



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 46 • September 1, 2016



The sun has set on Green Hills Golf Course, the venerable nine-hole layout in rural Robeson Township. The clubhouse is shuttered and the fairways are overgrown.

## Going Low

On August 27, 1949, **Johnny Yocum** set a course record 67, besting the old mark of 69 he shared with **Frankie Geist**, a former Berks County caddy champion. His round included a record 32 on the front 9. Earlier in 1949, Yocum set the back 9 mark of 33. His 67 included two eagles, four birdies and three bogies. Yocum played with **Dewey Boltz**, **Red Foley** and **Fred Madeira**. Geist shot his 69 in July 1940, a mark Yocum tied on June 1, 1949.

Prior to the Yocum record, the only other player to shoot under the par of 72 was **Johnny Markel**. By 1949, Markel had won the Berks Amateur championship three times; he would go on to win four more. He took over for his father at head professional at Berkshire Country Club in 1966, retiring in 1986.

Green Hills' pro-operator **Walter "Buddy" Heckman** lowered the mark to 64 on July 9, 1952, breaking his previous record 65. His round included an eagle on the par-5 first hole, six birdies and 11 pars. His playing partner, Johnny Yocum, shot 74.

**Herman Fry** shattered the record with a blistering 60, as reported in *The Reading Eagle*, July 15, 1998. The date of Fry's feat was not provided.

## Mixing Gangsters and Golf

### The Colorful Story of Green Hills Golf Course

The demise of Green Hills Golf Course has gone without notice. Without lamentation. Without a sense of loss. Without a nostalgic look-back.

Fact is, most Berks Countians, especially the golfers, haven't given the Robeson Township nine-holer any thoughts at all for decades. Surely there must be a few old-timers who recall that the golf course was once the private domain of reputed prohibition beer baron and gangster **Max Hassel**, who entertained his friends in the heart of Berks. Although Max commissioned a noted Scotsman to design and build the course, he most likely never played it. More on that later.

Green Hills Golf Course and Max Hassel that have been forgotten, and that cannot stand. Into that void steps *The Golf Chronicles*.

A little background. A member of *The Golf Chronicles* staff played at Green Hills in the late '90s and early '00s. Although the course was rough around the edges, it was certainly no push-over, having been cut into a hill side. A level lie was a rare treat. A *Reading Eagle* reporter, in a 1939 article, described Green Hills as having "the finest greens in the county, with rolling fairways and tricky hazards."

Max Hassel's colorful life is much too nuanced for a full telling in *The Golf Chronicles*. The story has been revealed in *Bootlegger* by **Ed Taggart**, (2003, Writers Showcase, ISBN: 0-595-26013-6). Taggart retired after 40 years as an editor and police beat reporter at *The Reading Eagle* and the *Reading Times*. If *The Golf Chronicles* had a book club, *Bootlegger* would be on the list.

On page viii, Taggart described Max as "a complex, adventurous, courageous, humanitarian, tax-dodging, character." He recounts a story (page 138) from a series about Max that appeared in the Sunday *Reading Eagle* in 1934. A colleague described Max as "the best boss I ever had," then went on to say: "Shrewd, kindhearted, easygoing, careful, and yet dictatorial. Mix 'em together and you have Max Hassel. Yet I would have hated to buck him."

Seeking a refuge away from prying eyes in the city, Max used "straw" buyers to acquire 108 acres in Robeson Township in 1928. He renovated the stone-two-story farmhouse and added a swimming pool and tennis courts. The property was deeded to his brother, **Calvin**, a year later.

Max lived in Reading's Berkshire Hotel, a property he was purported to own, and kept a suite at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Philadelphia. He spent weekends at The Farm entertaining guests.

There is more to the story, of course. Max made The Farm, as the Hassels called the Robeson Township complex, available to kids, who enjoyed the swimming pool with a sand beach, tennis courts and country ambiance of the estate.

