parked on Penn Square. They carried Moran to the car, where they met **Richard "Slim" Rowe**, who opened the door. Rowe, a bookmaker, was murdered in 1986, a case that remains unsolved.

"Did Tony say anything?" asked Dr. Stark.

On the way to the hospital, according to Hoffner, Moran said "The dirty Polak." Wittig had changed his name from Witkowski. Hoffner said Moran used some other words but he was reluctant to repeat them in front of the jury. Hoffner completed his testimony by identifying Moran's body, which was on-site because the inquest was held at Henninger Funeral Home.

After hearing testimony from **Dr. George P. Dejardins**, a pathologist from St. Joseph Hospital, and **Lt. Harry Bowman**, Reading police, the jury of six women determined that Moran "died at the hands of Wittig", who was held for trial.

Johnny Wittig was a 38-year-old South 6<sup>th</sup> Street resident who was considered Moran's lieutenant. In 1939, both were sentenced to one year in prison and fined \$1,000 for running a numbers operation. Wittig had no money so he asked Moran to pay the fine. Moran refused, for reasons unknown. When released from prison, Wittig was demoted to card dealer; Hoffner had taken Johnny's former position as second-in-command. Animosity for Moran may have motivated Wittig to kill his former friend, but he insisted he went to the club that night to warn Moran against his enemies. He never admitted to the crime.

Wittig was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 10 to 20 years in prison. He was released in December 1951 when Gov. John Fine commuted his sentence. There is speculation that **Abe Minker**, Moran's rival, bribed state officials on Wittig's behalf as a reward for eliminating Moran. Fueling this fire is the fact that upon his release and while on parole, Wittig went to work for Minker, who had taken over Moran's Reading rackets.