



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 53 • August 1, 2017



In 1935, the 12<sup>th</sup> hole was shortened from 495 to 414 yards. The green was previously behind the current putting surface. At the same time, a new tee for the 13<sup>th</sup> hole turned the 300-yard par 4 into a par 3.

## Goin' Publinks

Manor Golf Club hosted the 1950 Pennsylvania Publinks. In a July 25, 1950, newspaper article, **Buddy Heckman**, winner of the Berks Publinks in 1944, '46, '47 and '48 and the state Publinks in 1947 and '48 at Hershey, predicted a winning score of 280, or +4, for the 5,550-yard, par 69 Manor course. Heckman turned pro after his 1948 victory and was ineligible for the Publinks. Heckman, the assistant pro at Berkshire CC, shot a record 61 at Manor earlier that month.

**Wally "Skipper" Kilrea, Jr.**, a 17-year-old from Hershey, defended his state championship with rounds of 73-75-71-72—291, 15 over par. **Ernie Meckley**, Manor GC, was second at 297, **Dom Foscone** of Green Hills GC was ninth at 302 and **John Yocum**, Green Hills, was 12th at 305.

Berks Publinks winners at the Manor.

- 1947 Walter "Buddy" Heckman
- 1948 Walter "Buddy" Heckman
- 1949 Jackie Weitzel
- 1950 Stan "Gix" Geisinger
- 1951 Stan "Gix" Geisinger
- 1954 William "Mutz" Koehler
- 1955 Scott Weaver
- 1956 Gerry Gerhart
- 1957 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1958 Leon Buchter
- 1959 Joe DeAngelo
- 1960 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1961 Leon Buchter
- 1962 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1963 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1964 Bud Weidenhammer
- 1965 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1966 Cotton Hirneisen
- 1969 Jack Shollenberger

## In a Manor of Speaking

### Honoring Berks County's First Public Course on its Centenary

Berks County is blessed with its golf courses, public and private. That Berks' most venerable public course still stands is a remarkable story. The course is Manor Golf Club. The timing for this article is appropriate, for 2017 marks the centenary of Manor's beginning. The *Reading Eagle*, May 14, 1939, reported that work on the golf course commenced in 1917.

The Manor first appeared in the *Eagle* on May 17, 1925, with the headline, "Splendid Scenic Location for Frit town Golf Links; 300-Acre Course for Club Philadelphians are Forming." The golf course did not have a name as of that writing.

The reporter, also unnamed, asserted that the course would "rank with the most picturesque in the country." Although the newspaper reported that the course was nearly completed and was expected to open later that year, Manor would not open until 1928.

From the *Eagle*: "Among the striking examples of the work done are picturesque rustic bridges constructed across some of the deep ravines. One of them is about 50 feet high and is constructed entirely of lumber cut off the gourd, including chestnut and cedar for the railings. The work was performed by local laborers under direction of **D.N. Lorusso**, golf course construction engineer, Wernersville.

The development was started by **Dr. C.R. Craig** and **M.W. Newton**, both of Philadelphia, who expect to build a club house in the near future.

According to the newspaper, Dr. Craig had a modest summer house near the site. He was so impressed with the beauty of the surrounding area and its possibilities for building a sporty golf course that he called on a Scotch expert who surveyed the place and gave it his approval. The Scotsman was **Alexander Findlay**, no stranger to Berks County. Findlay designed the original nine holes at Galen Hall, which opened in 1913, and the 18-hole course at Reading Country Club, opened in 1924. He also consulted in the design of the present Berkshire Country Club in 19xx and designed the now-defunct Riverside Golf Course, perched along the Schuylkill River in Muhlenberg Township.

**Reedy's writin'**. Here's how **Bill Reedy**, the *Reading Eagle's* prolific sports columnist, described the revisions at the Manor in his column of May 22, 1935.