Max was infected by the golf bug. He played frequently at the old Riverside Golf Club on River Road in Muhlenberg Township. The golf course was built by **William Luden** of cough-drop fame in 1930. When Max played, he paid the \$1 greens fee for each member of his foursome, plus a \$1 caddy tip. Max took lessons from **Sandy Heron**, the Scotsman who was golf professional at Riverside. One of Max's colleagues described his golfing ability thusly (*Bootlegger*, page 150): "Once and a while I used to play golf with him. He played in Reading and at various courses in Jersey. Max liked the game...in fact, I guess it was his favorite hobby, but honest, he was a lousy golfer."



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*This is the only photo of Max Hassel known to have been published in a newspaper, April 14, 1933. The Reading Eagle acquired the photo from the Hassel family in exchange for a photo of Max lying on the floor of the hotel suite where he was murdered. Max was to use this photo for his passport, which he would apply for after gaining citizenship. With a U.S. passport, he could visit his native Russia. Citizenship would also make him immune from deportation.*

*The sketch below appeared in The Reading Eagle on April 13, 1933, under the headline "Career Ends Abruptly."*



In 1931, using straw buyers, Max purchased 42 adjoining acres and deeded the property to Calvin. This tract was used for the golf course. Max's desire to own a golf course may have been driven by more than his love of the game. *The Reading Eagle*, May 25, 1997, reported that he was supposedly denied membership in Berkleigh Country Club because of his reputation as the Prohibition beer baron. Nonetheless, Max's golf course has strong ties to Berkleigh.

He hired **Robert White**, a native of St. Andrews, Scotland, for the design. White designed the first nine holes at Berkleigh. **Bob Wallace**, later to become greenskeeper and pro at Berkleigh, helped build Max's course.

**Shot dead.** Max, however, most likely never played his golf course because he was shot dead on April 12, 1933, in Room 824 at the Carteret Hotel, Elizabeth, N.J. The crime was never solved by law enforcement authorities, who investigated the murder as the upshot of a dispute among the players in the prohibition beer business. Max's business dealings were populated with colorful characters such as **Meyer Lansky**, **Dutch Schultz**, **Frankie Carbo** and **Waxey Gordon**, all of them scheming and many violent. Max was scheming but not violent. According to Taggart, Max used cash, not force, to get what he wanted. In *Bootlegger's* final chapter, Taggart unravels the mystery of Max's murder.

The diminutive Hassel—he stood 5'4"—was also a benefactor who helped people in need, oft times anonymously. Max and his brothers, **Calvin** and **Morris**, created the Hassel Free Loan Society to honor his late parents, **Elias** and **Sarah**, in 1930. With a \$15,000 endowment, the society provided those in need, mostly immigrant Jews, with interest-free loans of up to \$150. The Hassel Foundation, established in 1963 to provide scholarships, exists to this day.

To gauge Max's impact on Reading and Berks County, look no further than his funeral. An estimated 15,000 people filed by his coffin at Henninger Funeral Home on North 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Some 5,000 people crowded around Keshar Zion Synagogue, 8<sup>th</sup> and Court Streets, where 500 managed to squeeze inside for the service. Police had to clear the way for the funeral procession of some 100 cars that drove from the synagogue to Green Tree Cemetery (now Keshar Zion Cemetery) on Rte. 724 in Grill.

Was Max respected? Yes. Reading had a large population of European immigrants who viewed Prohibition as unnatural to their lifestyle. They ignored it gleefully. Was he feared? By some. Not because of physical violence, but because by crossing Max, they would be cut off from his largess and, most important, from his beer supply.

No record was found of what went on at The Farm following Max's murder. Perhaps the Hassel family continued to invite youth groups to use the pool, tennis courts and other amenities. They may have allowed them to play golf.

**Going public.** Things changed in 1939. According to *The Reading Eagle*, October 13, 1939, **Frank Moore**, former assistant to Byron Nelson at Reading Country Club, had leased the nine-hole golf course and would open as a public course in the spring. Moore, a native of Memphis, Tenn., was acting pro when Nelson played the PGA tour in 1939. He said that extensive improvements had been made to the golf course, including the addition of a new clubhouse built by **Charles Schlegel**, who was also the general contractor for RCC's clubhouse opened in 1931. The building would include locker room facilities. It was situated between cedar and pine trees and would feature a 50-foot porch. A name for the golf course had not been selected.





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*The view from the first tee to the green on the far ridge greeted golfers for more than 70 years. In the 1950s, Green Hills advertised greens fees at \$1 on weekdays, \$1.25 on weekends and a \$40 annual membership.*

## We are the champions

A complete list of Green Hills club champions could not be found. What is available, however, leaves little doubt that some of the most prominent golfers in Berks County held the championship at the Robeson Township nine-holer. Green Hills club champions include **Buddy Heckman** (the first winner in 1940), **Lefty Faber**, **Billy Eban**, **Johnny Yocum**, **Herman Fry**, **Billy Fry**, **Scott Orr**, **Mike Deloretta**, **Joe Butto**, **Dennis Johnson**, and **Matt Dolinsky**. Newspaper accounts show that **Herman Fry** won at least seven championships (1977, '79, '81, '82, '83, '89 and '97) and he probably won more. In one event, witnessed by a *Golf Chronicles* staffer, Herman scored three consecutive 2's, playing the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> holes in birdie, eagle, birdie.

The tournaments were quite popular. The 1953 event, when **Harold Heckman** was the pro, featured four flights of 16, one flight of six and a women's flight of eight. Yocum won, defeating **Mutz Koehler**, 2 and 1.

Green Hills' tournaments attracted Berks golfing notables such as **Dominic Foscone**, **Mickey Giles**, **Gix Geisinger**, **Hen Rulapaugh**, **Dick Chubb**, **Ed Hamilton**, **Bruce Shollenberger** and **Marty Dorminy**.

**The Berkleigh Connection.** By April 12, 1940, the story had changed. The leaseholder of the golf course was now **Jack Shapiro**, described as a well-known Berkleigh Country Club member. Shapiro was a founder of the Berks County Golf Association and won the Berkleigh club championship in 1932.

**Ray "Dutch" Gettle**, Reinholds, was named club professional and caddy master. Gettle turned pro on the heels of a successful year in amateur golf. **Ed Balthaser** continued as greenskeeper, a position he held during the club's private years. **George "Pat" Patterson** replaced Gettle as pro in 1941. Patterson left in 1942 when he joined the Army.

**More Moore.** A banner headline on March 18, 1942, announced that Frank Moore once again considered taking the lease at Green Hills. Jack Shapiro was compelled to terminate the lease because of his mounting defense duties during World War 2. He was state commander of the Jewish War Veterans and was active in other patriotic organizations, including the American Legion and the Reading-Berks Defense Council. According to *The Reading Eagle*, Moore was considered because of his interest in leasing the golf course in 1939. The owner of the property, Calvin Hassel, was not named.

Moore's plans never panned out. Balthasar took over from Shapiro in 1943, operating the golf course for three years. Next came **Charley Wipperman**, a golf professional from Harrisburg, who managed the course through 1947. **Jesse Killian** assumed the lease to begin the 1948 golf season. In an article of November 12, 1947, Killian stated that he, his wife, the former **Marian Schwartz** of Lorane, and their five-year-old son, **Gerald**, would live in the apartment atop the club house. Killian was employed the Birdsboro Steel Company. He had caddied at Reading Country Club and served in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific. Killian was considered one of Berks County's leading amateur golfers.

**Walter "Buddy" Heckman** succeeded Jesse Killian as Green Hills' operator in 1951. Heckman had been assistant pro at Berkleigh. By 1954, Heckman was running Manor Golf Club, where he had been caddymaster in the 1930s.

**Harold Heckman** succeeding his brother, Buddy, at Green Hills in 1954. Harold also operated an indoor driving range on Court Street. Harold left for the new Ingleside Manor Country Club in 1961.

Newspaper reports on Green Hills management for the period between Harold Heckman's exodus and the return of Pat Patterson in 1964 were not found. These were the days when *The Reading Eagle* and the *Reading Times* provided extensive coverage of local golf news. Indeed, a search through the sports pages in 1961, '62 and '63 found few mentions of golf activities at Green Hills. A short article on September 16, 1963, announced qualifying for the club championship, which would be contested over 72 holes. **Dick Hasson** was defending champion. Alas, no articles about the 1963 or 1962 tournaments were found.