Freshly manicured and also revised to take two strokes off the perfection card, the shortened Manor Golf Club will be formally opened for the 1935 season tomorrow with changes that should tend to produce lower scores for the patrons of this public lay-out.



Reading Eagle photo  
June 25, 1950

**Stanley "Gix" Geisinger** accepts the 1950 Berks Publinks trophy from **Stewart Moyer**, Reading's recreation superintendent. **Ernie Meckley** is to the right. Also shown is **Felix Danella**, Manor Golf Club's professional-operator. Gix defeated Meckley in 20 holes at the Manor to take the championship. The players matched scores of 70, one over par for 18 holes. Gix won with a par on the second extra hole. Meckley was low qualifier with a 67, two under par, while Gix shot 72.



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 53 • August 1, 2017

## Manor Masters

In 1938, *Reading Eagle* sports writer Tom Boland, writing in his column "From Tee to Green," selected the top players at Berks County's golf courses. From Boland's May 13 column:

After going into a huddle with those who know the Manor players, here is our list:

- 1 George Patterson
- 2 Dave Hafer
- 3 Claude Wickel
- 4 Harold Gift
- 5 Paul Matten
- 6 John Clarke
- 7 W. Troutman
- 8 Matt Dengler
- 9 Harold Beidler
- 10 Whitey Geiss
- 11 George Olwine
- 12 Alex Dickson

Boland nearly picked a winner in Patterson. In the Manor club championship, played on June 26 in a driving rain, he bowed to John Ciabattoni, the 1938 Berks Publinks champion, 3 and 1, in the final match. Patterson won his semi-final match against Lefty Faber, 4 and 2.

Patterson's fine play continued in the 1938 Berks Amateur at Berkleigh. He defeated defending champion Bob Dinsmore, 3 and 2, in the first round played September 4. Dinsmore had won three of the previous four Berks Am titles. Faber avenged his loss to Patterson in the Manor club championship with a 3 and 1 win in the semi-final round.

Johnny Markel won the title, 3 and 2, over Faber. The 16-year-old Markel was the event's youngest winner, a distinction he still holds nearly 80 years on.

Work on eliminating much of the steepest grade on the dreaded No. 12 hole, a breath-taking grind to the average public course golfer in the past, has been completed, a new green on this curtailed hole will be playable for the first time tomorrow and in addition No. 13 hole has been reduced in length.

Formerly a par five 495 yard trek uphill all the way, the now famous No. 12 hole at the Manor has been reduced to 414 yards, for a comparatively easy par four. Just beyond the second ridge on the fairway is the new No. 12 green, now visible from the tee and the dog's leg towards the right leading to the original green on top of the hill has been ruled entirely off the course.

No. 13 hole has been materially revamped as well, since the original tee as located opposite the tee for No. 13 close to the new No. 12 green and is now but 178 yards from the carpet for a par three. Formerly, No. 13 was 305 yards long and a par four on the score card. In all, 111 yards have been taken off those two holes, but the reduction in distance is really of secondary importance. Golfers no longer will be fatigued from climbing in playing the 12<sup>th</sup>, nor will they be faced with the treacherous hazards in the eliminated dog's leg.

The inward nine holes at the Manor will now require but 33 strokes to match the perfection figure, as compared to 35 in the past. The reduction of two strokes on the return trip to the clubhouse cuts the par for the complete course to 69, which is now the lowest of any nearby links except Galen Hall, which is still parred at 66. The revised Manor course now has five par three holes, 11 fours and two fives. Incidentally, the re-opening of the Manor will mark the debut of the new pro there in **Bob Venables**, formerly connected with clubs in Sparrows Point, Md., Dover, Del., and Plymouth Country Club, Norristown.

**Travelin' Tilly.** Later in 1935, **A.W. Tillinghast**, considered one of golf's greatest architects, visited the Manor in his role as a consultant for the Professional Golfers Association. Today, this would be the equivalent of a visit by a golf architect such as **Tom Fazio** or **Pete Dye**. Tillinghast completed his Berks County circuit with visits to the now defunct Riverside Golf Course and Reading Country Club on October 4 (see *The Golf Chronicles* number 9, "Tillinghast is coming to Town").