During this period, the paper reported on tournaments at other public courses, including Arrowhead, Rich Maiden, Pleasant Hills, Manor and Willow Hollow.

Next in the management succession was Pat Patterson, who ran the golf course from 1964 until November 1973 when **John Katrina** took over. **Bob Batdorf** was the Green Hills pro in 1970 and '71. Batdorf was a star player for Reading High School, winning the PIAA district golf championship in 1947 and finishing ninth in the state tournament that year. He played in the Reading Open as an amateur in 1949, '50 and '51, and won the 1959 Pennsylvania state amateur championship. Batdorf played the PGA tour in the mid 1960s and appeared in the Philadelphia Golf Classic at Whitemarsh Valley C.C. several times.



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Jesse Killian won the 1952 Berks Publinks at Green Hills. The photo is from The Reading Eagle, June 23, 1952.

## Publinks at Green Hills

Green Hills hosted the 1952 Berks Publinks tournament, won by **Jesse Killian**, the former club operator, over **Billy Egan**, 2 and 1. The 80 qualifiers, with scores ranging from 71 to 107, competed in five flights of 16 players each.

The Reading Eagle reported results on June 23, 1952, which included a statement from Walter Heckman, pro-operator, that the tournament would be played at Green Hills in 1953.

For reasons that cannot be found, the 1953 tournament was played at Manor Golf Club with **Mutz Kohler** defeating **Dom Foscone**, 3 and 2. The 48 qualifiers played in three flights of 16 each.

Katrina's tenure was brief. On November 1, 1974, **Fred** and **Linda Nonnnemaker**, Birdsboro, took over the lease.

During this time, Calvin, the last of the Hassel brothers, sold the 135-acre property to three family members: **Sarle Cohen** (a nephew, being the son of his sister, Lena Hassel, who died in 1976), Philadelphia; **Marilyn Khoury**, Boston; and **Maxine Goldberg**, Montgomery County. The tract included the golf course, a swimming pool, club house, tennis courts, an apartment and other buildings. Calvin sold the property on February 10, 1972, for \$110,000.

Green Hills came full circle in 1997 when **Andy Shapiro**, Jack's son, took over the lease. Andy was Berkleigh club champion in 1970. Andy died on April 3, 2002, at age 54. His family continued to run the golf course until the spring of 2015, when they shuttered Green Hills Golf Club. *The Golf Chronicles* learned that the owner of a local landscaping business was interested in reopening the golf course but could not negotiate a lease.



A Reading Eagle photographer shot this scene at Green Hills Golf Club. The photo, which appeared in the newspaper on June 7, 1952, shows Henry Williams, the professional at Berkleigh Country Club, conducting a clinic during the Berks Publinks championship. Also shown are Buddy Heckman (kneeling), and, from the left, Mickey Giles, Johnny Yocum, Jesse Killian and Dominic Foscone.



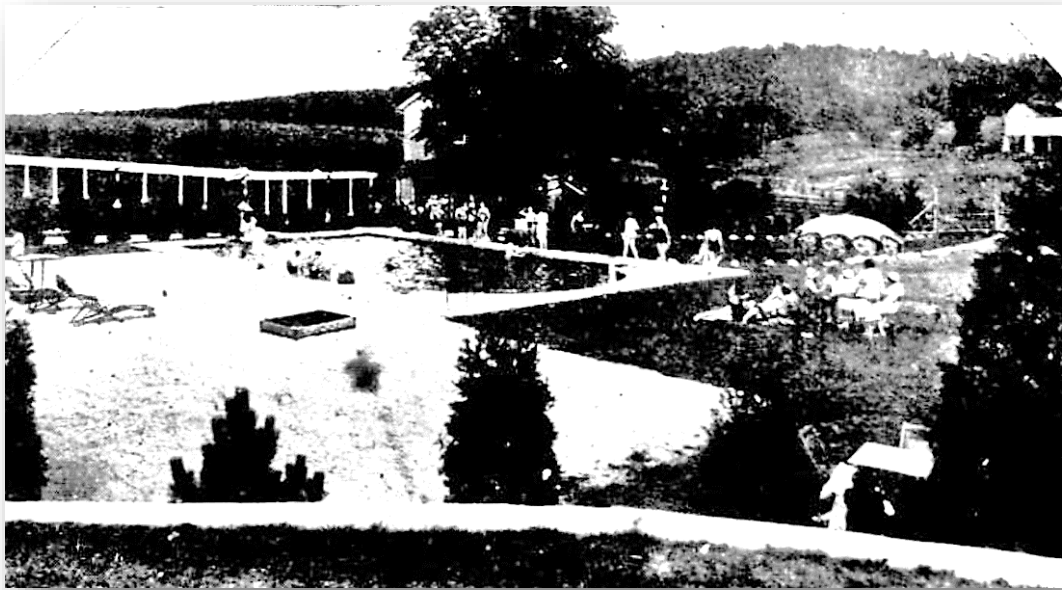
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*This photo published in The Reading Eagle, April 13, 1933, the day after Max Hassel was murdered, shows the pool at the Hassel farm in Robeson Township.*