The Tillinghast letters have been preserved by Pete Trenham on his Philadelphia Section PGA history web site. Pete was associated with RCC for 10 years.

Tillinghast reported his observations in a letter dated October 3, 1935, to **George Jacobus**, golf professional at Ridgewood Country Club, Paramus, N.J., and president of the PGA.

His trip to Reading began at the Abraham Lincoln Hotel, where he checked in on October 2. That evening, he met with local PGA members. The next day, he visited Berkshire Country Club, where he toured the course with **Harry Markel**, head professional and a PGA member, **Alfred Lundstrom**, the greenskeeper, and **Frank Richardson**, chairman of the greens committee.

From Tillinghast's letter: "Their chief problem was represented by the third green, a thoroughly antiquated affair with a poor turf condition caused by lack of drainage. It was so bad that I advised them to bring in fill and construct an entirely new and properly contoured green. Lundstrom had been of the opinion, I ascertained afterword. This course shows unmistakable signs of decadence and I learned that the turf has been steadily failing. A forced policy of economy has sadly interfered with needed fertilizing."

Tillinghast then moved on to the Manor and filed this report: "I then visited the Manor Country Club at the request of the P.G.A member Bob Venables. I inspected part off the course, where the proprietor (this is a public course) J.S. Shouder, wanted particular advise. The turf on the greens was quite good but I advised the necessity of keeping the sea-side bent from matting, which is doping to some extent. I gave definite instruction (and a sketch) for the contouring of a new second green, which they desire to build, and also investigated a condition of seepage on the third fairway.



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 53 • August 1, 2017



From the 11<sup>th</sup> tee, the green to the 300-yard par 4 is not visible, nor is the road that the golfer must hit over. The putting surface is behind the trees to the right. A 180-yard tee shot—hit straight—leaves a short pitch to the small green.



The view from the fairway looking back shows the Manor's 11<sup>th</sup> tee. The golfers standing on the tee cannot see the road but they can hear the traffic passing by. The 10<sup>th</sup> green is in the background.



The tee shot on the 75-yard par 3 15<sup>th</sup> hole also requires a carry over the road. From this tee, the traffic is all-too visible. The utility pole and power lines proved an added distraction.

Manor was featured in a 1939 *Reading Eagle* series that profiled Berks County golf courses. The article from May 14 sheds more light on the development of Manor Golf Club.

A golf shop was being added to the club house. It was designed by **Mrs. Florence Newton McCall**, whose father, M.W. Newton, along with Dr. C.R. Craig, invested \$247,000 to build the course. Mr. Newton owned a hotel in Philadelphia. His dream was to build a sanatorium-hotel, with the golf course as an attraction, much like Galen Hall. He died in 1926 before the golf course was completed and the hotel was never built.

**William E. Sharman**, a Reading attorney who served as the city's mayor from 1924-28, represented them for their land purchases, which totaled about \$20,000. Newton and Craig hired **Alex Findlay** to lay out the golf course. Sharman described how Alex Findlay planned the holes:

"He hit a ball and said, 'That's where we'll put number one.' He hit another ball and said, 'That's where we'll put number two,' and so on."

Work on the course was started in 1917, but the course did not open until 1928. The reason for the delay, according to the *Eagle*, was high wages that had to be paid workers during the World War days—this article is from 1939, so there was no WW1 and WW 2—and in 1920 and '21, the project was at a near standstill. Work resumed in 1921 and progressed until 1926 when Newton and Craig died.

The course lay deserted and became overgrown until **John Shouder** purchased the property in 1927. He invested \$20,000 to reclaim the course and another \$20,000 to build the clubhouse.

Shouder opened the course in 1928 to immediate success. The boom was short lived. In 1932, play had dropped off by 50 percent. Shouder sold the Manor to Mrs. McCall in 1936. Shortly thereafter, a new tee for the first hole was built using material excavated for the clubhouse addition. Also, the contours around the 14<sup>th</sup> green were revised and the 12<sup>th</sup> fairway was widened by filling a ditch that ran along the right side.

The pro shop was originally in the clubhouse basement. That area was lost when the men's locker room was expanded, which is why the building was added to.

## Manor Musings

According to Shouder, **Roger Norris** notched Manor's first hole in one in 1929.

On August 13, 1934, writing in his column "From Tee to Green," *Reading Eagle* sportswriter **Dan Divot** reported that **Dr. Earl Romberger** cracked out a 250-yard drive on No. 12 at the Manor, a hole players referred to as "the backbreaker." He then laced his second shot onto the green, "a feat to which few can point," opined Mr. Divot. No word on the doctor's score on the hole.

On July 20, 1941, **Buddy Heckman** set a course record of 64, five under par, in a foursome with **Johnny Weitzel**, **Art Gabel** and **Harold Brossman**. The previous record, 65, was held by **Bob Venables**, Manor's pro.

Heckman subsequently lowered the mark to 59, a fact reported in his obituary and confirmed by **Cheryl Heckman**, his daughter-in-law and Manor's current proprietor. Buddy Heckman died on June 10, 2003, at age 82.

In 1942, Manor golfer **Johnny Weitzel** became the second public course player to win the Berks Amateur championship. **Wilmer "Lefty" Faber**, playing out of the defunct Riverside Golf Club, was the first in 1939.



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 53 • August 1, 2017



The tee shot on the par-5 14<sup>th</sup> hole (above) is an act of faith; the green is not visible and the golfer must trust that he or she can drive the ball to a spot that leaves a comfortable second shot.

The golfer playing to the 14<sup>th</sup> green, as seen below, is left with a short pitch. The sand trap to the right of the green was added in 1999, replacing a pond that welcomed golfers for some 70 years.



On March 25, 1945, the *Eagle* reported that **Gene Harkin**, Philadelphia, was the new lessee at the Manor, taking over for **Bob Venables**.

**Best in Berks.** In the summer of 2000, the *Reading Eagle* ran a series highlighting what its sports writers considered the best 18 holes in Berks County.

The holes were selected for their position on their particular course. In other words, the best first hole, the best second hole and so on. The writers selected two holes from the Manor: the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Here are the descriptions.

Appearances can be deceiving. That's the case with our next hole, the par-4 11<sup>th</sup> at Manor Golf Course.

Most golfers are aware of the road—which is hidden from the tee—that they have to fly their drive over. Golfers can see a ravine just beyond the road, dense woods on both sides of the fairway and a severely left-to-right sloping fairway.

They can't see the green which is nestled behind the trees on this slight dogleg to the right.

The writer points out that this is the shortest par-4 on the list, playing 300, 285 and 280 yards from the blue, white and red tees, respectively. The 11<sup>th</sup> is described as a mental test. As in, is the golfer smart enough to hit a 180-yard tee shot to the flat part of the fairway, setting up a short pitch up the hill to the green. Or is it worth the risk of a ball in the woods, a high probability with a driver hit slightly off line? Let the golfer decide.

On to number 14.

According to **Buddy Heckman**, 80 years old in August 2000, not much has changed in 70 years. The par-5, 550-yard 14<sup>th</sup> is still the toughest hole at Manor Golf Club. Heckman says the way to play the hole is drive, layup, wedge.

The drive must navigate a wide, right-to-left sloping fairway. The layup must be hit precisely down hill to the narrowing fairway. The hole was changed in 1999 when Mike Heckman, Buddy's son, removed a pond that was to the right of the green and replaced it with a sand bunker. A few trees near the new bunker were also felled. The result is a hole that is more open and more forgiving. But not easy.

Here's the *Reading Eagle's* dream course in 2000.