*The pool played a key role in saving the Hassel house in 1930. On December 8, the house was severely damaged by a fire that started in a defective flue. The blaze was discovered at 6:30 a.m. by Ed Balthasar, the caretaker who lived nearby. The Gibraltar and Morgantown fire companies responded and their prompt action prevented the complete destruction of the house.*

*The swimming pool provided water for fighting the fire. Walls and floors were damaged and much furniture was ruined. Losses were estimated at \$10,000. Max sent donations to the fire companies in appreciation of their efforts.*



*The Hassel family plot at Keshar Zion Cemetery on Rte. 724.*





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The photos on the following pages were taken on July 23, 2016. The letters correspond to sites marked on the aerial photo on page 10.

A. Golfers—or for that matter, any other people—are no longer welcome at Green Hills.



B. An article in The Reading Eagle, April 12, 1940, reported that the clubhouse was nearing completion. The area under the porch behind the white lattice was once the location of choice for recreational tokers earning it the nick-name 'the pot bunker.' The deck was added to the clubhouse in the early '00s.

C. A bench and a solitary ball washer wait in vain for the next group to begin their round.







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*D. A look down the second fairway to the green in the distance. The fairway is covered in ankle-high grass that was referred to as Green Hills bent. Most people know it as crab grass.*

*E. Here's what's left of the second green. This was a 550-yard par 5 from the back tee. The dirt patch to the left was a sand trap. The turf has been scraped away from the nine greens, leaving behind brown scars that show the teeth marks left by the earth moving machine that stripped the sod from the contours planned by the old Scotsman more than 90 years ago.*



*F. The view from the fourth fairway, looking down to the green. Sand traps left and right protected the green of this par 4.*



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*G. The view from the fifth fairway looking back to the tee. Trees are overtaking the pond that was created in the late '90s as a source for the irrigation system.*



*H. The sixth green sat to the left of the trees at the bottom of the slope. From the back tees, this was a formidable downhill, 220-yard par 3. The long, narrow green was protected by a trap. The trees to the right and behind the green captured many an errant shot. This was all the par 3 you could ever want.*



*I. The seventh hole ran along Golf Course Road, to the left of the photo. From the back tee, this was a challenging 430-yard par 4 that required a second shot to the green (the dirt area in the foreground) perched atop a plateau with traps left and right. The parallel ruts were left by the earth moving equipment that removed the sod from the green.*



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*J. The eighth green was in front of a stand of trees. At 145 yards, it was the shortest hole on the course. An accurate tee shot was required to avoiding the front bunkers and place the ball on the cup-side of the ridge that ran the length of the green.*



*K. Here's what remains of the ninth green, which was carved into the hillside, creating a bowl-like appearance. This view is from behind the green, with the first fairway running up the hill to the right. Deep traps guarded both sides of the green. The hole played about 270 yards from the white tee, an inviting target for the long hitters. The 9<sup>th</sup> played about 420 yards from the blue tee.*



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An aerial photo shows Green Hills Golf Course, which was usually brown-tinged by mid-summer. The yellow numbers indicate the greens. The white letters show where the photographer stood to take the photos on pages 6 through 9. What this two-dimensional image cannot show are the elevation changes that characterize the golf course.



**A**