- 1 Galen Hall GC, par 4, 335 yards
- 2 Berkleigh CC, par 4, 410 yards
- 3 Moselem Springs GC, par 3, 191 yards
- 4 Berkleigh CC, par 4, 435 yards
- 5 Reading CC, par 5, 523 yards
- 6 Heidelberg CC, par 4, 434 yards
- 7 Berkshire CC, par 4, 324
- 8 Golden Oaks GC, par 5, 602 yards
- 9 Willow Hollow GC, par 3, 190 yards
- 10 Moselem Springs GC, par 4, 397 yards
- 11 Manor GC, par 4, 300 yards
- 12 Rich Maiden GC Par 3, 145 yards
- 13 Perry GC, par 5, 538 yards
- 14 Manor GC, par 5, 550 yards
- 15 Galen Hall GC, par 3, 190 yards
- 16 Arrowhead GC, par 4, 370 yards
- 17 Golden Oaks GC, par 4, 469 yards
- 18 Moselem Springs GC, par 4, 456 yards

The dream course would play to a par of 36-36—72 at 6,859 yards (3,444 front, 3,415 back).



# The Golf Chronicles

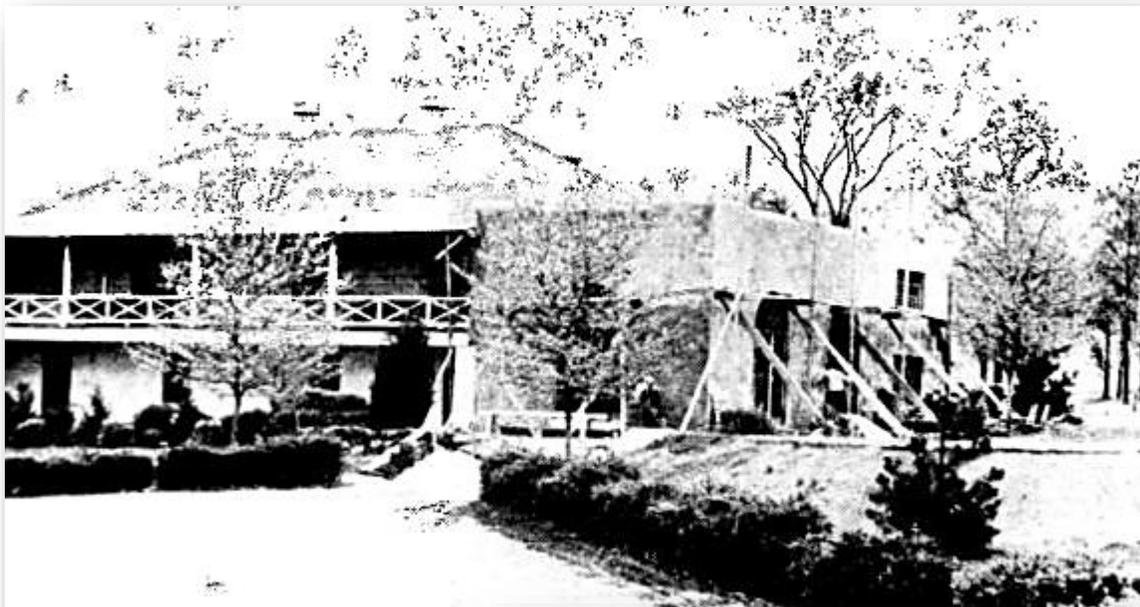
The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



Number 53 • August 1, 2017



Golfers tee off on the Manor's 250-yard first hole. The clubhouse is in the background. In 1936, a new tee was built using material excavated for the clubhouse addition.



The photos to the left and below are from the Reading Eagle, May 14, 1939.

To the left is a view of the under-construction addition to the clubhouse that now houses the golf shop.

The photo below, taken from the 11<sup>th</sup> tee, provides a panorama across the ravine. The road below is not visible. The steps on the far hillside helped the golfers climb the steep grade leading to the green.

